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**Poverty, Possessions and 'Proper living':  
Constructing and Contesting Propriety in Soweto and Lusaka City**

by

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## **Abstract**

Recent material culture theory points out how material possessions are woven into the fabric of lives, shaping social relations and texturing people's meanings and interpretation of their world. This study embarks on exploring aspects of this objected fabric, in the context of urban working class black South Africans, living in three different township suburbs in Gauteng, in four differing housing circumstances, in the mid-1990s and in the midst of much uncertainty of what the future might hold for poor urban residents.

Drawing on participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and household and appliance ownership surveys, the study explores the ways in which domestic objects – appliances specifically – function symbolically for a set of people living in Soweto formal houses, backyard shacks, an informal settlement and in Lusaka City site-and-service settlement on the West Rand, in Gauteng, South Africa. I examine symbolic constructions and creations in these people's homes, gleaning some of the meaning people attributed to particular modes of equipping their homes, and how aspects of their image of themselves and each other were presented, acted out, created, 'conversed', contested and negotiated through material goods.

In particular the study focuses on prevalent notions of propriety – or 'properness' – held by research participants. The notion evoked a range of meanings, a matrix of ideas which cut across and connected various domains – of taste, of ideal living, of systems of values about personhood, and, importantly, material culture. An unpacking of this multifaceted concept of propriety, through an examination of how it was played out and contested within households via the equipping of domestic space, constitutes the core of this study.

Concomitantly the thesis is about material symbols at work (and play) in domestic Soweto and Lusaka City. I look at how symbols act and interact in this context, how they shift meaning or prominence, and how they enhance or contradict each other in their suggestions. I consider how a symbolic 'rub', a semiotic friction, can exist, with important effects and implications – both within and amongst the goods people choose to own and display.

Finally, I argue that studying people's possessions, and more specifically the ways in which they talk about them and act around them, is an enlightening route to understanding the ways in which they make sense of their living, their experiences, their world. I suggest that these kinds of nuance are crucial for informing sensitive notions of poverty on the part of policymakers, in order to avoid ill-informed or misdirected poverty alleviation programmes. I thus conclude with a call for a practice theory technique – an agent-centred approach – to be employed in the anthropology of objects and crucially, of poverty.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY.....</b>	<b>11</b>
1. METHODS .....	11
2. A NOTE ON MY WRITING .....	16
3. POSITIONING THE SETTLEMENTS AND SAMPLES.....	17
3.1. <i>Mzimhlope: formal houses and backyard structures</i> .....	17
3.2. <i>Powa Park informal settlement</i> .....	21
3.3. <i>Lusaka City site-and-service settlement</i> .....	24
3.4. <i>Mzimhlope, Powa Park, and Lusaka City</i> .....	27
4. HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION AND INCOME: .....	28
4.1. <i>Household composition</i> .....	30
4.2. <i>Income</i> .....	31
5. THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF APPLIANCE OWNERSHIP: .....	33
5.1. <i>Appliance ownership in the Electrified settlements</i> .....	34
5.1.1. Food Related Appliances.....	34
5.1.2. Water heating .....	37
5.1.3. Refrigeration.....	38
5.1.4. Space heating.....	40
5.1.5. Entertainment appliances.....	41
5.1.6. Labour saving appliances .....	43
6. CONCLUSION.....	44
<b>CHAPTER THREE: "IT IS GOOD NOT TO LOOK POOR": THE CONSTRUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF 'PROPER LIVING' .....</b>	<b>47</b>
1. A PROPER HOUSE, A PROPER LIVING: CONCEALING POVERTY AND THE SYMBOLISM OF DOMESTIC THINGS .....	49
2. AGGREGATIVE NOTION, DISAGGREGATED ACTIONS: HOW PROPRIETY WAS ENACTED UNDER DIFFERENT HOUSING CIRCUMSTANCES .....	57
2.1. <i>The pressures of solid walls: the symbolic significance of brick houses</i> .....	59
2.1.1. Defining 'proper' appliances .....	60
2.1.2. 'Proper' use of domestic space .....	67
2.2. <i>'Proper' living in 'improper' dwellings: shacks and propriety</i> .....	71
3. CONCLUSION.....	76
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: CONNECTING INTO THE WORLD 'OUT THERE': CONSUMPTION AND 'PROPER' PARTICIPATION IN A GLOBAL(ISING) WORLD .....</b>	<b>78</b>
1. THE WORLD 'OUT THERE': BEING POOR IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY .....	79
2. USING AND BEING CURRENT: THE STATUS OF ELECTRICITY .....	86
3. SHARED CONCERNS, CONTRADICTIONARY COMPLAINTS: GENERATIONAL QUESTIONS OVER 'PROPER' PARTICIPATION IN THE WORLD 'OUT THERE' .....	88
3.1. <i>The public vs. the private: different symbolic markers of 'proper' modern living</i> .....	92
3.2. <i>'Proper' family obligations and expectations</i> .....	93
3.3. <i>The ironies of consumerism</i> .....	96
4. 'PROPER' LIVING AS A MULTIFACETED CONCEPT.....	97
5. CONCLUSION.....	99
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: SYMBOLS AT GENDERED WORK: NEGOTIATING WOMEN'S PROPRIETY 101</b>	
1. A QUESTION OF PROPRIETY: WASHING MACHINES AS GENDERED SYMBOL .....	102
2. SYMBOLIC RUB/SEMIOTIC FRICTION: WASHING MACHINES AS CONUNDRUM/ CONTRADICTIONARY SYMBOL/UNCOMFORTABLE OBJECT .....	106
3. SYMBOLIC RUB AND CONTESTATION/GENDER AND GENERATION: COAL STOVES AND CONTRADICTION/CONTESTATION .....	109
4. (ENTERTAINMENT) APPLIANCES, CATALYSING CHANGE IN INTRA-HOUSEHOLD SOCIAL RELATIONS .....	115
5. CONCLUSION: .....	116
<b>CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION: POVERTY, PROPRIETY AND PERSONHOOD.....</b>	<b>118</b>

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: DETAILED HOUSEHOLD DEMOGRAPHICS.....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: MAPS OF THE STUDY AREAS .....</b>	<b>143</b>
1. LOCATION OF STUDY AREAS IN RELATION TO SOUTH AFRICA.....	143
2. STUDY AREAS IN RELATION TO EACH OTHER AND TO JOHANNESBURG .....	144
<b>APPENDIX C: GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>145</b>

## List of Tables

<i>Table 1. Details of Interviewed Households, August 1995<sup>1</sup></i> .....	29
<i>Table 2. Distribution of electric cooking appliances in households in electrified settlements</i> .....	34
<i>Table 3. Distribution of paraffin and gas stoves in households in electrified settlements</i> .....	35
<i>Table 4. Distribution of other food-related appliances in electrified households<sup>1</sup></i> .....	36
<i>Table 5. Distribution of water heating appliances in households in electrified settlements</i> .....	37
<i>Table 6. Distribution of refrigeration appliances in households in electrified settlements</i> .....	38
<i>Table 7. Distribution of space heating appliances</i> .....	40
<i>Table 8. Distribution of TV sets</i> .....	41
<i>Table 9. Distribution of sound systems and radios</i> .....	41
<i>Table 10. Types of TV sets in electrified households</i> .....	43
<i>Table 11. Types of sound systems in electrified households</i> .....	43
<i>Table 12. Distribution of appliances regarded as 'proper' in Mzimhlope backyard and Lusaka City</i> .....	72
<i>Table 13. Basic social and domestic features of sampled Mzimhlope formal households (August 1995):</i> .....	139
<i>Table 14. Basic social and domestic features of sampled Mzimhlope backyard households (August 1995):</i> ....	140
<i>Table 15. Basic social and domestic features of sampled Powa Park households (August 1995):</i> .....	141
<i>Table 16. Basic social and domestic features of sampled Lusaka City households (July 1997):</i> .....	142

## List of cases

i. <i>Winnie's kitchen</i> .....	47
ii. <i>The Ngcobos' thoughtful interior decorating</i> .....	49
iii. <i>Connie Phala's juggling of finances</i> .....	52
iv. <i>Rachel and Godfrey Kettlele's risky shack decorating</i> .....	55
v. <i>The Makekes' calculated appliance choices</i> .....	60
vi. <i>Octavia Kgaje's humiliation by paraffin</i> .....	63
vii. <i>Gertrude Mogoshane's urban orientation</i> .....	73
viii. <i>Metro Lekokotla's rural responsibilities</i> .....	74
ix. <i>The Chinakas and their focus on the brand-new</i> .....	78
x. <i>The Mawasha's disposal of their coal stove</i> .....	85
xi. <i>Technikon Student project</i> .....	86
xii. <i>Joyjoy Laubewu's array of meaningful appliances</i> .....	98
xiii. <i>The Mabuzweni's laundry arrangements</i> .....	107

# Chapter One

## Introduction

*"The study of material culture is another way of telling, of narrating our lives, our world" (Christopher Tilley, 1999<sup>1</sup>).*

*"I take my umkhukhu<sup>2</sup> like a proper house" (Thembi Ngcobo, 1997)*

*"Washing machines make lazy women" (Tshidiso Legoale, 1996)*

*"By focussing directly on the object does not have to fetishise it, but rather to reveal what a material which is so mundane as to be taken for granted, is actually doing in social terms" (Miller, 1998:9)*

The notion that objects are imbued with symbolic meaning is a concept now taken for granted by social scientists. However, for many years, social anthropologists disregarded both the study of 'things' and the study of processes and practices of consumption. Miller (1987:11) argues that this is because these spheres were considered to be outside the traditional realms of anthropological interest, apparently drawing attention away from the discipline's central concerns of "social relations and 'real' people". Although there were isolated works which tangentially approached the subject - such as Mauss' 1954 classic *The Gift*, it was only in the late 1970s that an ongoing anthropological study of consumption, (one which embarks on understanding the social role of objects), began. This is marked primarily by Bourdieu (1984) and Douglas and Isherwood (1978), who disputed assumptions made by economists about the motivation behind consumption practices, on the grounds that they do not locate consumerism in a complex social sphere and instead presume a rational economic cost-benefit approach by consumers in their actions. "The essential function of consumption", Douglas and Isherwood (1978:62) argue, "is its capacity to make sense", and not, as economic models assume, to fulfil basic physical needs. They thus propose a cultural theory of consumption in which goods are not viewed only as materials of subsistence but also as crucial markers of cultural categories. Bourdieu (1984) adopts a similar - though ethnographically richer - structuralist approach to that of Douglas and Isherwood, conceptualising

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from inaugural professorial lecture, University College London, 4 March 1999

<sup>2</sup> Zulu word referring to a shack structure.

objects as symbolic markers of classification, but focussing specifically on their role in the production and presentation of social status, power and positioning.

Whilst these works were groundbreaking in their propositions, they failed to consider that cultural practices and cultural signifiers are not governed by some static bounded societal superstructure, but that they are dynamic: created, negotiated and contested, adapting and responding to changing circumstance. More recent scholarship advances some rather more comprehensive arguments. In this respect, Appadurai, in his introduction to *The Social Life of Things* (1986), presented a notably fresh and important conceptual argument, which, though primarily concerned with objects as commodities (or "things in motion" by his definition(1986:5)) is seminal for understanding the social dimension of objects more generally. He posits that objects not only render a crucial social role but exist within the social realm themselves. Objects, like living things, he says, have "social lives" (1986). In other words, he suggests that people and objects are enmeshed in the same kinds of social and societal processes (including general political frictions and power struggles), and thus are shaped by - and indeed shape - them. In the same volume, Kopytoff advances a complementary proposition, suggesting that objects can be considered to have "biographies" - life histories - in the same way as people. Further, he argues, as social scientists it is useful to consider these object biographies, since "...the story of the various singularisations of [a thing], of classifications, and reclassifications in an uncertain world of categories whose importance shifts with every minor change in context (1986:90)... can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure" (1986:67).

Appadurai's and Kopytoff's approaches are important because they paved the way for a new way of thinking about objects - specifically the dynamism of the meanings and values that emerge around objects, and the manner in which these meanings are part of social and political processes and contestations. Whilst Douglas and Isherwood (1978) and Bourdieu (1984) view objects within fixed categories, as consistent cultural markers, Appadurai and Kopytoff demonstrate how these change through time, from one moment to the next, through one transaction or another. Their theories have been - and remain - pivotal to all subsequent anthropological debate on the subject of objects (as commodities or otherwise) and consumption.

The interactive, engaged nature of the relationship between objects and people's identities, social relations and cosmologies has increasingly become a focus in recent anthropological contemplations of consumption practice (for example, Comaroff, 1990; Miller, 1987; 1988, 1994, 1995, 1998; Tilley, 1999; Weiss, 1996). Objects are increasingly viewed as components equal with people in contributing to and conversing in processes of both societal and self construction. In this respect, Tilley (1999)<sup>3</sup> is particularly clear. He argues that there exists a "fundamental relationship of reflexivity and relativity between us and things", and rejects earlier theories which posit objects simply as reflective of identity, as inappropriately binary. Instead, he describes "things as agents which produce our identity ... our world. They are not the code of our world, but rather the flesh of our world". Weiss (1996) also makes an important contribution to these debates in his work on the shaping of the "lived world" of the Haya in Tanzania. He identifies a crucial link between human agency and physical space and objects, a notion he labels as "engagement", and which he elaborates as "the interrelation of action and experience as processes that both generate and are anchored in a meaningful order of spatial and temporal relations" (1986:4). He adds that "because of the reciprocal character of engagement, when people act to define, transform and *make* the world they inhabit, they also work to make themselves" (1986:4). This notion of conversation, of discourse, of interaction, of the eminence of objects in shaping and communicating meaning in people's worlds underscores the exploration of the social role of domestic appliances in low-income Sowetan homes that follows in the course of my thesis. Though I focus on objects as media of expression, I take as a basis the notion of objects as material culture - as "means by which culture is constructed as both social and material worlds" (Miller, 1995b:276) - rather than simply as reflections of social relations, as surfaces from which to distil people's concepts of identity and social life.

From August 1995 to February 1998 I was part of a team involved in a policy research project, funded by the Department of Minerals and Energy in South Africa, investigating the social determinants of domestic energy use in low income township

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted from inaugural professorial lecture presentation, University College London, 4 March 1999.

homes in Soweto and on the West Rand. Using primarily anthropological methods<sup>4</sup>, we explored people's choices, priorities and practices, in an effort to understand their energy usage at home. Over many months we recorded details of energy-related activities; observed many a pot of *pap*<sup>5</sup> being prepared and skirt being ironed; monitored fuel purchasing practices, income earned, fluctuations in household size and shape; explored people's ideas and attitudes; listened to vigorous discussions amongst research participants over electricity provision, gendered behaviour, expectations, poverty, (un)employment, violence, development, (and whatever happened in yesterday's episode of *The Bold and the Beautiful*<sup>6</sup>). However, a shift in our research approach to focus on studying the decoration and, more specifically, the appliances in these Sowetans' houses was a revelation to me: people's choice of domestic objects - and the way they organise, act around, and talk about them - allowed me fresh insight into their conceptions of their living situations, and of their (contested) notions of their social position in their families, their community, in the world. Just as Hoskins (1998) learned in Indonesia, in trying to understand people's own experiences of urban poverty through a variety of avenues, it was my exploration of Sowetans' domestic objects that enlightened me to important nuances of their experiences that I had been struggling to grasp.

It is at this point that my thesis intersects with the energy research. In this work I set out to explore how various domestic objects - with a core focus on appliances - function symbolically for the set of people in Soweto and on the West Rand who participated in the energy research project. I explore symbolic constructions and creations in these people's homes, gleaning some of the meaning they attribute to particular modes of equipping their homes, and how aspects of their image of themselves and each other are presented, acted out, created, 'conversed', contested and negotiated through material goods. In particular, I am interested in prevalent notions of propriety - or 'properness' - held by research participants. Over and over, and drawing on a range of ideas about the meanings and degrees of

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter Two for a more detailed explanation of methods used.

<sup>5</sup> 'Pap' is a staple dish, a stiff corn-based porridge.

<sup>6</sup> A popular American soap opera broadcast daily, back to back with another – *Days of Our Lives* – on South African TV

propriety, people participating in the research project described or insinuated aspects of their own or other's lives as 'proper' or otherwise.

An unpacking of this multi-faceted concept of propriety, through an examination of how it is played out and contested within households via the equipping of domestic space, constitutes the core of this study. I use domestic objects as stepping stones, backwards and forwards, to and fro, in an attempt to gain an understanding of the way the research participants constructed their notions of propriety and, within these, made sense of their living, their experiences, their world. Concomitantly, the thesis is about material symbols at work (and play) in domestic Soweto. I look at how symbols act and interact in this context, how they shift meaning or prominence, and how they enhance or contradict each other in their suggestions. In Chapter Five, I consider how a symbolic 'rub', a semiotic friction or contradiction, can exist - with important effects and implications - amongst the goods people choose to own and display.

The thesis draws primarily on domestic appliances and things related to energy use in its investigations, but will at times consider other commodities - such as furniture or youth fashion, for example - as comparative material. Appliances, though easily thought of as mundane run-of-the-mill possessions, similar in nature and defined only by their purpose, are no different to any other household belongings in their symbolic capacity. They create and communicate meaning by their presence in the home and are as much part of a meaning system in which gender and generational relations are shaped and acted out, social status is marked, ideology is represented, aspirations are manifested, or strategies for living are mirrored, as any more obviously symbolic domestic objects. Nonetheless, consideration of appliances in terms of their semiotic and social role is rare in anthropology and many of the other social sciences. Historians of technology, in particular, have pointed out this hiatus (Oldenziel 1996, Lubar 1996, Pfaffenberger 1992) and have argued the need for studies which view technological objects not only as "technological texts", but also as "cultural phenomena" (Lubar, 1996:33). Oldenziel (1996) further comments how on the whole, studies of technology of 'low tech' objects or "daily use technologies" (such as domestic appliances) in particular have been ignored by scholars, and argues that this is due to the discipline's sexist prioritisation of concern with

productive technologies. Those few studies which do look at domestic technologies as more than simply mechanical objects, and which instead reflect on them as social and political phenomena, tend to focus on aspects of their production rather than of their consumption (or the interrelationship between the two) (see Berg, 1994; Cockburn and Furst-Dilic, 1994; Cowan, 1985, 1989; Ommrod, 1994). There are of course exceptions. In particular, Silverstone's and Hirsch's (1992) edited collection of essays, *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, includes a number of studies which broach the field of appliances from this perspective. Throughout the collection, the connection between information and communication technologies, their consumption and the domestic sphere or, phrased differently, the "articulation of technology and domesticity" (1992:5) is examined, with a predominant interest in the meanings located in their use by household members, rather than the meanings suggested by their mere presence in the home (see for example chapters in the collection by Cockburn; Haddon; Hartman and Gray; Hirsch and Morley; Livingstone; Miller; Murdoch; Silverstone; Wheelock).

Whilst such a focus is both useful and important, I would argue that the simple presence of appliances (and other objects) in people's homes is laden with rich meanings, messages and symbols that story people's experiences and understandings of their world. Jelin (1991) suggests similarly. Her interesting study of expenditure patterns and decision-making processes in working class households in Buenos Aires focuses attention briefly on the symbolic meanings and importance of domestic appliances. Observing an upending of "a 'rational' perspective of 'real' consumption needs" (1991:183) in these households, she concludes that the large number of appliances owned act to make the family "look presentable" (1991:188), "hide inferiority" (1991:189), imply relative privilege and mark consumer power.

On the whole however, appliances are absent from anthropological studies of material culture. Instead, scholars have tended to concentrate on less mundane (or "visually banal" (Attfields, 1997:267), more explicitly flamboyant objects. For example, much has been written about clothing and fashion (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Friedman, 1990; James, 1999; Heath, 1992; Hendrikson, 1995; Miller, 1990; Tarlo, 1996; Wilson, 1985), textiles and weaving (Spooner, 1986; Steedman, 1998; Weiner, 1989), locally handcrafted items (Gosselain, 1999; Guss, 1989; Hosler, 1996;

Mackenzie, 1991) and food (Hirsch, 1990; Rutz, 1989; Weismantel, 1989; Weiss, 1986). Within these arenas, attention has largely been concentrated on two key themes, both rooted in processes of world-wide mass commodification. On one hand, researchers have explored the local meanings and objectification (Miller, 1987) of social forms and values located in the production and use of local, and particularly 'traditional', goods, often in contrast with meanings associated with goods acquired through the global economy. For example, Mackenzie's fascinating study of Bilum bags made by women (and often further decorated by men) in Papua New Guinea (1991) reveals how the bags embody particular local notions of gender and gender relations. On the other, interest has focussed on appropriation and 'redefinition' (or what Thomas (1998) calls 'relocalisation') of imported/non-locally produced goods, and the manner in which these processes provide and shape local meaning, experience and practice. Friedman's work on *les Sapeurs* (1990), Hansen's study of second-hand clothing in Lusaka (1995), and Abu-Lughod's commentary on imported underwear amongst Bedouin women (1990) are examples of this approach.

Included in studies of domestic space is a fair amount about the symbolic nature of dwellings. Whilst the themes I mention above are common in this sphere too (see Thomas, 1998; Wilk, 1989), research is inclined to focus rather on the design of domestic structures and the use of their space as an embodiment of the social world, as the practical and aesthetic medium through which domestic and other relationships are made concrete in the world (for example, Hugh-Jones (1995) in Amazonia; vom Bruck (1997) in Yemen; Moore (1986) in Kenya; Bourdieu (1977) in Algeria; Fox (1993) in Austronesia; Hirschon (1993) in Greece, among others). Thus studies of domestic space tend to explore and demonstrate the notion of dwellings in their entirety as a social microcosm, rather than considering the stories and ideas expressed by their contents and the arrangement of their contents.

Blanton's (1994) comparative study of peasant households around the world does similarly, despite his setting out to do otherwise. He is interested in how houses communicate social status ("houses are part of society's system of non-verbal communication" he notes (1994:8)), arguing that other possessions are not such reliable indicators. Drawing on McCracken (1988), he suggests that the composite of houses and their contents provides a truer reflection of wealth and status than

isolated goods, such as items of clothing, because the aggregate of all these belongings cannot mislead, cannot conceal reality, because of the levels of outlay involved in their acquisition. The material that follows in my thesis contradicts this assertion to some extent by revealing how domestic furnishings can perform a concealing function. Nevertheless, despite his intent, Blanton's study neglects to consider house contents, reflecting on house structure and design alone. Furthermore, he treats households as monolithic entities rather than as units of internal diversity and differentiation. And thus, in his examination of strategies towards marking social status, he ignores the heterogeneity of conceptions about what reflects social status - and the strategies to achieve and represent it - that must surely exist within his sampled households.

Those studies that do examine home contents share a common argument throughout. All work from or demonstrate the basic premise of material culture theory, presenting domestic possessions as objectifications of various aspects of the social world. In some instances, the primary symbolic role of domestic objects is viewed as one of differentiation and contestation over social positioning.

(Baudrillard, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984; Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Others recognise more complexity, and fluidity, in meaning. For example, Gullestad (1992) illustrates how the process and product of home decoration is used by working class women and men in Norway to create and express specific ideas about their identity, citing egalitarianism and ability to survive as central images. Hirschon (1993), working in Yerania in Greece, having first explored the construction and delineation of domestic space, focuses on specific domestic objects and the symbolic importance of their presence in homes. "A properly equipped house", she says, "is one in which hospitality can be offered in an appropriate fashion" (1993:78). She suggests that, for the population she studied, the existence of a formal dining table in the main room of a home embodies a range of family values, including those of hospitality and family cohesiveness. The theme of enhancing and presenting family unity and stability through the aesthetic of domestic symbols runs through a number of other works (see also Wilk, 1989; Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981), including Miller's fascinating study of consumption in Trinidad (1994), in which he examines meanings inherent in antithetical consumption and house decorating practices around the rituals of Christmas and Carnival. According to

Miller, Christmas-time investment centres around house decoration and furnishing, in objects which mark the primacy of the home and family in Trinidadian life. He thus demonstrates how the notion of 'transcendence' (as he labels aspirations of family permanence and continuity) is expressed through domestic objects. He argues that consumption and ritual practices associated with the annual Carnival, in contrast to those around Christmas, act to embody 'transience' in lifestyles - impermanence, freshness, living that is trendy, current and moving with the times. Thomas (1998) identifies similar objectification of modern living in the choices of particular styles of building and decoration of homes in Manambondro in Madagascar.

Whilst much has been written about townships and township living in South Africa - and Soweto in particular - little embarks on studying people's lives in these places from a perspective of local domestic material culture<sup>7</sup>. And yet, as the studies and theories I have described above indicate, there is much to be learned through considering the microlevel and aesthetic performative features of people's lives. The importance of such studies is located in the potential they have to shed light on the way that people encounter, engage and experience their worlds. Material possessions are woven into the fabric of lives, shaping social relations and texturing people's meanings and interpretation of their world. Here I embark on exploring aspects of this objected fabric, in the context of urban working-class black South Africans, living in three different township settlements in Gauteng, in four differing housing circumstances, at the particular moment in time of the mid-1990s and in the midst of much uncertainty of what the future might hold for poor urban residents.

In Chapter Two, I locate the study for the reader by providing a background description of the three settlements as well as a quantitative examination of appliances owned by households in each. Chapter Three examines how people's experiences of poverty are symbolically managed within a domestic setting and argues that the elaborate actions of concealing poverty illustrate the importance of achieving and maintaining an image and sense of 'proper living', one that is encapsulated symbolically in the house and its contents. Chapter Four develops notions of propriety and 'proper living', exploring how people's choices around

possessions also aim to mark their own place in the world perceived to operate beyond the bounds of poverty. In Chapter Five, I explore how notions of propriety extend into ideas about gender and gender relations, and consider how these ideas of properness are both constructed and resisted through the symbolic inferences of various appliances. In addition I introduce and discuss the notion of symbolic 'rub', by which I mean the emergence of contradictory symbolic meanings associated with an object, or object constellation. Two key entwined strands of narrative run throughout the thesis: the notion of propriety, and the role of the symbolic meaning in domestic objects and the part they play in people's shaping, contesting and experiencing of living.

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<sup>7</sup> Yose (1998) makes brief mention of the symbolic role of domestic furnishings in the Marconi Beam housing development in Cape Town. Bank (1999b) explores the symbolic meanings that emerged around paraffin cookers in men's hostels in Duncan Village, East London.

## Chapter Two

### Contextualising the Study

Fifteen kilometres south west of Johannesburg, Soweto sprawls between minedumps, as far as the eye can see. Row upon row of low-cost houses, laid out in grids. The red face brick of the houses of the 1930s. The brown stockbricks of the 1950s. In pockets of land once open, jam-packed informal settlements are crammed to their edges with shacks and people. On winter afternoons, the sky hangs low and still, thick with the coal smoke from stoves and braziers burning in homes throughout the township. In summer, the hot sun beats down mercilessly on often treeless neighbourhoods. A further 25 kilometres west, a recent site-and-service settlement called Lusaka City busily establishes itself on the barren red soil of the West Rand. Shacks speckle the earth. The odd brick house emerges slowly, as the resources of the erf's owners allow. New gardens, patchy lawns, struggle their way into existence.

#### 1. Methods

From these two metropolitan areas we<sup>1</sup> drew the samples for the Gauteng component of the study of 'Social Determinants of Domestic Energy Use amongst Low-income Households', that are also the sources of the material in this thesis. The research brief for the Energy study required that the work be carried out amongst people living in four different housing types: a formal township, backyard shacks, a planned (upgraded) informal settlement, and an unplanned informal settlement. We identified corresponding areas in the northern parts of Soweto<sup>2</sup>. The suburb of Mzimhlope in Orlando West consists of formal housing with long-time access to credit-metered<sup>3</sup> electricity. Households in Mzimhlope tend to rent out shack space in their backyards, providing their tenants with basic access to electricity via extension cords from the main house. We were thus able to study households living in the formal houses as well as the backyards in this area. Powa Park, also in Orlando

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<sup>1</sup> The project team in Gauteng consisted of myself, my co-researcher Tebogo Mafokoane, and the project coordinator, Caroline White. For three months in 1997, Leviticus Mendlula joined the team as a researcher. The project was initiated and funded by the Dept. of Mineral and Energy Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B for maps of the study areas.

<sup>3</sup> Electricity usage is billed at the end of each month, and is thus paid in arrears.

West, provided us with an example of an upgraded - but unelectrified - informal settlement, and Mandelaville in nearby Diepkloof, an unplanned shack settlement. At the time of beginning the study in 1995, we anticipated that Powa Park would be connected to the electricity grid during the project and that we would be able to monitor the transition. However it became increasingly clear that this was not to be, and thus for the purposes of the Energy project, a fifth area was added to the study in 1997. Unable to locate a newly electrified site-and-service settlement within Soweto, we included Lusaka City, on the West Rand. In this planned settlement, most residents still lived in shacks, and had access to pre-paid electricity<sup>4</sup>.

A core sample of fifteen households was drawn in each of the areas in Soweto. In Lusaka City, we took a sample of twenty. In Powa Park, which is a small settlement consisting of only 476 sites, we were able to take a random sample across the whole area. However, in each of the other areas, we identified a manageable, easily walkable section and drew a random sample from within this. Our sample of backyard residents was achieved by identifying households living in the backyards of the allotted segment of Mzimhlope who paid rent and budgeted and ate separately from the residents in the formal house<sup>5</sup>.

In each area, my co-researcher Tebogo Mafokoane and I each took full responsibility for working with roughly half of the sampled households. Because the Energy project had not allocated money for translators, Tebogo Mafokoane - who, unlike me, is multilingual - was assigned responsibility for all households in which little or no English was spoken. Thus in Mandelaville, where far fewer people spoke English than in the other areas, she took major responsibility. As a result I was less able to gain a nuanced understanding of people's experiences there, and I therefore exclude the settlement from this work. Instead, I was responsible for a greater proportion of households in Powa Park.

All samples were augmented by people who were not included in the original random samples. We sought out those involved in activities relevant to the Energy project,

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike credit metered electricity provision which is billed in arrears, this mechanism of electricity delivery requires the purchase of units prior to their use.

such as *spaza*<sup>6</sup> owners, food vendors, and other small entrepreneurs. Others were simply eager to participate or friendly enough to chat. Lawukazi<sup>7</sup> heard about the research and wanted to share her views. Tsehla wondered what I was up to, wandering the streets day after day, and approached me to find out. Lindi was home more often than Sinah, her backyard tenant who had been sampled. We'd greet and catch up and she'd pass messages each way. Sandra's *shebeen*<sup>8</sup> was always packed with people keen for conversation, groups of friends would soak up winter sunshine on the pavements, women met for tea and gossip (or to gamble, cards shuffled, dealt, slapped down in a blur, coins flicked noisily across the tabletop). I'd wander by or stumble upon these moments, and join in because people were gregarious, welcoming and interesting, the *amahewu*<sup>9</sup> good, the sunshine enticing.

The research process was thus fairly organic in form. I'd follow the leads, participate where welcome, remove myself where not. However, the researchers did complete various structured activities with members of the core samples of households. In each, we conducted a structured first interview, which included a detailed household demographic survey questionnaire administered to the 60 sampled households in Soweto. This way we gathered base-line data about each household - individual and family histories, current household structures, income estimates, as well as details of appliance ownership and energy-using activities. A year later, in 1996, we repeated the questionnaire in a shorter form in order to update household information and track any changes. As I established relationships and learned more about people's personal stories, our interactions became more fluid and spontaneous, more engaged with individual lives. Where appropriate, I worked around themes of interest, facilitating distinctive conversations rather than conducting structured interviews. Other times I just hung out. With Rebecca in her dusty yard. With Winnie in her coal-stove warm kitchen. Ineptly playing table-football with Victor in his *shebeen*. Baking batch after batch of cookies for sale with Joyce. Sitting glued to

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<sup>5</sup> Residents of the formal houses in Mzimhlope often build shacks in the back yards to provide extra sleeping space for members of their own household. For the purposes of the Energy project, these setups were not considered for sampling.

<sup>6</sup> A small general dealer, usually run from home premises, selling household supplies.

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of consistency, I utilise the same names for research participants used in the 1998 report for the Energy project.

<sup>8</sup> A local (usually unlicensed) drinking spot, commonly run from home premises.

the glamour of *The Days of Our Lives* with Anne and Nonthombi. Scraping 'smilies'<sup>10</sup> and trotters in preparation for cooking with Irene. "*Haai wena!*"<sup>11</sup> " exclaimed Rebecca, bemused at the amount of time I spent hanging out chatting, "[you've got a] soft job!"

In 1997, we administered a further questionnaire survey, this time specifically recording details of appliance acquisition and ownership, and accompanied it with semi-structured interviews. In order to augment the information we collected from the sampled households in Mzimhlope, we completed these surveys and interviews in 50 formal homes in a single street (of which six households included had been in the original sample). Results of the surveys are tabulated later in this chapter.

Due to the fact that Lusaka City was included in the study at a late stage in the fieldwork, as well its greater distance away from Johannesburg and Soweto, research there was briefer and more limited than in the other sampled areas, and did not include a detailed household demographic survey like those carried out in the other areas. Socio-economic data of households sampled in Lusaka City is therefore scanty, and is not tabulated or discussed alongside that of the other samples in the course of this dissertation. Instead, our research in Lusaka City focused primarily on appliance ownership and energy use. The sampled households in Lusaka City nonetheless provide rich core and comparative information around appliances and notions of furnishing and household decorating, and for that reason I have chosen to include data generated there.

The thesis distils the information gathered during the Energy study, and transforms its outcome from one that is policy-based to one that attempts to learn about people's own experiences of being poor and living in Soweto and Lusaka City through the symbolism of their domestic appliances and other possessions. Part of my method then, has been to reread the original fieldwork material from a different perspective, and to rework it for a different audience. Throughout, I draw on quantitative data collected by both myself and my co-researcher. However the

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<sup>9</sup> Home-brewed maize and yeast beer.

<sup>10</sup> Slang referring to (cooked) sheep heads.

<sup>11</sup> Expression of exclamation, with a meaning close to "Hey, you!" (literal meaning, "No, you!").

qualitative ethnographic material I include is drawn only from my own interviews and experiences.

Reusing fieldwork data is not unproblematic. My analyses were limited to some extent by the fact that the information was originally gathered in a manner and form appropriate to a policy research project both defined by and aimed at government administrators. In addition, whilst doing research as part of a team has many advantages, it also has its hindrances. Researchers come to the project with their own interests and agendas, their own ways of seeing the world and the world they're working in. In this instance, it was my interest rather than my co-researcher's to explore the symbolic nature of domestic appliances.

Throughout the fieldwork, it was of course impossible to escape my own race and gender (Abu-lughod, 1988; Anderson, 1993; Callaway, 1992; Nader, 1986 all comment similarly). Whilst being a woman was to my advantage at tea gatherings and women's kitchen parties, I could not begin to access young men's scenes. Men hanging out on street corners, boys doing whitepipes<sup>12</sup> in the bushes, I could not miss them. Nor could I hang out with them. I was fine material for chirps and chat-up lines, stares and smirks, but not for conversation about everyday things. Twenty-something Dumi would greet me sweetly, chat politely, when I found him scrubbing his mother's floor at home. But he would barely spare me more than a glance when he was out with his mates on the streets. Tshidiso joked with me that he'd get me a BMW to replace my rusting Toyota, "cheap-cheap, almost for *mahala*<sup>13</sup>", he promised; and showed me the rooms he was helping build in the backyard. But he would not chat in any detail about his thoughts or his days. Older men were kind, friendly, but distant too. I was fed development-speak and 'rainbow-nation'<sup>14</sup> ramblings, but was excluded from the kinds of stories and gossip that women were comfortable to share with me. Men's interactions with me alluded to networks of lives and activities, but seldom allowed me to access them. As a result, my work

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<sup>12</sup> Slang referring to smoking mandrax through bottle necks.

<sup>13</sup> A Sotho expression, meaning "for free", "for nothing", widely used.

<sup>14</sup> An expression that was first used by the then Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, at the successful outcome of the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, in which he celebrated the richness of a racially diverse country, unified at last. It has since become iconic of the 'new' South Africa.

deals predominantly, though not exclusively, with women's stories, views and experiences.

My unilingualism was also far from ideal. With only a rudimentary grasp of Zulu, even less of Sotho and other prevalent local languages, I was often lost in moments of conversation. Particularly as group chatter sped up, my understanding plummeted, and I would have to ask with embarrassment for translations. Despite these constraints, people overwhelmed me with their willingness to participate, to share their worlds and their experiences, to deal with amusement and patience with my limitations and my inabilities.

## **2. A note on my writing**

In my use of the term "household" in this dissertation, I follow Hansen's conception of a household as "a site of interaction rather than ... an empirically observable entity or conceptual unity. Household members come and go, they draw on kin-based resources and on non-kin networks, they interact with different material and personal interests, and ... they do not always agree on the terms that should structure their relationships" (1997:5). In addition, in my use of the term I refer to the (fluid) set of people for whom the house identified during sampling was the geographical locus of key resources which ensured their survival.

Throughout the thesis, I also use and quote vernacular words derived from a range of local languages - including Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, Pedi and local slang. In general I do this either because the word is commonly used, usually understood by South Africans no matter what language they speak, or because no direct English translation exists. Furthermore, Sowetans are renowned for their hybrid style of language use, their "mixed masala" speech (as it was once described to me by a resident) which draws on the whole range of South African languages, including words from English, Afrikaans and "the language of the streetwise"<sup>15</sup>, Tsotsi-taal. My inclusion of a variety of local words, then, is an attempt to invoke some sense of this expressive local language use and way of describing and labelling the world.

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<sup>15</sup> As defined by Sizwe Satyo, Prof. Of African Languages, University of Cape Town (pers. comm, 2000)

This style is often transferred across to English, so that English speech becomes dotted with African language words, often conjugated as though they are not 'out of place'. As an example, my text includes a quoted comment which states "In the mkhukhus...". The word uMkhukhu – meaning 'a shack' - is made plural as though it were English, rather than in its correct Zulu format of imikhukhu. Note, then, that quotes included in my text are directly transcribed, with the language, grammatical structures, expressions and vocabulary originally used left unchanged. Because I worked in English, none of the quotes I include are translations. Further, in places in the dissertation I write in a style which does not follow the conventional syntactic rules of English grammar, and which utilises colloquialisms often not expected in academic writing. I do so deliberately, in an effort to creatively evoke for the reader a more textured sense of the localities about which I am writing.

### **3. Positioning the settlements and samples**

In the remainder of this chapter I provide a general background and description of each settlement, in an effort to present both a sense of living in each, and some of the structural, social and political differences between the settlements and the samples drawn from them. I then look more specifically at the samples in terms of their appliance ownership patterns, to provide the base numerical data on which the remainder of the thesis rests.

#### **3.1. Mzimhlope: formal houses and backyard structures**

Whilst the chaotic Soweto highway into Johannesburg whizzes, hoots, yells with hurtling combi-taxis, persistent traffic light vendors (ice-cold Fanta through your car window, or plastic coathangers, or trendy 'Bold & The Beautiful' car-shades. You choose), brand-new shineysilver state-of-the-art BMWs throbbing with boombox soundsystems, and exhaust-noisy *skorokoros*<sup>16</sup>, the bordering neighbourhood of Mzimhlope (in the northern part of Orlando West) quietly does its suburban thing. Its wide roads, some tarred some not, are more the passage of dawdling pedestrians, a host for children's games of chalk-marked hopscotch and *bathi*<sup>17</sup>, than conduits for much motor traffic. The grassy (in places) sidewalks are meeting spaces for the lazy

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<sup>16</sup> Slang referring to an old and dilapidated car.

<sup>17</sup> A game played with stones and tins.

exchange of gossip and news. Facing onto the road, eyeing each other across the way, pre-cast concrete semi-detached 'matchbox' houses<sup>18</sup> (built during the brick and timber shortage of the 1940s (Venables, 1948)) are tightly packed in uniform rows. Fences and closed gates mark off each property. Although houses were initially provided by the state on a rental basis (freehold ownership has only recently been granted after much lobbying and in the midst of continuing bureaucracy) (Emdon, 1993), many have been transformed from their original form, with (much valued) face-brick extensions, imposing fencing and gates topped by spikes (painted gold), elaborate burglar bars, red-polished verandas, parking spaces, and neat gardens with flowers growing in rows in the hard dry soil. In the back yard, extra rooms accommodate the spillover of household members or are used for (illegal but unpoliced) rental to tenants. Lush pomegranate or peach trees, one in each yard, and planted by the state when the houses were first built, shade those who have not uprooted them for extra yard space. Inside too, few residents have left the initial house design unchanged: the majority have converted the original three rooms into a four-room structure. In most instances, the two tiny bedrooms and a kitchen-cum-living space (together totalling about 40m<sup>2</sup> of floorspace) have been further divided by a wall (of ceiling board or chipboard or sometimes bricks) separating the kitchen from a living room<sup>19</sup>. Alterations and improvements to the houses have been carried out over generations of occupant families. Grandfathers of current residents installed dividing walls. Grandmothers built cement verandas and polished them to a shine. Mothers subsidised changes to the facades over years and years as money gradually permitted. Offspring continue by contributing what they can, as they can. This slow incremental process results in people living among unplastered ash-bricks and partly-built rooms often for years at a time<sup>20</sup>.

Despite the seeming suburban quiet, a hive of entrepreneurial activity exists behind garden gates. The odd hand-painted sign on property fencing advertises cooldrinks for sale inside, or video filming for special occasions, or flower arrangements for

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<sup>18</sup> The tiny rectangular housing structures (approximately 40m<sup>2</sup>), built en masse during the 1950s and '60s to house Africans in Soweto, are widely known colloquially as 'matchboxes'.

<sup>19</sup> Of 59 Mzimhlope households surveyed, 56 had done this alteration. For further discussion of this feature, see Chapter Three.

<sup>20</sup> See Ginsburg (1996) for a historical description of these processes of incremental alterations to Soweto houses.

weddings, three legged cast iron pots or portable gas stoves to hire for funerals and large celebrations. A popular mechanic on the main drag advertises his skills: "Clutch, Breks, Engin overalls"... Not far away, another advertises "PuNcTures FiXED WhiLe-U-WaiT" with the added lure, he writes boldly, of "FrEE aiR".

From many houses, trade happens without advertisement. Without any labelling on his door, locals know where to find Bonginkosi who sells home-made water urns made of lidded plastic buckets with an inserted element. Or Ntombezishoyo's traditional healing *sangoma*<sup>21</sup> practice. Shebeens flourish in living rooms and backyards. Mantombi's reknowned 'quarters'<sup>22</sup> filled with soya mince, chips and atchar<sup>23</sup> are sold out by 2 p.m. each day. In this long-established community - where everybody knows everybody, her business needs no signpost.

Pensioner residents have buried their parents, and now watch their grandchildren and their long-time neighbours' grandchildren produce children in the self-same houses in which they spent their young adulthood. Bongiwe leaves her house-key with Winnie next door while she is at work, so that her children can get into the house when they return from school. Lindiwe shouts at the children of Tebogo (who lives three blocks away) to go home because it is getting too late for small ones to be out. MakaHlela spots Sando (her pensioner friend's grandchild) outside, and sends her to the store to buy spinach and mielie<sup>24</sup> meal. The community networks are intricate and extensive. Households too: elderly mothers live with their grown-up children, cared for by their offspring, caring for their grandchildren. These are multigenerational households, commonly consisting of three generations, often extended laterally to include additional family members either temporarily or permanently.

Space is at a premium. Households spill out from the small house space into structures - formal buildings or, more commonly, shacks - erected in backyards.

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<sup>21</sup> Zulu word denoting a traditional healer.

<sup>22</sup> A popular meal consisting of a quarter of a loaf of bread, hollowed out and filled with other foodstuffs.

<sup>23</sup> A spicy pickled vegetable relish.

<sup>24</sup> Local word for maize.

Those with backyard space to spare often pack it with lodgers, renting out the ground area on which tenants construct their own shacks. Overcrowding has always been a problem in Soweto: in the 1940s in Mzimhlope the tiny matchbox houses contained on average seven people and 1.3 families (Venables, 1948). The situation was somewhat alleviated by the building of Meadowlands during the 1950s and 1960s. But with constant city-ward migration of Africans in search of employment, from the late 1970s backyard shacks emerged to accommodate the overflow of people (White *et al*, 1996). In 1995, backyard tenants paid between R50 and R70 rental per month, an amount which included access to electricity via an extension cord dangling across the yard from the main house (and frequently involving a treacherous array of multiplugs and bad connections, often at both ends of the supply). Water (cold only) is acquired by tenants from the single outdoor tap in the yard. Residents in the main house have further access - again only to cold water - via a tap in the kitchen. An outside flush toilet is shared with the residents of the main house.

These living conditions make for volatile relationships between landlords and tenants. Each is regularly heard complaining bitterly about the other: tenants are accused of not doing their share of yard cleaning, of making too much noise, or of using too much electricity (a point difficult to prove unequivocally because of the credit-metering system installed in Mzimhlope). Tenants gripe that landlords treat them unfairly, switching off their electricity access at the mains in order to control their consumption, not allowing them to run small businesses from their shack, meddling in their activities, or evicting them without just cause. As a result, the turnover of tenants in backyards tends to be high. In a period of two years, Connie had had three different sets of tenants. Octavia too. You pay, and conform, or you go. As a backyard tenant you have no legal rights to resist eviction. Nor do you have any legal responsibilities binding you to a particular landlord. Though backyard living lacks privacy and limits residents' autonomy, it does have benefits. Access to electricity - even if erratic, controlled and the source of arguments - is one of the attractions for tenants choosing to rent rather than seek out a space in an informal settlement. And the security of sharing a yard, of having others looking out for your spot when you're out, is a boon in a neighbourhood where burglary and theft are common.

In the small yards, there is little space for shacks. It is one-room-living, at the most two. Squeeze in if you can. Or split the family: send a child or two to stay with grandmothers in rural areas, or maybe up the road to your natal home. Most backyard households are small, just a couple, maybe their young child. Often men live alone in meagrely-furnished shacks. While they work in the city, their families keep a second hearth burning in a rural area. They return there whenever they can, locking their city doors for a weekend, a week, a month at a time.

Long-time residents of the matchbox houses in Mzimhlope share a history of staunch political opposition to the state during apartheid. In the 1980s, when the area was an African National Congress (ANC) stronghold with a very active and engaged Civic<sup>25</sup>, it was the starting point for a country-wide Rates and Services boycott<sup>26</sup> (Swilling and Shubane, 1991). In the late 1980s and early 1990s it became the centre of violent battles with residents of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)-supporting hostel across the highway. Today the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO)-aligned local Civic committee is less politically engaged, and far less popular than before amongst Mzimhlope residents, who often criticise it for being opportunistic and self-serving rather than concerned with the interests of its constituency (White *et al*, 1996). Backyard tenants complain even more vehemently than those living in formal houses. They argue that they are politically marginalised by the Civic, who - in their stance that shacks should not exist in a 'new' South Africa - never act in their interests.

### **3.2. Powa Park informal settlement:**

In the shadow of the Orlando Power station, the small informal settlement of Powa Park busies itself with living. Early mornings, city workers emerge from their shacks - immaculate in perfectly ironed garb - and head off to catch trains or taxis. Others who are not formally employed set about their days in the township. Women sit under bright umbrellas on the main road down to Klipspruit, one of the boundaries of

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<sup>25</sup> Term applied to residents associations in black neighbourhoods since the late 1980s. They came together under an umbrella organisation called SANCO (South African National Civics Organisation) which allied to the ANC after the latter was unbanned in 1990.

<sup>26</sup> The Rates and Services boycott - which halted all payment of residential rates and services (such as electricity and water) - arose in Soweto as a protest against the apartheid government (Chaskalson, Jochelson and Seekings, 1987)

the settlement. Here there are many passers-by to purchase their fruit and vegetables, choc-toffee sweets and dry biscuits. Victor pumps up the volume on his sound system. His noisy *spaza* and shebeen disturb the *sangoma's* quiet practices across the way. In the open space alongside, a local mechanic grooves to Victor's throbbing beats. Without leaving Powa Park, you can buy all your basic groceries (Rasta is known to stock almost anything you might need, Rebecca too), style your hair (Thandi does perms for R20, relaxers for R15), get your car engine checked or your burglar bars welded (William has a flourishing business since he acquired a generator to run the welder he brought from home in the Transkei. He even produces small coal stoves, just right for fitting into small shack spaces). Others sell coal, or paraffin, or wood - all crucial for everyday living, in a place which operates without any access to electricity. Silas earns his cash chopping up fresh cow heads and selling them in pieces for weekend meat consumption. Nearby, others sell 'insides' - usually the offal of sheep and cattle. You can get cooked food too: Irene slaves over preparing 'smilies' - sheep heads - scraped of their fur and boiled at length in a large drum over an open fire. The brains, she assures me, are delicious. Her barbecued pig and sheep trotters are popular too. Sometimes Mr Majola, her neighbour, shares her fire and cooks mielies grown in his backyard for sale. Her sister Rose meanwhile sits quietly inside, mending clothes and sewing tracksuits for cash on an ancient Singer machine, while caring for her toddler niece.

At the communal washbasins, women gather in sunshine to scrub and rinse laundry. Here you can catch all the latest neighbourhood news. Always, somewhere in the settlement, building is on the go: shacks are erected or perfected, and ash-brick houses are slowly built by their owners, eager for the security, warmth and image these formal structures will provide. Brick by brick the structures grow, as money (or well-spotted nearby building sites) allow. Other people tend their gardens - a few brightly coloured flower beds, but far more often, productive patches of mielies, pumpkin and spinach. These squeeze between shacks, sometimes with space for only two rows of mielie plants, and line the banks of the railway line that runs across the northern perimeter of the settlement. Pigs rootle around the rubbish dumps, a few cattle graze at the *vlei*<sup>27</sup>, ducks and geese waddle at their feet keeping a wary

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<sup>27</sup> Afrikaans word, referring to a small wetland.

eye on lurking neighbourhood dogs. On Tuesdays, a queue of mums and children wait patiently outside the mobile clinic van that parks on the open dirt patch at the centre of the settlement.

Happy noise bursts from the crèche at breaktime, when the 60 children lucky enough to have secured a place spill out onto the junglegym<sup>28</sup>. Others less fortunate gather at the chickenwire fencing and watch wistfully, or shout to their friends inside. These kids play in the dust on the road. Bigger children play at *bathi* or make elaborate wire trucks and cars which they wheel around with chest high steering wheels. There are children everywhere, wherever you look, though the absence of high school students is notable<sup>29</sup>.

Below the cooling towers of the power station on the east of the settlement, a pipe intermittently pumps a massive jet of water containing coal debris onto the land below. It has created a rough black beach, parts of it submerged in rivulets of water which feed into the reeded *vlei* below. Dunes of dumped ash are piled around, and are periodically cleared by trucks from nearby brick-making enterprises. Daily, barefoot women hunch over in the shallow water with buckets of all sizes by their sides, scanning the debris for unburnt coal. Like collecting shells, only painful on their feet. For the poverty stricken in Powa Park, access to this free resource is a critical means of finding warmth they would otherwise not be able to afford in winter.

Having invaded the open stretch of land between the power station, the railway line, and a small *vlei* in the early 1990s, the residents of Powa Park negotiated their rights to remain there with the owner of the land, the then Johannesburg City Council.<sup>30</sup> In 1993, the settlement was proclaimed a legal township. 476 small sites were officially marked out, necessitating the relocation of some residents to Orange Farm, a site-and-service settlement further south. A deal was struck between the local civic

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<sup>28</sup> Climbing frame.

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix A, Table 15, illustrating the demographics of sampled Powa Park households. Note the absence of high school age children in these households. Families tend to have younger children only, or have older children who live elsewhere. For further discussion see also p.31.

<sup>30</sup> Since the 1994 elections, this (changed) structure is known as the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council.

structures and the Council that all those residing on the land would pay a R20 monthly fee for services provided by the Council. Water standpipes, washbasins and flush toilets (all communal), public payphones, and, more recently, street lighting, have been installed. The main road through the settlement has been tarred, using local labour, and the few subsidiary roads, though still dirt, have been edged with concrete blocks.

Most residents view Powa Park as, at last, their permanent place of settlement in Soweto, though there is some debate at local authority level over the suitability of the land for building formal houses. The settlement's well-organised Civic - a staunchly ANC structure - continues to negotiate with relevant stakeholders for housing and electricity. Nonetheless, ash-brick homes are gradually being built by residents impatient with waiting for housing subsidies to be awarded, or for a community-wide housing development scheme to be implemented. At the time of my research the vast majority of residents lived in corrugated iron shacks, of varying quality and size.

Households in Powa Park rarely consist of more than two generations, and these usually contain young children rather than high school scholars. When three generations are to be found, these tend to contain teenage mothers, rather than pensioner grandparents. There are few elderly people in the settlement.<sup>31</sup>

### **3.3. Lusaka City site-and-service settlement:**

The uniformly laid out erven of Lusaka City (officially known as Rietvallei Extension 3) stretch across low hills, way out on the West Rand, 40 kilometres from Johannesburg. Red earth divided in squares, patterned with tiny, regularly spaced brick structures (containing 'longdrop' pit toilets) and a spiderweb of overhead electricity cables. Colourful shacks - pink (a favourite choice), lime green (another), powder blue, grey, brown - scatter in-between. By 1997 a few residents had managed to erect small brick houses. Some were living in a structure half-corrugated iron, half ash-brick. Most lived in corrugated iron shacks, of usually two or three, sometimes four rooms. Building is in (slow) process. But with the promise of legal ownership of their serviced sites, this is the long-term goal of all residents.

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<sup>31</sup> See section 4.1 for discussion.

For most, this is the first permanent spot of their own. Shacks tend to be bigger than those of Powa Park. And often more elaborate. Interior walls are insulated with factory palettes or plastic-coated cardboard, rather than Lion match or LuckyStar Pilchard<sup>32</sup> papering. Plain colours are in, patterns are out. Simple fencing and gates mark off property boundaries. Struggling lawns here and there, and numerous flower gardens, are carefully laid out and tended into bright displays of colour lining the sides of the wide red-dusty roads. Vegetable gardens, in contrast, are few, grown behind shacks at the back of the erven. Chrysanthemums are in, carrots and mielies are not. At night, electric lights flicker in house windows. The pre-paid electricity supply (with meters moved to the outside walls in an attempt by Eskom<sup>33</sup> to halt rampant theft of power, through tampering with meters<sup>34</sup>) ensures that TVs blare and children don't suffer homework by candlelight.

Lusaka City is a huge site-and-service settlement on land apparently earmarked for development in 1994,<sup>35</sup> and now under the jurisdiction of the Krugersdorp Metropolitan Council. Since its establishment (longdrop toilets and water taps were installed by 1996), people from all over Soweto and the West Rand rushed to acquire their own erf, and thereby to escape the difficulties and discomfort of living in other people's backyards. Or to leave behind the struggles, and often squalor, of informal settlement living. Or to opportunistically secure a second or even third property that could be sold profitably at a later date. Many shacks in Lusaka City remain locked and bolted day after day, watched over by resident friends or family, their owners living in houses elsewhere but eager to cash in on money-making opportunities.

Processes of acquisition were haphazard. The local South African Residents Association (SARA), the Krugersdorp Metropolitan Council (KMC), and another

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<sup>32</sup> Lion Matches and LuckyStar Pilchards are just two popular product brand names in South Africa. Shack residents often paper their interior walls with offcuts of sheets of labels, or the advertising materials of these products.

<sup>33</sup> Eskom, a para-statal, is the national electricity provider in South Africa.

<sup>34</sup> The moving of electricity meters from inside shacks to out in the open enables Eskom officials to easily monitor people's electricity usage (whether they are at home or not) and to ensure that the meters are not tampered with in a way that enables the residents to access electricity without paying for it.

<sup>35</sup> pers.com, Lusaka City branch of South African Residents Association (SARA), March 1997

committee, which asserts itself as the civic representation for the area (sometimes choosing to align itself with the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO), sometimes not), each claim to be the legitimate route to securing freehold ownership rights. Each organisation has its own mechanisms for handing over sites - SARA extracts membership fees (which amounted to R60 in 1997<sup>36</sup>) from would-be owners, 'Group X', as the alleged civic is nicknamed by local SARA committee members, is rumoured to demand anything from R250 upwards for an erf. It does not appear that the KMC requires any fees, but acquiring an erf directly through them is not easy: in 1996, applicants who were turned away from the KMC on the grounds that stands were no longer available, were able to secure sites through SARA and 'Group X'. It is a confusing, infuriating business for the residents of Lusaka City, many of whom are concerned that they may be evicted at some stage, but are nevertheless adamant that they will not leave.

Residents converged on Lusaka City's vacant sites from a variety of other parts of Gauteng, making for a diverse neighbourhood. Unlike Powa Park where Xhosa predominates, or Mzimhlope, where Sotho is the first language of most residents<sup>37</sup>, there is no dominant home language in Lusaka City. Still in its infancy, the neighbourhood consists primarily of new relationships: Susan, despite calling a familiar hello to every bypasser outside her shack, explained in 1997 that she "[doesn't] have friends in Lusaka City". Support networks are still developing, and lives appear less intertwined than in the other settlements<sup>38</sup>.

Small informal businesses are also not as prominent as elsewhere. Well signposted where they do exist, *spazas* are few and far between, and the range of available home-based services is limited. Groceries, or mechanics, gas refills or haircuts, are all a fairly long walk away, across Randfontein Road - a busy highway into Johannesburg that runs along the northernmost border of the settlement - and into the nearest formal settlement of Azaadville.

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<sup>36</sup> I was unable to ascertain whether these were one-off contributions, or annual fees.

<sup>37</sup> Apartheid policy was to segregate the suburbs of Soweto by ethno-linguistic category.

<sup>38</sup> This is a well-documented feature of new residential developments. See for example, Yose (1999) or Spiegel and Mehlwana (1997).

Households are generally small, consisting of one or two generations of kin. Many are breakaway splits from parental houses or are ex-backyard residents thrilled at their freedom, couples with their own home for the first time, maybe with a young child or two, seldom of high-school age.

#### **3.4. Mzimhlope, Powa Park, and Lusaka City**

Mzimhlope, Powa Park and Lusaka City are three living places and discursive spaces. They are three distinct urban geographies shaped as much by their local histories as by everyday practices of their residents as they struggle to situate their lives within contemporary urban South Africa, and to make do and make good as civilians, as working class South Africans, as persons. These histories have necessarily evolved in relation to the troubled politics of the apartheid policies of labour migration, influx control and the forced removals of the 1940s to 1980s, and urban development of the present. They are also shaped by the changing sense of style of living, changing symbolic associations with everyday objects of living, and changing patterns of engagement with commodity production of household items and fetishisation of interior design. My dissertation endeavours to get at the links between the material and symbolic, the personalised and the collective, the political and aesthetic dynamics in the way that household objects - appliances specifically - and interior design were differently 'put to work' in these three urban settlements in 1995 to 1997. I turn now from ethnographic description foregrounding aspects of urban living to add a quantitative dimension. Whereas in the preceding pages I have attended primarily to the visible signs of residents making their urban spaces livable, the following section provides the numerical data from which I draw throughout the thesis.

#### **4. Household Composition and Income:**

Quantitative household data were gathered during the survey we completed between August and October 1995 in Mzimhlope and Powa Park. Note that the samples are small and therefore are not statistically representative of the settlements as a whole. However, the data serve to demonstrate some of the differences between the aggregate of households interviewed in each of the settlements. Note too, that the data capture a moment in time, a day in a lifetime, and thus do not reflect the frequent changes that occurred in household size and composition, nor in financial resources.

**Table 1. Details of Interviewed Households, August 1995<sup>i</sup>**

	Mzimhlope		Powa Park	Lusaka City <sup>ii</sup>
	Formal	Backyard		
<b>Number of households:</b>	15	15	15	20
Total number of adults (>18) resident in sum of interviewed households <sup>iii</sup>	62	30	28	43
Total number of elderly (>50) resident in sum of interviewed households <sup>iii</sup>	19	1	2	1
Total number of children (<18) resident in sum of interviewed households <sup>iii</sup>	40	6	14	15
<b>Number resident in household (means):</b>				
Total	6,53	2,87	2,93	2.85
Adults	4,27	2,13	2,07	2.05
Children	2,27	0,73	0,87	0.75
<b>Other household characteristics:</b>				
Ave. age of resident adults	41.52	30.55	36.64	No data
Age range of adults	19 - 85	19 - 47	23 - 58	20-66
Ave. age of resident children	8.77	5.66	4.73	No data
Percentage of households without children resident <sup>iv</sup>	13.33	66.67	46.67	40.00
Percentage of households with split economic commitments <sup>iv, v</sup>	20.00	46.67	86.67	45.00
<b>Household income</b>				
Nothing	3	2	6	Data not available
R1 - R250	0	3	2	
R251 - R500	4	2	0	
R501 - R1000	2	4	1	
R1 001 - R1500	3	3	2	
R1 501 - R2500	2	3	4	
R2 501 - R3500	1	0	0	
R3 500 +	0	0	0	
Average household income (Rs)	895,87	849,87	805,60	
Per capita household income (Rs)	150,10	320,77	282,34	

**Note:**

- i. This table is adapted from White, C, Crankshaw, O, Mafokoane, T and Meintjes, H (1996:7). I have omitted the figures referring to an original settlement not included in the present study, added those for Lusaka City, and included additional information.
- ii. Gaps in the Lusaka City data in this table are due to the lack of completion of a detailed household demographic survey amongst sampled households. (See p 14 above)
- iii. These figures exclude members of the household who were living elsewhere at the time of the survey questionnaire.
- iv. Percentage figures are used here in order to make the different sample sizes comparable.
- v. By this I refer to households which have a financial responsibility to children and other dependents living elsewhere

#### **4.1. Household composition:**

Those household units living in those Mzimhlope formal houses included in the study are shown on average to be far larger than those we sampled living in its backyards, in Powa Park or in Lusaka City<sup>39</sup>. Of the fifteen households interviewed in the formal houses, five included ten or more people dependent on shared income (though not all of them were necessarily resident). In contrast, in Powa Park none of those we interviewed were this size (8 of the 15 households had fewer than five members). Similarly in Lusaka City, where 18 of twenty households interviewed consisted of five or fewer dependants). In the backyards, the only interviewed household consisting of more than ten people was one which was formed by three unrelated migrant worker friends living in Soweto and supporting their families back home in Mozambique. Of the remaining fourteen households included in the study, twelve contained fewer than five members.

Those households included in the study from Powa Park, Mzimhlope backyard and Lusaka City contrasted not only in size, but also in composition with households in formal Mzimhlope houses. Households interviewed in Mzimhlope formal housing contained a full range of ages and generations - pensioners, middle-aged men and women, young adults, scholars (25% at high school) and toddlers. Children were resident in the majority (86.67%) of the sampled formal households. Elderly people were far less prevalent in the other three samples: in the Mzimhlope formal houses, nineteen out of 62 adults resident in the fifteen interviewed households were over 50 years of age, in contrast with Powa Park where only two of 28, the back yards where only one of 30, and Lusaka City where only one of 43 residents were older than 50. Mzimhlope was established in the 1960s, and many of the original residents remained. However Powa Park and Lusaka City are more recently established settlements (both only emerged in the early 1990s), and thus tended to be populated by younger families. Few elderly people lived in backyard shacks because these tend to be the living spaces of migrants working in Gauteng, or of young people setting up home away from their parents.

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix A where detailed household composition is tabulated for each core household included in the study.

Children were also fewer in the households studied in Powa Park, the Mzimhlope backyards and Lusaka City - particularly in the case of the backyards where only 33.33% of sampled households contain resident children. In many instances, children of residents were left in rural homes to be cared for by other family members. Almost half of the households in the backyard and Lusaka City samples, and nearly 90% of those in the Powa Park sample had children living elsewhere (and hence had split economic commitments). Note too that the average age of children in interviewed households in Powa Park and the Mzimhlope backyards was younger than those in the formal housing sample, a reflection of the general absence of high school students in these samples. This was partly due to older children being sent to live and go to school elsewhere while parents kept the youngest with them, and partly because many of the families in these settlements were only at a stage of having young children.

#### 4.2. Income

I provide income figures with much hesitation. Their use is limited. They depict a static moment in time, and often even this is impossible to capture accurately. In instances where people commonly survive through erratic informal sector activity (two handsewn dresses sold one week, none for another three), piece jobs here and there, temporary work as and when it is available, and insecure contract positions, incomes earned fluctuate from day to day, week to week and month to month. For example, of 37 households for which I attempted to document income in August 1995 and again in August 1996; thirteen experienced at least one decrease in their monthly earnings, eighteen an overall increase and only six remained stable. Moreover, as incomes fluctuate, household members shift (and are shifted) back and forth. As a job contract expires, another child gets sent home to be cared for by *gogo*<sup>40</sup> at a rural home. As work improves, family members come from elsewhere to be supported. People move, wherever there are 'spare' resources to be shared. (See Jones, 1993, Ramphela, 1993, Spiegel, 1986, 1987 for excellent insights into household membership fluctuation among the poor in South Africa)

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<sup>40</sup> Zulu word for 'Grandmother', often used to refer to old women in general, not only to kin.

Not only are earnings erratic, they are also often difficult to quantify. Whether *spaza* owners or shebeen queens, hairdressers or sweet-vendors, most struggle to keep business finances separate from household consumption. Severely limited resources do not enable such distinctions. Businesses operate as remaining resources allow them to. Impoverished times are marked by emptying *spaza* shelves, as people eat their stock and are unable to replenish it. Profits drop, so does income, but nobody is quite sure by how much. Next turn at the *stokvel*<sup>41</sup> handouts provides cash to restock and put business on track. For the moment.

The issue of who earns the money often affects how much of a household's total income benefits the household unit. Consider Connie and Reuben. Connie had worked all her life. Her husband Reuben had been unemployed for years. With the addition of the disability grant of her sister Maria, Connie had struggled through supporting twelve household members. Suddenly Reuben secured work on a road-widening project. His earnings should effectively have added a third onto the overall household income. But very little ever reached the family funds. Instead Reuben was drunk daily, instead of only at weekends as he used to be...

It is thus not possible to represent the complexity and fluidity of households' experiences on income tables. The data provided here are simply a pencil-marked outline of the financial states of the households sampled in the three settlements, a scribble which would have been erased and redrawn over and over from day to day, in complexity impossible to capture here.

Recorded average monthly incomes of the sampled settlements suggest that kinds and levels of financial resources available were similar in all three settlements for which data are available. Considering these monthly household averages, the Powa Park sample could be considered on average to be slightly poorer than the backyard sample in Mzimhlope, which in turn registered as marginally more impoverished than the sample of formal house residents. The difference is minimal however. On the other hand, a cursory examination of average per capita monthly incomes suggests

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<sup>41</sup> Rotating Credit Association that can take on various forms of saving and purchasing.

that formal house dwellers were poorer than the rest. This lower figure is a result of the large household sizes in these homes, with few family members residing elsewhere. In the same vein, I would argue that the figures for both the backyard resident sample and the Powa Park sample are skewed, due to the prevalence of children and other dependants of households in these samples living elsewhere at the time of the survey and therefore not included in the per capita calculations.<sup>42</sup> The high number of split economic commitments amongst these households - of responsibilities for remittances to other homes - would decrease the respective per capita figures substantially. However, accurate calculations are impossible in most instances, due to the lack of clarity over what proportion of income goes to dependants elsewhere, and the irregularity and fluctuation of remittances.

## **5. The Demographics of Appliance Ownership:**

I turn now to examine patterns of appliance ownership in the sampled settlements, in order to provide the base data for my exploration in the following chapters of the roles appliances played in the shaping and marking of people's cosmologies and aspirations. Note that I only present the data here, leaving discussion and analysis of appliance ownership patterns to subsequent chapters.

Note also that both in this chapter and throughout the dissertation, I focus my interest on appliance ownership patterns in the electrified areas of Mzimhlope (both the backyards and the formal houses) and Lusaka City. Figures for Powa Park are not tabulated: appliance ownership in Powa Park was constrained due to the absence of electricity in the settlement as well as because the range of non-electrical appliances available for purchase in South Africa is itself very limited. Residents had little choice in the appliances in which they were able to invest. However I include data from Powa Park because residents' views and experiences are nonetheless informative. Details of appliance ownership in this settlement are discussed (rather than tabulated) later in the chapter.

On the basis of the surveys and discussions, it is possible to identify general trends in appliance ownership in the sets of households resident in each settlement . I

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix A for details of split households in each of the settlements.

present these here. In the case of the electrified settlements, in which appliance ownership was far more extensive and varied than in Powa Park, I begin with a detailed comparative breakdown of appliance ownership by energy-related activity and settlement. The tables demonstrate the various characteristics of appliance investment in the three samples taken from electrified settlements, and indicate the clear trends in each. The survey data is collated in these tables by energy-using domestic activity for easier reading and interpretation. Note that broken appliances that are retained on display are included in the numeric data.

Because of the different numbers of households interviewed during the appliance ownership surveys (n=50 in Mzimhlope formal, n=15 in the backyards, n=20 in Lusaka City, n=15 in Powa Park), tabulated data in this section of the chapter provide actual figures of the occurrence of appliances in each sample, as well as their proportional (percentage) values. By including these percentages I am not intending to imply that the households surveyed are statistically representative of each area as a whole, but rather to make the data sets that I include here more easily comparable.

## 5.1. Appliance ownership in the Electrified settlements

### 5.1.1. Food Related Appliances:

**Table 2. Distribution of electric cooking appliances in households in electrified settlements**

Appliance/combination	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	n=50	%	n=15	%	n=20	%
No electrical cooking appliances	0	0	0	0	6	30
Two-plate stove	15	30	10	67	9	45
Oven with four-plate hob	25	50	0	0	3	15
Two-plate stove + oven with four-plate hob	8	16	1	7	0	0
Table-top oven	1	2	2	13	1	5
One plate stove	1	2	2	13	1	5
TOTAL	50	100	15	100	20	100

In the formal houses there is a strong bias towards owning four-plate stoves with ovens, whilst in the backyard sample and the Lusaka City sample there is a prevalence of two-plate stoves. Single-plate stoves are rare in all three settlements. In the few cases where these were observed, they were home-made appliances consisting of a hot plate element balanced on an old paraffin flame stove. In two of the instances recorded, the 'stove' was seldom used for cooking, since it was not possible to regulate its temperature, and so their usage was confined to space- and water-heating.

More striking is the absence of table-top ovens from all the households. These are potentially useful considering the space constraints in most low-income homes, and they would enable people to bake (a rationale provided by many households for their investment in four-plate stoves with ovens). A practical limitation of these stoves compared with four-plate ones is, however, the smaller number of hot plates (two), a shortcoming on Sundays when meals consisting of more than two components are often prepared.

Note that all households in both the Mzimhlope formal and backyard samples owned at least one electric cooking appliance, while a full 30 % of the Lusaka City sample were without any.

**Table 3. Distribution of paraffin and gas stoves in households in electrified settlements<sup>43</sup>**

Appliance/combination	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	n=50	%	n=15	%	n=20	%
No paraffin or gas cookers	35	70	7	47	1	5
paraffin wick stove (single/double)	6	12	6	40	15	75
paraffin primus stove	8	16	2	13	2	10
gas hob	1	2	0	0	2	10
Total	50	100	15	100	20	100

<sup>43</sup> Coal stoves are omitted from this table because their primary purpose in all households in all three settlements is as a space heater. Their function as cooking facilities is a convenient secondary benefit. I therefore tabulate them alongside other space heaters in Table 7.

This table includes appliances that were used only in emergencies alongside others which were used daily; appliances which tended to be stored out of view when not in use alongside others which were kept accessible for daily use. In both the Mzimhlope formal sample and the backyards, most of the paraffin and gas cookers indicated on this table were used only as backup, in the event of electricity disconnections. In contrast, at least 14 (70 %) of the Lusaka City sample made use of their paraffin or gas stove as the primary cooker.

The table is nonetheless interesting for the disparities it displays with regard to non-electric appliance ownership between the settlements. In Lusaka City, the majority of sampled households owned non-electrical cooking appliances, in contrast to the ownership patterns in formal houses (one third of the sample) and backyard shacks (just over half of the sample). This will be considered in detail in Chapter Three where I analyse the patterns of appliance ownership in the settlements.

**Table 4. Distribution of other food-related appliances in electrified households<sup>i</sup>**

Type of appliance	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	Frequency	% of household sample <sup>ii</sup>	Frequency	% of household sample <sup>ii</sup>	Frequency	% of household sample <sup>ii</sup>
microwave	7	14	0	0	0	0
electric frying pan	20	40	0	0	7	35
rotogrill	0	0	1	7	0	0
snackwich	12	24	0	0	2	10
toaster	12	24	0	0	4	20
large food-processor	4	8	0	0	1	5
hand held beater	1	2	0	0	0	0
electric carving knife	1	2	0	0	0	0
electric slow cooker	1	2	0	0	0	0
soda stream (gas)	1	2	0	0	0	0

**Notes:**

- i. Here the number of households owning the appliances does not equal the total number of households in the sample. The data represent the total number of any particular appliance in each sample, so households which owned more than one of these appliances are represented more than once on the table. Percentages indicated thus represent proportions of the total sample.
- ii. This percentage indicates the frequency of each appliance in relation to the total sample for each settlement. In other words, it represents the proportion of each sample that owns each kind of appliance. The percentage reflected is calculated as follows:  $(\text{frequency} \div n) \times 100$ , where  $n = \text{total}$

sample size in each settlement (n=50 in Mzimhlope formal, n=15 in Mzimhlope backyards, n=20 in Lusaka City)

In all settlements the appliances represented in Table 4 were owned only in conjunction with electric stoves of some kind, except for one case in Lusaka City where one of the household members, Ruby, used an electric frying pan for her business making fatcakes for sale. However, she prepared all domestic food on a paraffin stove.

Additional cooking appliances are rare in the Lusaka City sample, and even more so among backyarders. The Mzimhlope formal sample shows greater diversity. In households where electric frying pans were owned, they were usually used only for Sunday cooking, and for frying meat meals. None were used as the primary cooking surface. In Lusaka City particularly, electric frying pans were considered too heavy on electricity to use for everyday cooking.

Despite the relative prevalence of toasters and snackwiches<sup>44</sup>, in most households these were seldom, if ever, used. However, they were often kept on display. In many cases, they were received second-hand, given by domestic employers who wanted to get rid of them. Often they did not work, or did not work properly. Toasters in particular, were not a popular investment, because “they dry out the bread”. A preference for snackwich-makers over toasters was often expressed.

### 5.1.2. Water heating

**Table 5. Distribution of water heating appliances in households in electrified settlements**

Appliance/combination	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	n=50	%	n=15	%	n=20	%
no dedicated electric appliance	14	28	10	67	10	50
kettle only	27	54	4	27	10	50
kettle + urn	3	6	0	0	0	0
kettle + geyser	4	8	0	0	0	0
urn only	2	4	1	7	0	0
TOTAL	50	100	15	100	20	100

<sup>44</sup> Snackwich is brand-name, but is used to refer to a range of toasting irons.

A fairly high proportion of households in all the settlements, but especially those in the backyards, did not own appliances dedicated specifically to water heating. Instead, these households heated water in a pot on an electric, paraffin or gas stove. In winter, those who light coal stoves made ample use of them for heating water.

Across the samples, geysers (hot water cylinders) and urns were virtually non-existent. With one exception, households which had an urn or geyser also had an electric kettle. There were geysers only in homes where there was a bathroom. The idea of installing a geyser without a bathroom was on the whole considered ridiculous. 'A geyser? But I don't have a bathroom!' one woman in Mzimhlope said, echoing her neighbours' attitudes. The absence of urns is more puzzling, considering that they do not need plumbing and are energy-efficient thanks to their immersed elements. They also have a tap for easy access to the water, and could save household members much time and effort, especially around bath time. However, it is possible that they were viewed as appliances appropriate in work-places rather than in homes.

### 5.1.3. Refrigeration

**Table 6. Distribution of refrigeration appliances in households in electrified settlements**

Appliance/combination	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	n=50	%	n=15	%	n=20	%
no refrigeration appliances	6	12	12	80	9	45
double-door fridge-freezer	24	48	2	13	8	40
single-door fridge	11	22	1	7	1	5
single-door + double-door fridge	4	8	0	0	0	0
single/double door fridge + deep freeze	4	8	0	0	1	5
deep freeze only	1	2	0	0	1	5
TOTAL	50	100	15	100	20	100

Here we see striking differences between the settlements in terms of refrigerator ownership. It was rare for a formal household in Mzimhlope to be without a fridge (88% of the sample had a refrigerator of some kind), while backyarders very seldom

owned one (80% lived without one of their own). In Lusaka City, they were fairly common, with 55% of the sample having a fridge or freezer. Half of them were purchased in order to run a business. Sharing a fridge with a neighbour was generally not seen as a good option: those who did, found it could entail sharing their food. As one woman who was pleased no longer to be sharing her nearby parents' fridge, pointed out: "If we put food in there, we must share. A hundred rands worth [of meat] takes only two weeks. Now it lasts for a month because we don't eat with everybody".

Another contrast between settlements is the different income levels associated with owning a fridge. In Mzimhlope, fridges were common. Households that lived without fridges are extremely poor<sup>45</sup>, living hand to mouth, day to day. In Lusaka City and in the backyards, where people did not have fridges, it was not so much because they were too poor but because different investments were being prioritised. Having no fridge was not necessarily associated with extreme poverty.

Interestingly, in all settlements, there was a strong preference for large double-door fridge-freezers (in particular in the Mzimhlope formal households, where 60 % of the sample owned such appliances). These took up considerable space in tiny homes, dominating kitchens or living spaces. Only three small bar fridges were observed, all in formal houses of Mzimhlope. In each case, these were extras, owned by households who could afford the luxury of a second fridge – often kept in a backyard room for the use of grown-up children.

Quite a number of refrigeration appliances – seven – in the formal houses in Mzimhlope were not working. Most used these broken appliances as convenient storage as there was a distinct lack of storage facilities in most of these homes. Furthermore, as I show later, they were not discarded because their presence fulfilled various social functions.

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<sup>45</sup> These include the six households represented clearly on the table, as well as a further two households whose only fridge is not working.

### 5.1.4. Space heating

**Table 7. Distribution of space heating appliances**

Appliance	Mzimhlope formal houses			Mzimhlope backyard shacks			Lusaka City		
	Frequency	% of total no. of heaters	% of household sample owning heater type	Frequency	% of heaters	% of household sample owning heater type	Frequency	% of heaters	% of household sample owning heater type
Electric heater	52	57	88	6	67	40	8	36	40
Paraffin heater	3	3	6	1	11	7	4	18	20
Large coal stove	34	38	58	1	11	7	0	0	0
Small coal stove	2	2	4	0	0	0	5	23	25
Mbawula <sup>46</sup>	0	0	0	1	11	7	5	23	25
Gas heater	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	91	100	156	9	100	156	22	100	100

**Notes:**

- i. This percentage indicates the frequency of each appliance in relation to the total number of households sampled for each settlement. In other words, it represents the proportion of each sample that owns each kind of appliance. The percentage reflected is calculated as follows:  $(\text{frequency} \div n) \times 100$ , in which  $n$  = total sample size in each settlement ( $n=50$  in Mzimhlope formal,  $n=15$  in Mzimhlope backyards,  $n=20$  in Lusaka City).

Table 7 indicates high prevalence of electrical heating appliances in all three settlements, but particularly in the formal houses of Mzimhlope, in which 88% of the sampled households owned an electric heater. Note that, in addition, many of these households owned a coal stove. Comparing usage (rather than ownership) of electric heaters across the three settlements, we find that all the electric heaters in the Mzimhlope formal and Mzimhlope backyard household samples were used. However, of the eight households in Lusaka City that owned electric heaters, only three relied on them exclusively for space heating. Two households did not use their heaters at all - one burned a coal stove, the other a paraffin heater instead. The remaining three households combined electric space heating with coal or paraffin heating.

Table 7 also provides a clear representation of multiple fuel use for space heating and the high levels of non-electric appliance ownership, amongst the Lusaka City shack dwellers in contrast to those living in the formal homes and backyards of Mzimhlope. Whereas 70% of the Lusaka City sample owned non-electric heating appliances, a mere 21% of the backyard sample and a larger (but misleading) 68% of the formal house sample kept non-electric heaters in their homes. These latter

<sup>46</sup> A coal-burning brazier, made from an old tin punctured with holes. A fire is lit inside the tin.

percentages are misleading because, particularly in the case of the formal houses, many of the alternative appliances were retained but not used. Two of the three paraffin heaters in the Mzimhlope formal housing sample, for example, were never used. Similarly, at least three of the coal stoves were never lit, but stood idle in the kitchen, decorating the space and providing a useful kitchen work surface. This discrepancy in fuel use practices stands to reason: in credit-metered Mzimhlope, many people had not, for many years, been paying for the electricity they used, whereas in Lusaka City, where a pre-payment system had been installed from the start and carefully monitored for tampering, residents had had little option but to pay.

Also interesting to note are the differences in the distribution of non-electric heaters across the various housing types. Paraffin heaters, for example, were far more prevalent in Lusaka City (20% of the total sample) than in the formal homes of Mzimhlope (where only 6% of the sample owned these appliances). Large coal stoves were favoured in Mzimhlope matchbox homes, primarily because they were inherited with the house, while not one of the new Lusaka City households had invested in one of these extremely expensive appliances. Here people burned paraffin heaters, coal braziers (25%), or small locally-produced makeshift coal stoves (25%) to keep warm in winter. Note further that braziers were burned only in shack-dwelling households, and never in formal houses, however poor the residents.

#### 5.1.5. Entertainment appliances

**Table 8. Distribution of TV sets**

No of TV sets	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	n=50	%	n=15	%	n=20	%
0	2	4	8	53	8	40
1	39	78	7	47	11	55
2	9	18	0	0	1	5
TOTAL	50	100	15	100	20	100

**Table 9. Distribution of sound systems and radios**

No of sound systems/ radios	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	n=50	%	n=15	%	n=20	%
0	8	16	2	13	4	20
1	30	60	13	87	13	65
2	12	24	0	0	3	15
TOTAL	50	100	15	100	20	100

Entertainment appliances were extensively owned by households in all three electrified settlements. A total of 98% of the sampled formal houses in Mzimhlope, 100% of the sampled backyarders, and 90% of the Lusaka City sample owned either a TV or sound system. In fact, in most instances, households owned one of each. For example, of the 42 households in Mzimhlope formal who owned sound systems, only one of these did not own a TV as well. All entertainment appliances were run off electricity in these settlements, except for four battery-operated radios among backyard householders.

With respect to television sets, the highest incidence of ownership was in the Mzimhlope formal households, where only five households (10%) did not have a working TV. Each of these households was extremely poor. Backyarders, by contrast, tended to own sound systems rather than TV sets. No M-Net<sup>47</sup> facilities were encountered in any homes, but two VCRs were found in each of the formal housing sample and Lusaka City, and one in the backyard sample.

Duplicate entertainment appliances were found only in the Lusaka City and Mzimhlope formal samples, with a higher incidence in the multiple-roomed formal homes, in particular in households in which family members lived in backyard extensions. These duplicates tended to be faulty or broken, although in some instances they were purchased for household members staying in back rooms, or in order to defuse tensions arising over conflicting entertainment interests within the household. For example, the Tsehlas, a three-generation household in Mzimhlope formal, bought two radios in order to avoid conflict between people wanting to listen to different programmes at the same time.

Turning now to consider the different *kinds* of TV sets and sound systems owned, our attention is again drawn to interesting discrepancies in ownership between the settlements. However, deductions from the following tables must be made with caution, in particular with respect to backyard ownership of television sets, for which the sample is extremely small.

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<sup>47</sup> The TV pay-channel in South Africa.

**Table 10. Types of TV sets in electrified households**

Type of TV set owned	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
53/61cm colour TV	33	58	2	29	5	39
portable colour TV	1	2	2	29	2	15
black & white TV (any size)	23	40	3	38	6	46
TOTAL	57	100	7	100	13	100

**Table 11. Types of sound systems in electrified households**

Types of sound systems owned	Mzimhlope formal houses		Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
hi-fi	23	42	0	0	6	31.5
hi-fi with CD	2	4	0	0	3	16
radio	14	25	9	69	4	21
radio-cassette player	16	29	4	31	6	31.5
TOTAL	55	100	13	100	19	100

Note how among residents of the formal houses in Mzimhlope, investment in large colour TV sets was prioritised, while it appears that in the other settlements this was not often the case.

With respect to sound systems, just under half of both the Mzimhlope formal sample and the Lusaka City sample owned hi-fis, some even with CD players. However most of these households did not own CDs or cassettes, and under-utilised the hi-fi sets as radios only. Strikingly, not one backyarder sampled owned a hi-fi. Most had acquired only a basic radio.

#### **5.1.6. Labour saving appliances**

The distribution of labour-saving appliances presents a conspicuous contrast when juxtaposed with the tables indicating the virtual ubiquity of entertainment appliances in sampled households. No housework aids had been invested in by any of the backyard or Lusaka City households. Even in the formal housing sample, ownership

of these appliances can be considered only negligible: six washing machines (half of them unused), two vacuum cleaners and three floor polishers were recorded in a sample of 50 households in Mzimhlope. There were no dishwashers or tumble dryers. These aspects will be discussed and analysed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

## **6. Conclusion**

Following from the tables included thus far, we see how households in the formal houses of Mzimhlope tended to own a greater variety and larger number of electrical appliances than those in the other two electrified housing types. In addition, appliances in these households were often more elaborate than those in the backyards and Lusaka City: the ownership of ovens rather than two-plate stoves is a case in point, as is the prominent presence of large colour TV sets there, as compared to TV set distribution in Lusaka City and the backyards.

Backyarders, on the whole, lie at the opposite extreme. Here the trend was towards fewer and more rudimentary electric appliances (the prevalence of radios over hi-fi sets for example), and minimal investment in living space and equipment. Where it was possible to use one electrical appliance for multiple purposes, this was often done, even though it may have been energy-inefficient. Electric two-plate stoves were commonly used not only for cooking but also for heating water and, with the addition of a sheet of metal or a pot of boiling water, for warming living space. Further, people tended not to buy appliances that are not easily movable, as evidenced by the low incidence of fridges and ovens in the sample. Note, however, that there are a few backyarders in the sample who did not conform to this pattern. Both instances will be discussed further in Chapter Three where I consider the symbolic meanings of appliances and housing types.

A greater range of non-electric appliances was owned and used in the site-and-service settlement of Lusaka City than in either of the Mzimhlope housing types. Although many residents in the formal houses owned coal stoves, other non-electric appliances were present in negligible numbers. In Lusaka City however, a variety of non-electric heaters and stoves was owned. Electrical appliances in the settlement

varied from the most basic (cheap two-plate stoves were common, for example) to good-quality purchases (such as brand-new double-door fridges), with many householders expressing a desire to accumulate gradually a set of good-quality electric appliances.

Finally, in the unelectrified settlement of Powa Park appliance ownership was extremely limited due to the small range of affordable non-electric appliances on the market, as well as people's widespread reluctance to purchase equipment that they did not envisage using for long. Nobody in the informal settlement anticipated staying in a shack, without electricity, permanently. The pattern of appliance ownership in Powa Park then, was fairly uniform. The most common appliances in Powa Park households were paraffin stoves, which were used to fulfil a range of domestic activities – cooking, water heating, ironing and often space heating. Most sampled households owned paraffin wick stoves, with either single or double hobs. Other than paraffin wick stoves, very few appliances were owned in this informal settlement. Only one household owned a paraffin heater, two owned gas heaters, and three had coal stoves (two of which were small). Money spent on heating appliances in these households was generally seen as a waste, since paraffin stoves and coal braziers were used to perform this function. Most households owned some sort of radio and nearly half of them owned a television set which they ran off car batteries. Only one household had a paraffin fridge, which was bought for a *spaza*. Although many households also owned one or two electrical appliances, either used in their previous dwellings or bought in anticipation of having electricity shortly, most were lent out to family and friends who live in electrified homes. The odd electric kettle or iron was kept stored out of the way in the shack.

Whilst people's income brackets and means of survival in the interviewed households did not differ much from one residential area to the next, the tables in this chapter illustrate that their appliance ownership patterns nonetheless contrast quite dramatically. Factors such as the length of time people have been living in an area or dwelling is likely to affect the quantity of appliances they have been able to accumulate (consider for example, the large number of appliances owned in formal houses in long-established Mzimhlope). However, people's choice of possessions is

clearly far from dependent only on their affordability or utilitarian functioning. The remainder of the dissertation is concerned with exploring additional concerns that people voiced and around which they acted in their choices of domestic appliances.

## Chapter Three

### **“It is good not to look poor”: The construction and reproduction of ‘proper living’**

The sun filtered between the shacks, marking warm stripes across the dusty yard. We sat on beer crates outside, the group of women neighbours and me. Yet again, I was confused. Yet again, I was faced with bemusement. What was it in their reasoning, these faces asked, that I could not grasp? “We can’t borrow food or money because people will say [of us] ‘they are suffering’. If you are suffering you must keep it to yourself” ... “You can talk joking [with friends, but] you can’t tell them your spirit ... your secret”, they patiently explained. Though these were still early fieldwork days, over and over I had encountered the same attitudes. Powa Park. Mzimhlope. Shacks. Houses. Men and women. Permanent urbanites or migrants with strong rural affiliations. In all instances, people were concerned not to publicise their poverty, their daily struggle to survive. “Nobody will know if we didn’t eat because I will be smiling on the road outside”, Winnie promised. In a context where a majority of people battle (at least periodically) to make ends meet, and where black people’s poverty is so embedded in political history, any pretence of a different state seemed unnecessary to me, a middle class white South African.

Yet attempts at concealing poverty were clearly central to the way in which people I encountered were organising their lives, their relationships, and their homes. To admit publicly to being poor seemed to symbolise failure of the worst kind, second only to being the subject of gossiping accusations of it. Most poor households were therefore at pains to mask the extent of their situation as best they could. Many months later, Winnie expressed her rationale more directly, at the same time indicating one way in which domestic objects operate symbolically.

#### **i. *Winnie’s kitchen***

Winnie’s kitchen was a sparkling advertisement for Handy Andy.<sup>1</sup> Her coal stove glimmered shining white in the corner of the room, her three sets of cooking pots (set in ordered rows on shelves and cupboard tops) gleamed from the scrubblings of pot scourers. It was a functional space: any appliances

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<sup>1</sup> Handy Andy is a popular ammonia-based household cleaning agent. The brandname is commonly used to refer to any of a range of similar ammonia-based cleaning agents.

that were not in regular use were packed away behind cupboard doors, keeping the surfaces clear and the space uncluttered. Striking then, were the two highly visible fridges. One was an aged giant, the other a new bar fridge, given to Winnie as a retirement present by her employers. Both were kept running, though neither was anywhere near full. In one, half a pumpkin, a couple of tomatoes, and a tin bowl of leftovers dotted the shelves that day. The contents of the other were also scanty: a bowl of fresh beans, a bottle of water, a jar of atchar. The amount of cooling space is useful at month-end, Winnie said, when she and her daughter restock the household groceries. Besides, she confided with a secretive smile: "It's decoration! People will come and say 'Ooh, that Winnie, she's rich. She's got two fridges' ... It is good to be on top sometimes. It's good not to look poor".

As my fieldwork progressed - winding its way through people's experiences of their own poverty, through their houses and backyards, through month-end debt-paying and mid-month financial balancing acts, through day-to-day struggle and negotiation, zigzagging through networks of kin and neighbourly support, through the dusting and polishing of broken TVs sitting squarely on living-room cabinets, the purchase of costly new stoves on hire-purchase schemes, and the bashing down and building up of interior walls - the complexities and the subtleties that at first eluded me began to emerge and weave themselves into a broader system of meaning, one relating to the production of appropriate personhood.

This system of meaning defined poverty as an embarrassment, as failure, as improper. It was therefore worth hiding. By unpacking the symbolic manifestations of this notion of poverty, this chapter establishes the primary theme of propriety that runs throughout the dissertation. Most people in the sampled households, whether shack residents or formal homeowners, whether they had permanent land tenure or were temporary lodgers, subscribed to the same notion of 'proper living', and shared an understanding of its prerequisites, rules, and implications. I begin the chapter with a general exploration of this widespread cosmology by investigating some of the symbolic means through which the people I worked with created and shaped their domestic space - and concomitantly their sense of self, their own propriety or otherwise. I look at the significance that they themselves attributed to particular household objects and object constellations. I then examine how, in practice, not all research participants expressed this common sense of propriety in the same way or to the same extent. What was inappropriate in one setting was acceptable in another. I suggest reasons for the differing practices whereby houses were equipped

and decorated, and argue that the notion of propriety is semiotically encapsulated within different types of housing, and in their domestic fittings and furnishing styles.

### **1. A proper house, a proper living: concealing poverty and the symbolism of domestic things**

As others have noted of home decoration elsewhere (Bourdieu, 1984 of France, Gullestad, 1992, of Norway, Lofgren, 1990 of Sweden, Miller, 1994 of Trinidad and 1988 of England, Vickery, 1993 of 18<sup>th</sup> century England, and others), domestic furnishings and equipment performed important semiotic roles in the production and presentation of personhood in Soweto and Lusaka City. As Gullestad (1992:78) comments, "interiors 'talk' by constituting rich and flexible representational forms".

#### **ii. *The Ngcobos' thoughtful interior decorating***

July 1997. Thembi was busy in her yard as I wandered past. I greeted her over the fence, and commented on the new stoep<sup>2</sup>, that had been built around her shack since I had last been in her neighbourhood. "But you must come and see what we've done *inside!*", she beamed, beckoning me in through the gate.

Thembi and her husband Vincent Ngcobo had secured a site at Lusaka City in August 1995, after more than 10 years of renting space in other people's homes and back yards. Now, with the salary Vincent was earning as a driver for a local company, they had built a three-roomed L-shaped shack on the erf, later adding a raised concrete patio outside the front door. They had fenced in their yard, and planted a flower garden, in summertime a bright splash of colours across the red earth.

Concrete floors had been laid in all three rooms, with wall to wall carpeting in the lounge and bedroom. The kitchen had red and white linoleum tile flooring (to match its red and white furnishings). There was no ceiling or insulation on the walls. Thembi recognised that installing these would ensure more comfortable temperatures in their home, but argued that cardboard would make the shack look shabby. Instead, the zinc<sup>3</sup> inside the house was painted a clear, clean colour in each room.

The sitting room was painted light green. A rust-coloured lounge suite filled most of the space left by a large wooden wall unit. A hi-fi (with CD player) and portable colour TV were framed within the unit, along with a selection of shimmering pink ceramic vases and ornaments and several leafy pot plants. They owned only one CD and no cassettes, so primarily used the hi-fi to listen

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<sup>2</sup> Raised platform/ verandah

<sup>3</sup> Zinc is the common South African word used to refer to corrugated iron.

to the radio. Clearly visible, on a side table alongside the couch, placed on a crocheted cloth, sat a telephone without a Telkom<sup>4</sup> connection.

The kitchen was the central room and point of entry to the shack from outside. It was immaculate: sparkling white with red trimmings. The walls were fronted by fancy kitchen units, a fitted sink (without functioning taps or drainpipe: a bucket hidden in the cupboard below collected the used water) and a spanking new two-door fridge-freezer decorated with an array of fruity fridge magnets. When they moved to Lusaka City, into the first home of their own, Thembi and Vincent gave the (fully functional) two-plate stove that they had been using in their backyard shack to Thembi's sister, replacing it with a four-plate stove with oven. In the centre of the kitchen stood a table, covered with a red and white plastic tablecloth, and four matching chairs. A smart roof fan with a light fitting attached hung above the table. Thembi didn't use the fan much, and said that she "just bought it for the light".

The kitchen surfaces were kept clear of gadgets or decoration, aside from a box containing a cake-mixer/beater, stored (but visible) on top of a cupboard, and a blender (that no longer works) on the counter. "Oh, I just keep it anyway!" Thembi said. The kettle, electric frying pan, toaster and snackwich were stored in the cupboards, to be hauled out when necessary.

Vincent and Thembi's bedroom was also colour-coded, with a fluffy dark blue carpet matching the dark blue bedding and padded headboard.

"I take my *umkhukhu*<sup>5</sup> like a proper house," explained Thembi. She and Vincent could not envisage building a brick home in the near future, so in the meanwhile were doing their best to create a living space that emulated, for them, what they saw as a 'proper home'.

Thembi's statement reveals a notion of propriety that was widely shared by others in the participating households throughout all four settlements. She suggested that different degrees of propriety exist in relation to living conditions and house structures. A shack, clearly, is not a 'proper house', according to Thembi. A number of others complained similarly that living in a shack is indecent, improper, not fit for humans. In the words of one shack resident, "Look at us, living like dogs in these *hoks*".<sup>6</sup> Shacks are laden with symbolic significance as markers of an 'improper' lifestyle. Impropriety is judged not only as living in a state of poverty. It also refers to the inability of an individual or family to rise out of their own poor conditions, as well

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<sup>4</sup> Telkom is the only landline telephone service provider in South Africa

<sup>5</sup> "Shack". See footnote 2 in Chapter One.

<sup>6</sup> *Hok* literally means "cage" in Afrikaans, but is sometimes used in Gauteng to refer to these home-built shack constructions. In the Western Cape, the use of the term "*hokkie*" (the diminutive of a *hok*) is widely used, most commonly to refer to shacks in back yards rather than in free-standing shack areas.

as to the inhumane treatment of shack residents by Government. Government, they said, has not provided 'properly' for them as its citizens. Impropriety is about both the indignity of being expected to live "like dogs" and to the lack of pride and moral fibre of those who do nothing to improve their condition.

In contrast to shack dwelling, living in a formal (by which I refer to brick or concrete) structure is symbolically associated with wealth and success. As Rebecca (who at the time lived in a shack in Powa Park) once remarked enviously of her neighbour, "Ooh, *Madala*<sup>7</sup> is very rich. In the Transkei, he has got lots of cattle. And goats. Even a house with *proper* bricks, you know the small red ones ....<sup>8</sup>". The *madala*, she was pointing out, was wealthy enough to afford not only many livestock - a 'traditional' marker of wealth, but also a brick house - a modern marker of wealth, she implied.

Dwellings therefore are seen not only in terms of their structure, but also in terms of a lifestyle they are imagined to embody: formal structures are imbued with associations of propriety. They are 'proper houses' in which 'proper living' occurs - in a way that shacks are not.

Notably, however, it emerged that a formal house structure is understood as a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition to demarcate an undeniably 'proper' house and, with it, to present a 'proper' lifestyle. To procure an image of propriety, the shell requires appropriate furnishing, equipping and decorating. This point is inherent in the aggregation of Thembi's actions and her concluding comment. "I take my *umkhukhu* like a proper house", she said, implying that despite the fact that it can never be an entirely 'proper house', she and Vincent equip it as such. A display of domestic objects, she suggests, compensates to some degree for 'improper' architecture.

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<sup>7</sup> A term used to refer to, or address, old men, literally meaning 'old person' in Nguni languages specifically, but generally used by speakers from all language groups.

<sup>8</sup> Many structures around Soweto are built from block-bricks manufactured locally by small and medium entrepreneurs, and consisting of a mix of cement, grit and burnt coal ash collected free from the local power station. These are grey in colour and are larger than the standard red fired clay commercial bricks to which Rebecca referred.

Like Winnie (i. above), other people expressed more directly the role of domestic objects in establishing propriety. Living in a poor home, without comforts or quality belongings “doesn’t look good when you have visitors”, Connie Phala from Mzimhlope once explained. “It is embarrassing, even if it is your family [who are visiting]. You must have enough things”:

iii. **Connie Phala’s juggling of finances**

Month after month, year after year, the Phala’s performed a tricky financial juggling act. Connie had worked for years as a cashier at Edgars;<sup>9</sup> her sister Maria received a disability pension each month. Theirs was the only consistent income for the twelve-strong household. Connie’s husband Reuben was unemployed for the duration of my research. Occasionally he secured carpentry piece work, but he tended to spend his earnings on drink at a local shebeen. Once Connie’s daughters Valerie and Tebogo had finished school, both worked part-time, as ‘casuals’<sup>10</sup> at city clothing stores. Their income was erratic and much of it did not reach the common pot. There were school fees and college fees (from 1998) to be paid for six children, a nephew and a grandchild, house rates and services, food for many mouths, transport in to work daily, *stokvel* and burial scheme commitments, uniforms, and so on. Connie was always concerned about how to manage their few funds. She ruminated endlessly over budgeting schemes that might (but never did) get everything paid each month. She was deeply in debt, having taken out a R6 000 loan in 1997, and a further R20 000 in 1998. With each she had had the aim of setting up an informal business. Each time, her scheme had backfired.

In 1997, Tebogo had to wait for a year after matriculating before she could go college. In 1999, Thatho was removed from pre-school because not even the registration fee could be mustered. Yet Connie expressed frustration and fury at her sons who shirked school because they reckoned it was cooler to be hanging on the streets. Education is their future, she asserted. It is their route out of poverty, she hoped.

And yet over and over, she sacrificed or postponed things such as these that were important to her or her family’s long term well being, while she prioritised home improvements. In 1997, she used a large portion of the R6 000 loan on demolishing an interior wall of their Mzimhlope home, and building a fancy polished-brick archway as a divider instead. At the same time she fitted an expensive new front door. She was unable to furnish the space in the manner she wished. It remained without the couch she dreamed of, or the side cabinet filled with a complete tea set. The second loan, of R20 000, was part of a strategy to earn the cash to purchase these furnishings, but the money was absorbed into a bad *bakkie*<sup>11</sup> purchase and she had again to put her desires

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<sup>9</sup> A clothing chain store found countrywide.

<sup>10</sup> Staff on temporary, part-time contracts.

<sup>11</sup> A small pick-up truck

on hold. "I thought then the money will be coming in and I will quickly be able to get the lounge suites. But eh, I was *daydreaming*", she said with disappointment.

"Other houses have a lounge suite, a dining room suite, a nice kitchen and bedroom. It is high time that we must stay in a nice looking place too. I feel ashamed if I go to other ladies' places, to the other people at Edgars..." she told me. She reminded me that she had "been at Edgars for many years....", implying that having had a permanent job for so long, she had no excuse not to have a 'properly' fitted house. After all, "If you go out with the ladies from my work, they've got beautiful homes", she said.

Continuing, she focused on her children's desires and embarrassments, and in so doing revealed the 'improprieties' she saw in the current state of the house: "When the children have friends, they can't bring them in the house, or they will talk, they will say 'Tebogo's place, eh, the fridge is in the dining room, the door is broken, there's a bed in that room they call the lounge, the rooms aren't painted nicely ... People who see the inside of your house, they won't tell *you* [what they think], they will tell *the next person*. You feel bad, you feel small..." She avoids having visitors, she said, "only two friends in November street, they know my suffering".

Connie's actions and commentary both reveal the symbolic weight of domestic objects in this instance. It is only those friends who have visited her home, Connie claimed, who are aware of the true nature of her destitution. They have witnessed the absence of appropriate objects in her domestic space. Further, she not only talked about objects as indicators of failure or success, she also acted around these to extreme ends. It is important that a proper house has proper trappings so that its residents will not be viewed as a failure in the task of living. Perhaps the most explicit declaration of the metaphor of domestic things came from Nthombi, for whom the connections between form and reference were clear: "You are lowering your dignity if your house is not nice", she commented.

In essence, these various women all expressed the 'impropriety' of appearing poor, and the importance of owning and displaying appropriate objects in the home as symbolic representations of dignity and propriety. Notably, the women indicated how communication of a state of 'proper living' requires symbolic presentation not only of one's ability to survive from day to day but also of an image of domestic comfort, quality and surplus sufficient to allow hospitality.

Ginsburg (1996), who carried out research in the mid-1990s examining renovations and alterations by formal house tenants in Soweto, records similar attitudes amongst her research participants. She quotes a woman who had upgraded her standard 'matchbox' house to a state she saw fit: "When visitors come, they find that *now* I stay in a *house*" (1996:138, emphasis added) and another: "[We] found these houses as *little rats' holes* and [we] turned them to be *houses* (1996:135, emphasis added). Ginsburg discusses these comments primarily in terms of tenants asserting a belief in their rights both to own the houses they were living in and to be permanent urban residents. The buildings were apartheid-state property at the time and were not available for private purchase.<sup>12</sup> Government policy throughout the 1950s up until 1986 (when influx control laws were repealed<sup>13</sup>) was aimed at keeping the urban African population to a minimum, and as a result tenants constantly faced the possibility of forced removal to homeland areas. Ginsburg adds that upgrading of houses was a means for Sowetans to express their own dignity, particularly in the face of the disrespect and degradation caused by apartheid. I would argue further, that a notion of propriety is implicit in these women's statements. Without altering the external brick structure with which they were provided, but by inserting particular internal fittings (in this case, ceilings, interior doors, floors and plastered walls), the women Ginsburg (1996) describes transformed the allocated buildings from mere 'structures' into ('proper') 'houses'. It is precisely through this process of marking their propriety, I would argue, that they asserted the dignity and respectability to their neighbours and friends that Ginsberg (1996) suggests is what they aimed to achieve and express.

Thembi and Vincent Ngcobo's actions and choices in building, furnishing and decorating their home (see ii. above) exhibit how these symbols, associated with various domestic objects and fittings, and combinations of objects and fittings, were drawn upon in acting out a notion of 'proper living'. The Ngcobos had fashioned their domestic space in a way that placed the presentation of image right up front, in many

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<sup>12</sup> Since the early 1990s, occupants of state-built housing in Soweto could elect to own their properties at no extra charge (Emond, 1993). However the processes of transfer were slow and in 1995, a number of those participating in my research had not yet gained proper freehold ownership.

cases leaving basic pragmatic function<sup>14</sup> to second place. Consider their decision to buy a brand new four-plate stove when they moved into the Lusaka City shack, despite the fact that they already owned a functional two-plate stove, that they rarely needed more than two cooking surfaces, and had never used the oven except as storage for a few cooking pots. Consider too, their decision to keep a broken blender, and an unconnected telephone (which can therefore be useful only for non-verbal communication), markedly on display. Or consider their choice of a hi-fi with all the available bells and whistles even when they could not afford to use it beyond its most basic functions, each of which is obtainable with equal quality from a far cheaper appliance. Or their investment in a kitchen sink, built into a unit, yet their house had no internal water piping. Perhaps even more telling is their choice of living in uninsulated corrugated iron, even though it heats to a furnace in summer sunshine and is teeth-chattering cold in winter: cardboard or other insulation would have destroyed the overall appearance of their home. In this instance, they unambiguously prioritised image over comfort. Through a carefully displayed home with conscious investment in and display of particular objects, Thembi and Vincent subscribed to and projected an image of 'proper living', despite living in a shack. They lived 'as if', by converting their shack into a purveyor of 'proper' life.

Others acted similarly, as the following case demonstrates:

iv. ***Rachel and Godfrey Kettlele's risky shack decorating***

March 1997. Virtually every day, Rachel worried how she would feed Thato, her two year old daughter, and her husband Godfrey. Money had been scarcer than ever before since Godfrey had lost his job at an upholstery firm in January, and with it, their R260 per week income. Since then, both he and Rachel had been unsuccessful in finding work, though Godfrey had an upholsterer friend who gave him odd jobs when he could. But these happened irregularly. Rachel estimated that she and her family now survived on less than R100 per week. They went to sleep hungry even more often than before.

The family lived in a two-roomed corrugated iron shack in Lusaka City. The front door opened into a small kitchen area, off which a bedroom/sitting room was located. The interior walls of the shack were insulated with wooden factory palettes, which were not only practical for slowing down the West

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<sup>13</sup> Influx control laws were designed to control African urbanisation in cities which fell outside of African labour reserves. In essence the laws prevented Africans from moving freely between rural and urban areas, and even between different urban areas (Hindson 1987).

<sup>14</sup> By 'pragmatic function', I refer to the primary function for which the object was designed.

Rand wind whistling through the interior, but also, Rachel asserted with vigour, ensure that "even the shack looks smart".

Electric appliances dominated the small space. A large brand-new double-door fridge-freezer (still being paid off on hire-purchase) towered over the sturdy four-plate stove alongside, and - placed directly opposite the front door - welcomed visitors to the house. The stove was broken - Rachel and Godfrey took it that way from a friend who wanted to get rid of it. So Rachel cooked on a paraffin wick stove which, when not in use, she kept stored behind the frilly curtain covering a set of kitchen shelves. I wondered where the kitchen unit, at the time being paid off on 'lay by'<sup>15</sup>, would fit. In the sitting area, an imitation leather armchair and matching couch huddle around a multiple-layered hi-fi and a portable TV. After many months of being broken, the TV was recently repaired and Rachel was thrilled to be able to catch up on the gossip in 'The Bold and the Beautiful'. The hi-fi, however, had broken two years earlier but had not moved from its spot, polished on the embroidered cloth on the counter. Sotho news and music blared instead from a small portable radio on the fridge-top, lent to Rachel by a friend who had bought a fancier model.

At the time that I met them, Rachel and Godfrey were in a greater financial fix than they had been before, though they had never had much cash to spare. Yet, in moving to their own place in Lusaka City, they had placed their meagre finances under additional strain, by choosing to work towards establishing the domestic space that they desired. Each month they were committed to paying an instalment of R150 towards their fridge, a further undisclosed amount for the kitchen unit, and R120 for a Kitchen Party - a rotating credit association organised by its members specifically for the purpose of accumulating household goods. If any of these contributions were not paid for more than a month, they stood to lose their accumulated financial inputs and, in the case of the retail purchases, the equipment too. Prior to Godfrey's retrenchment then, their obligatory monthly financial expenditure amounted to more than a quarter of their income. So on that day in March, Rachel was beside herself with worry. "Money is troubling me, it disappoints me", she said, alarmed that not only would Thato be crying hungrily later that day, but also that their fridge would be repossessed unless they found money for the instalment within a day or two.

I was intrigued by their choices and sacrifices, by the lengths to which they went to equip their shack, and the organisation of their space around a selection of broken appliances. It appeared that to Rachel, the decisions were fairly simple: "I like to have nice things when people come to visit", she explained, "and even for me, I like to live nicely".

The Ketele's home space was carefully constructed. Particular objects were made prominent by their orientation. Even those that were broken retained their visible

spot in the order of things. The Kettleles, like all human beings, were in the business of playing with symbols, of drawing on the meaning of form. By prioritising investment in – and display of – particular domestic fittings and furnishings, Rachel and Godfrey used and manipulated visual symbols to mask the realities of their circumstances and hide the extent of their poverty. They dignified their otherwise 'improper' space.

As both the Ngcobos and the Kettleles demonstrated, even appliances which did not work technically but which looked good, could still function on this level: broken appliances were kept on prominent display in many homes. Television sets sat as the centre piece in wall units. Hi-fis added to the clutter on sideboards. Electric ovens dominated small kitchen spaces. In Lusaka City, where Telkom connections were not yet available, telephones were placed on crocheted doilies to decorate specially designated side tables, but could never ring. The symbolic value of the appliance lay in what it communicated to others about its owners, as well as to the owners themselves. In these instances, the symbolic value of the appliance was the singular, but critical, value for people: The appliances did critical 'housework' even when they no longer functioned as utilitarian items.

In summary, I have tried to demonstrate the existence of a widely held notion of propriety relating to lifestyle - and crucial to achieving dignity - amongst the low income Gauteng township residents with whom I worked, and to argue that avoiding a public image of poverty is fundamental to the pursuit of individual and household propriety. I have begun to illustrate how people tackle this sought after objective by drawing on the intricate symbolic meanings of domestic objects and space.

## **2. Aggregative Notion, Disaggregated Actions: How propriety was enacted under different housing circumstances**

Up to this point, I have intentionally not related any differentiation in the attitudes, perspectives and actions of the research participants. I do this not because I wish to suggest that there was no variation between settlements, between households, or

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<sup>15</sup> An alternative payment system to hire-purchase, 'lay by' involves putting down a deposit on an item and paying off the remainder of the price over time. The store involved retains the item until fully paid for.

between individuals. Rather, I choose to do so because, in my experience, the principles of the notion of propriety in relation to poverty were shared by all: being poor whittled away at one's dignity; being seen by others to be poor annihilated it. This is a point upon which each and every research participant concurred - either verbally or through their actions. Further, the object markers which conceal poverty (past or present), by symbolically fabricating or indicating people's well-being, were intimately understood and interpreted by all. However, whilst the fundamental tenets of this specific aspect of propriety were agreed upon, in the activity of living people dealt differently with them, according to their own specific circumstances. In other words, whilst the ideology was shared - and staunchly adhered to - in practice it was often objectified to different limits, in conjunction with a range of factors.

I turn now to a discussion of some of the ways in which domestic space and objects were managed differently by people under varying circumstances. I argue that a couple of structural characteristics - housing type and people's permanence in the city in particular - are central to the manner in which people responded to and utilised the semiotics of objects and space, in their pursuits of propriety. Note that there does not appear to be any gender or age dimension in either the attitude that poverty is improper, or in the way that object symbolism was employed in domestic spaces to conceal or contradict this particular state.

It is salient here to reiterate some of the structural differences and similarities of the four settlements from which the participating households were drawn<sup>16</sup>. The area I refer to as 'Mzimhlope formal' consists of state-built pre-cast concrete 40m<sup>2</sup> 'matchbox' houses, most of which are joined to a neighbour as a semi-detached unit. The majority of homes in the other three settlements - Lusaka City, the Mzimhlope backyards, and Powa Park - are corrugated iron shacks, though in each area there is a scattering of brick buildings, usually constructed from ash-bricks by the household members themselves.<sup>17</sup> All those living in these three areas who participated in the research lived in shacks at the time of the research. Mzimhlope formal, its

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter Two, for the detailed descriptions of the settlements in which the research was carried out.

<sup>17</sup> The random sample methods used in the original research samples resulted in samples of people living only in shack constructions.

backyards, and Lusaka City all have access to electricity, albeit through different mechanisms and payment schemes specific to each. Mzimhlope formal and Lusaka City residents have permanent land tenure. The fate of Powa Park residents is less clear as there has been debate at Local Authority level over the suitability for building on the land on which they have settled. However people living there do not anticipate having to move elsewhere. Most people living in the backyards of Mzimhlope are of course temporary residents, and do not have any legal rights over the space they rent from the formal house owners. Their lease set-up is extremely tenuous: the practice of backyard shack rental is illegal so tenants have no recourse to legal assistance should landlords decide that they no longer wish to have them living on their property. Most backyard shack residents have an additional home elsewhere - often in rural areas. Powa Park is unique amongst the sampled settlements in its lack of domestic electricity supply. These commonalities and differences each affect the way in which people act through symbols around the notion of propriety, in particular with respect to concealing or contradicting a state of poverty.

### **2.1. The pressures of solid walls: the symbolic significance of brick houses**

Brick houses are warmer than shacks in winter, cooler in the summer. They are drier in the rainy season, safer from *tsotsis*<sup>18</sup> outdoors. They often have more space. Furthermore, as I have shown, besides their relative comfort and safety, formally built houses are considered to be more 'proper' than shacks. They are desirable not only for their structural qualities, but also for the symbolic qualities inherent in their structural form. However, brick houses can be a burden. It is precisely the attractive symbolic qualities that place residents of formal houses under further pressure to muster other symbolic trappings of 'proper' living. For, in order for inhabitants not to appear poor, 'proper' houses need 'proper' equipping, 'proper' space usage, 'proper' domestic delineations.

In Mzimhlope, people conformed (or tried to conform) rigidly to the conventions of presenting propriety through the arrangement of their domestic space. Here, inside the concrete walls of neighbourhood houses, residents planned and enacted

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<sup>18</sup> 'Ruffians'/'rascals' in street talk.

appropriate renovations (often over a period of many years), budgeted for and accumulated furnishings and equipment considered suitable in formal houses, and did their best to appear at least to use their domestic space in the 'proper' fashion.

### 2.1.1. Defining 'proper' appliances

The appropriateness of particular appliances is of central concern in the equipping of formally built homes. The following case studies present some of the characteristics of 'proper' and 'less proper' appliances, and further illuminate the symbolic manifestations of the notion of proper living.

#### v. *The Makekes' calculated appliance choices*

Joseph Makeke was a sharp-minded entrepreneur. On reaching his retirement from the police force in 1993, he thought it necessary to set up an income source additional to his pension. At the time, there were already five *spazas* operating in his road, so he and his wife Elsie moved from their comfortable Pimville<sup>19</sup> house to Motsoaledi (a squatter settlement near Baragwanath Hospital) in order to set up a *spaza* enterprise there. Their adult daughters remained behind in the plush Pimville home. However Motsoaledi was "too rough". "Every day there were killings" Joseph complained. When a friend notified him of open sites at Lusaka City in 1995, he and Elsie rushed there to secure a space. They lived there until May 1997, when they decided to return to their Pimville home. "There it is a big house and it is furnished nicely. I can't leave it [any longer]," Joseph said, adding that of the five *spazas* in his Pimville street in 1993, only one remained. Now, they could set up a *spaza* from home without facing as much competition.

The Pimville house was completely fitted out with electrical appliances including a fridge, a freezer (both solely for domestic use), a geyser (in a bathroom "the size of a room!") an air conditioner-cum-heater, a washing machine, a four-plate stove with oven, two asbestos heaters, a bar heater, a fan heater ("I've got a lot of heaters there!" he smiled, "We must have a heater in each bedroom") and a roof fan. They disposed of their coal stove<sup>20</sup> when the house was extended. By way of explanation, Joseph said there wasn't space in the kitchen for two stoves - and when the house was redone, he invested in an electric one and built a fireplace instead. In contrast, in the Lusaka City shack, the Makekes owned and made use of a selection of both electrical and non-electrical appliances, including two paraffin stoves, a paraffin heater, a flat iron and a *mbawula*.

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<sup>19</sup> Pimville is an old formal area originally built in 1905. Both Pimville and Motsoaledi are areas of Soweto.

<sup>20</sup> Coal stoves were ubiquitous as main cooking and heating sources in Soweto housing prior to its electrification in the 1970s. Importantly, their presence in many homes continued long after electrification, as Table 7 in Chapter Two indicates.

Joseph complained bitterly about the electricity accounts he received in Pimville, yet he adamantly refused to use any non-electric appliances to reduce them. "I can't use paraffin [appliances] in that house!" he exclaimed in response to my query as to why he didn't use a paraffin or gas heater to cut down on his electricity costs, "it will spoil it... That house is too big, you must use electricity ... it won't *look nice*" [emphasis his].

Furnishings (including appropriate appliances) for the two Makeke homes – the Pimville house (originally a 'matchbox' structure, now extended into a double storey construction) and the Lusaka City shack – were conceptualised in very different ways. Not only did references to the comforts, size, modernity and luxury of his Pimville home pepper Joseph's conversation, he also adamantly and explicitly stated that certain appliances that are acceptable in the shack are not appropriate in the brick house. His terminology is revealing. Paraffin appliances "won't *look nice*" in the Pimville house, he said, indicating the extent to which the presentation of image through objects matters. He suggested that, should he or his family display or use the inappropriate appliances - paraffin heaters in this case - in Pimville, they would be showing themselves up to their neighbours and other outsiders to the household. In effect, he implied, they would be exposing their impropriety publicly. They would be divulging that they cannot afford the more expensive alternative of electricity, or that they do not know or care that it is a sign of decent, refined living.

Others reiterated Mr Makeke's sentiments: Fikile Malinga, who was using a gas cooker in her Lusaka City shack, said that it would be inappropriate to use it in a formal house. When she and her husband are finally able to build a brick house on their newly acquired erf, she claimed, they would certainly prioritise an investment in "a big one", an electric four plate stove with an oven. Likewise, she would never consider using a paraffin stove or *mbawula* in a brick home. "Here, *emikhukhwini*<sup>21</sup>, it is okay. But in a proper house, it is no good," she explained.

Fikile and Joseph's attitudes towards the various fuels and associated appliances were consonant with widely expressed opinions throughout the areas in which I worked. Electricity was without exception perceived as the ultimate energy source,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "in the shacks"

<sup>22</sup> This notion is expanded further in the following chapter.

a marker of progress and modern living, because of its quick, clean, safe, labour-free qualities, all accessible with only a flick of a switch. With electricity “everything is easy”, commented one of my research participants. Without it, declared another, “there [can be] no development”, no progression towards better standards of living. Other fuels – paraffin, coal, wood and gas – tended to be considered second-rate, usually to be used only because circumstances permitted no alternative. They too, were imbued with associations, though commonly of a negative kind. These fuels are far less pleasant to use: they produce fumes or smoke and are more labour-intensive. A remark from one research participant reveals the negative imagery with which paraffin and other non-electric fuels were imbued: “Paraffin makes your clothes smell,” she complained with disdain, “It’s not nice. And when you go to town, then [people] smell it [on you].” She articulated a widespread conception: that paraffin is the fuel of the poor, the backward, the unsophisticated, with which association should therefore be avoided if a public suggestion of ‘proper’ living is to be attained.

An examination of household budgeting amongst research participants further revealed that paraffin tended to be categorised along with food and other day to day household ‘groceries’, the costs for which women were characteristically held accountable. It was purchased from the same stores and *spazas* as food, washing powder and bleach, usually with cash earmarked for all these domestic items as a category. Electricity on the other hand, was categorised with rent, rates, and other expenses associated with provision of shelter - typically the responsibility of men.<sup>23</sup> This gendering of the two fuels could be an additional factor in the symbolic categorisation of paraffin and paraffin appliances as low status, and electricity and electrical appliances as high status.

Bank (1997, 1999a) also notes the gendering of paraffin as a ‘women’s fuel’ in Duncan Village in East London, but bases his analysis on different reasoning. He argues that paraffin was not only a potent symbol of domesticity and motherhood, but also that it constituted an important means by which women were able to exert significant control over household finances, over children, and over their own social

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<sup>23</sup> See White, Meintjes and Mafokoane (1998) for more detail.

spaces. Women in Duncan Village, he argues “use paraffin to delimit spaces of ‘their own’, a locus of power within which they devise ... calculated and strategic interventions to undermine the dominant power relations at the neighbourhood level” (1997:175).

However, Bank’s observations that poor Duncan Village women were not, on the whole, averse to the connotations of paraffin contrast starkly with mine in Soweto. Certainly, women in unelectrified Powa Park (who were thus reliant on paraffin as their primary fuel) sometimes utilised their responsibility for paraffin supplies to exert their rights to increased portions of household income. However, women (and men) in Soweto and Lusaka City were uniform in their identification of paraffin as a marker of poverty and hence impropriety, and in their desire to be disassociated from the fuel and its connotations.

The potency of the negative symbolism associated with paraffin in Soweto is illustrated by Octavia Kgaje’s experience.

vi. ***Octavia Kgaje’s humiliation by paraffin***

Octavia grew up in her grandmother’s formal house in Mzimhlope, and was still living there at the time of my research, now with her husband and children. Since the late 1970s, the house had been linked to the national electricity grid. However, in the past few years, her family’s fraught financial circumstances had resulted in the electricity supply to the house regularly being disconnected. During the periods that they were connected, the Kgaje’s used electricity for most domestic energy purposes, including heating the living space and bedrooms (the most expensive activity of all). In the kitchen an old coal range provided further warmth on winter nights. However they simply could not afford to use electricity consistently in this manner, and were often unable to pay the bills they accumulated. With Eskom, the national electricity provider, taking an increasingly tough stance on non-payment<sup>24</sup> by disconnecting any people who did not pay regularly and who accumulated unacceptably high arrears, the Kgaje’s spent much of each year without electricity. Instead they were forced to bring out their paraffin stove from its hidden storage place under the kitchen table, light candles in empty cooldrink bottles, and scrub out the coal stove in the kitchen. It was during one of these times that I visited Octavia the day after she had attended a local *stokvel* meeting. She was furious about the treatment she had received from her

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<sup>24</sup> The issue of non-payment for rates and services in Soweto has a complicated political history. For a detailed description of the events surrounding the issue, see Swilling and Shubane (1991).

neighbours when she prepared samp and *morogo*<sup>25</sup> to sell to women attending the meeting. She described how nobody bought her wares, choosing rather to buy from other vendors. "They said they were tasting the paraffin", she raged. People complained that the food did not taste good because it had been cooked on her paraffin stove. "But you can't taste the difference! I know that for sure", she further asserted, explaining how, even when she has access to electricity at home, as a budgeting technique she sometimes prepares foodstuffs (such as pigheads) which require long slow simmering, on a paraffin stove instead.

Octavia viewed the rejection of her food by her neighbours as a blatant rebuff, a criticism of her state of impropriety, made on the basis of her inability to rise out of a state of poverty, and semiotically marked for all to see by her reliance on paraffin in her electrified formal house.

An examination of the actual distribution of electric and non-electric appliances through the settlements is additionally revealing. Consider stove ownership in households that participated in the research, for example.<sup>26</sup> In Lusaka City, 19 of the interviewed households (95 percent<sup>27</sup>) own non-electrical stoves, in the backyard shacks 8 of 15 sampled households (53 percent), whilst only 30 percent (15 of 50) of the Mzimhlope formal house sample owned similarly. Even this figure of 30 percent is misleading, since it includes many appliances which are used only in emergencies, and which are stored out of sight when not in use. In contrast, every sampled household in Mzimhlope's concrete houses contains an electrical cooking appliance, whilst almost one third of the sampled shack households in Lusaka City do not.<sup>28</sup> Also interesting is the distribution of non-electric heaters across the various housing types.<sup>29</sup> Paraffin heaters, for example, are far more prevalent in the shacks of Lusaka City (20 percent of the interviewed households) than in the formal homes of Mzimhlope (where only three sampled households (six percent) own these appliances).

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<sup>25</sup> Samp and *morogo/imifino* (Sotho/Zulu) are a popular local staple food made from, respectively, roughly pounded dried maize, and a mix of leafy plants (such as pumpkin and blackjack leaves), often collected from the wild. It is eaten countrywide.

<sup>26</sup> See Table 1 in Chapter Two, which indicates the distribution of paraffin and gas stoves in the interviewed households in the three electrified settlements.

<sup>27</sup> Note that I include percentages here only to make comparison between the cohorts of households interviewed in each settlement easier. I do not suggest that these are statistically representative of the settlements as a whole.

<sup>28</sup> See Table 2 in Chapter Two.

Following the sentiments and actions of Octavia and Joseph, and as indicated by the figures above, it is clear that electric appliances were those most commonly associated with the higher status and improved lifestyles represented by living in a formal house structure. These were the primary domestic appliances which augmented an image and sense of 'proper' living, while others – such as paraffin stoves or coal braziers – undermined it. As a result, in most cases, electric appliances were favoured over other non-electric alternatives. Certainly they were considered a prerequisite for the symbolic fulfilment of the proper living suggested by solid house constructions.

However it is not only a value association with a *fuel* that defines particular appliances as appropriate or inappropriate equipment in a home. Further symbolic value was ascribed to specific appliances as well, in effect achieving a layering of semiotic meanings around which people made choices. Consider for example, the instance of coal stoves, fireplaces and braziers, each of which burn 'low-status' coal and wood. It was perfectly acceptable to house a formally manufactured coal stove in the kitchen of a brick home (though many chose not to, for clear symbolic reasons, see Chapters Four and Five for more detail). Built-in fire places enjoyed the image of modern, comfortable living. However, to burn a brazier in a structure other than a shack was to compromise the vision of a 'proper' lifestyle which is rendered by its bricks and mortar.<sup>30</sup>

Similar hierarchies were observable around electric appliances. Four-plate electric stoves (with ovens) were far preferred to electric two-plates, despite space constraints and even though it was rare that more than two plates were needed or used for food preparation. Hi-fi sets with cassette and sometimes CD facilities were consistently chosen over and above radios, yet few people owned either compact discs or tapes to play on them. We see then, how symbolic meaning associated with particular appliances developed through a layering of their various perceived qualities. An appliance which uses symbolically 'high-status' fuel was not necessarily

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<sup>29</sup> See Table 3 in Chapter Two.

<sup>30</sup> For a clear demonstration of how this principle is enacted, see Table 7 in Chapter Two.

invested with other sought-after symbolic meanings. So an electric two-plate stove, for example, whilst being symbolically valued over a paraffin stove for its reliance on electricity, remained fairly low in a hierarchy of electric stoves, and was considered far less attractive - read 'less proper' - than a four-plate cooker. In other words, whilst an electric two-plate stove was considered 'proper' in its fuel use, it was not 'proper' in form.

Whatever the preferences of people in all the areas sampled, those living in formal housing structures experience the greatest pressure to conform to the symbolic principles of proper living, despite not necessarily being financially better-off than those living in shacks.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, whilst those in shacks may themselves have elected to own 'proper' appliances if they were able, those living in houses responded to the symbolic significance of their dwelling and went to great lengths to ensure that they accumulated as many 'proper' appliances as possible.<sup>32</sup> As Table 2 in Chapter Two indicates, two thirds (or 33 out of 50) of the households interviewed in Mzimhlope possessed an oven with a four-plate hob (which was kept in the kitchen whether or not it was functional), whilst only one out of fifteen households interviewed in the backyards and three of twenty households in Lusaka City were in a similar position. Instead, there was a prevalence of two-plate stoves amongst interviewed households in each of these two shack settlements (67 percent and 45 percent respectively). Similarly, as indicated in Table 10 in Chapter Two, residents interviewed in the formal houses in Mzimhlope prioritised investment in large colour TVs, while this was not the case, at least not to the same extent, amongst people interviewed in the other settlements. The simple numeric ownership of televisions alone is revealing: whilst 96 percent of households interviewed in Mzimhlope formal

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<sup>31</sup> It is a common assumption that people who live in brick houses are more financially secure than those who live in shacks. However, the nature of urban housing provision for black South Africans during apartheid was such that descendants of the first residents inherited the rights to continue living in the self-same house. Thus most people living in Mzimhlope formal houses inherited their houses from their forebears. As evidenced in Table 1 in Chapter Two, many of the research participants who live in formal houses in Mzimhlope were at least as poor, and often poorer, than participants who lived in shacks. In fact, in many instances the residents of formal houses in Mzimhlope had most likely had to put less money into the structure of their dwelling than those who had had to erect their own shacks in backyards or site-and-service settlements.

<sup>32</sup> See Yose (1999:82) for a resonant observation that many people who moved from a shack settlement into a new housing development in Cape Town got rid of their furniture (often by sending it back to rural areas) and replaced it with new furniture.

housing owned at least one TV (many of which did not work), only 47 percent and 60 percent respectively of households interviewed in the backyards and Lusaka City owned a television at all.<sup>33</sup> In effect, it appears that people's expectations about the equipping of houses varied with the nature of house structures, which in themselves are also symbolically significant. In multiple instances, the practical value of the appliances was considerably overshadowed by the semiotic significance which they, as symbols of 'proper living', imparted.

### **2.1.2. 'Proper' use of domestic space**

Further, expectations - and interpretations - of the lifestyles of people who live in formal houses rest not only in the manner in which they equip their domestic space with symbolic objects, but also in the way it is spatially organised and used. It is crucial, I learned, to maintain separate rooms, each with an appearance of different and 'proper' functions. With great concern and diligence, formal house residents again employed signs at this level, as part of the package of appropriate design which imparts their achievement and the maintenance of the 'proper living' that the shell of their house symbolically suggests.

In every sampled Mzimhlope house, a formal sitting room - usually the front room into which the front door opens - was maintained, at least in appearance, as a reception room for visitors. Lounge suites, regal in rich imitation velvets (often covered in hard-wearing transparent plastic protection) or fake leather, posed smartly alongside a glass topped coffee table, or adjacent to a dark wooden sideboard. Either was flamboyantly dressed in decorative hand-crocheted doilies, crisply white, and anchored in place by a heavy glass ashtray, or a vase of bright plastic flowers. Wall units presided over the circle, cluttered with copper etchings of lions, pink ceramic pooches and ponies, frilly-edged tea sets, rubbery potplants, a well-dusted television and a hi-fi set with multiple layers and buttons and lights that flicker. The wall-clock - all mirror - reflected the room back through its timekeeping. It might have shone with polished gold-plating instead. A picture of an English country town, or a grey pebbled beach scene, hung alongside a freebie calendar, handed out by the local pharmacy or bottlestore. The room resounded a welcome. It was hospitable, it

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<sup>33</sup> See Table 8 in Chapter Two.

looked comfortable, it was at the ready for visitors. Yet nighttimes, many of these spaces were transformed into a mound of foam rubber and brown blankets. Couches were shifted, tables put aside, children's bodies curled up in the space evacuated. Who would ever have guessed, when there's never a doily out of place in daylight? Winnie smiled when I once asked her about where all her children slept when they were still living at home. She admitted that they put "sponge" (foam rubber mattresses) on the sitting room floor. However, "in the morning you can't see it is a bedroom. You would never notice! The house is clean *early* so you won't see that ... ", she asserted quickly, adding that the 'sponges' were put away in the bedroom, the blankets to air on the washing line outside. "Really, you will *never* know", she reiterated. As in Winnie's family, in many cases,<sup>34</sup> because space in the house is so limited, the predominant use of the sitting room was - or had been in the past at some stage - as sleeping place for members of the household. But in the name of propriety, of appearing to live as 'proper living' required, of concealing hardship and struggle and broken 'rules' through the symbol of the correct objects being in their correct spaces, bedding was removed when not in use.<sup>35</sup>

Kitchen space is an area of particular complexity. Here the absence of food, one of the most potent markers of financial struggle, is hard to hide. Here 'impropriety' is easily evident. People in the Mzimhlope sample have reacted uniformly. Unlike in shacks where kitchen space often mingled with living space, kitchens were separated from other rooms, often through doors that could close if need be, away from prying eyes. It is striking that, of 59 households sampled, 56 had kitchens separated from the rest of the house by a dividing wall. It is especially striking considering that the houses were originally built in a three-room design, with two small bedrooms and an open-plan living and kitchen area. Those who moved into the new houses as youngsters remember rectifying the situation as soon as their families moved in. Aged Ester Rabolela recalled how "the first thing we did [when we

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<sup>34</sup> Although in some instances backyard shacks or rooms (preferably) are built in order to accommodate the overflow of people in households, in most instances I documented, children had at some stage in the past - or still - routinely slept in the sitting room space at night.

<sup>35</sup> In an interesting contrast, this was not the case in low-income households in Yerania, a suburb on the outskirts of Piraeus in Greece, where Hirschon (1993) noted that sitting rooms often contained beds in addition to the lounge and/or dining room furniture. Though Hirschon does not discuss this, it is likely that here, different symbolic associations had emerged to those I describe.

moved in] was make the kitchen". "It is not nice for people to sit so they can see you cooking", she said. Granny Emily Maluleke recollected similarly: "Ooh, it was *horrible* here when we came" she said, "we did a lot of renovating since then". Again, one of the first tasks her family embarked upon was to erect a chipboard wall to divide the space into a separate sitting room and kitchen. A few women were explicit when voicing their concern over being able to close the kitchen door on visitors. Anna, a pensioner who was struggling to make ends meet, and who dried spinach and wild greens from her garden to keep herself fed from week to week, muttered that "when someone is looking at you in the kitchen it is not nice. They will see that I'm poor, that I'm cooking *goggas*<sup>36</sup>". Timid Alinah explained shyly that "you've got to cook separate otherwise you don't feel free... if people come and they see you are always eating *morogo*<sup>37</sup> they will talk. They will say you are poor". Both these women expressed clearly how they kept under wraps these unquestionable markers of their poverty - their regular meals of *morogo* and *goggas* - by retaining a separate kitchen. Alinah's case is particularly interesting considering that she and her mother had been engaged in renovating the rest of their 'matchbox' house into an open plan design. The walls between the other three rooms had been removed, the spatial functions now delineated only by broad archways. But the kitchen remained shut away.

Weiss' (1996) findings amongst the Haya in Tanzania resonate to some extent with mine. He observed how activities of both cooking and eating occurring in enclosed spaces – doors and windows to homes were closed, or if there was indeed a second room in the house, the interior door was shut. He argues that this "interiority" (1996:110) is based partly in a similar notion to that I describe, one of avoiding either jealousy/disgrace (should others see how well/how poorly) the household ate, as well functioning to create and mark a sense of self-sufficiency. However, his observation that "enclosure" (1996:110) at food preparation and meal times is also part and parcel of a set of good "manners" (1996:107), did not seem to apply in Soweto. Consider, after all, the following.

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<sup>36</sup> *Goggas*, an Afrikaans word meaning 'bugs', which Anna applies to the small balls of dried green spinach and other leaves that she prepares from her garden, in order to ensure she has food when the greens season is over.

<sup>37</sup> *Morogo*, strictly speaking meaning edible green leaves collected in the wild and cooked (see footnote 25 earlier) is a cheap/free dish which is often eaten when resources are low. Hence its associations with lean times.

The only three open-plan kitchens in the sample of 59 present an interesting contrast with those that were closed off from the rest of the house. In one, the owners had removed the wall between their sitting room and kitchen in order to accommodate clients at their popular shebeen. In this joint, the space was abuzz with business: the *spaza* in the other room had a constant stream of customers, the shebeen in the kitchen-living area grooved day and night to the titillations of blaring Nkosi FM<sup>38</sup> and an endless supply of Joburg Homebrew<sup>39</sup> cartons. Accusations of poverty here would clearly have been ill-founded. In the others, ornate display was clearly the name of the game. Lawukazi's kitchen was her pride and joy. Floor tiles and wooden cupboards chequered the room with red and white. An array of glistening-clean white appliances filled much of the room's space, cupboards and shelves were loaded with kitchen goods: rows of shining pots ordered by size, towers of matching Tupperware<sup>40</sup> containers (red and white to match the rest), a fruitbowl overflowing with plastic fruit, a snackwich, a Soda Stream, a cake beater and more, all on display, not to be missed whether you entered through the back or the front door to the house. And Sophie had moved her kitchen to the room at the front of her house, the room which in all other houses is the sitting room, into which the front door opens. Sophie's kitchen too, was fancily fitted out, with a breakfast bar and matching fitted cupboards, and a double sink with hot and cold water to boot. Clearly, none of these women had anything to fear. Their kitchens marked their success with a flourish. Instead of hiding the kitchens away, they made use of all the symbolic potential they contain. The fancy stoves, the giant fridges, the colour-coordinated fittings, all shouted out comfort and financial accomplishment, symbolically denying any struggle - past or present .

Whilst many people living in shacks equipped and used space in the same ways as those living in formal houses, the discourse around notions of what is proper and what is not, and the lengths to which people living in formal houses went to conform in their domestic spaces to the semiotic principles of propriety, suggests that the

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<sup>38</sup> The post-1994 Zulu language radio station in South Africa.

<sup>39</sup> A commercial brand of a local beer-like drink called *umqombothi*, made from fermented sorghum.

<sup>40</sup> Brandname for plastic containers, that has filtered into generalised use.

mere fact of living in a formal house created expectations and pressures to objectify a state of propriety. A 'proper' house is in itself symbolically loaded. The house itself is the most immediate presentation of residents' image. Living in a 'proper' house, then, brings with it the pressure to achieve a matching lifestyle, and therefore the set of appliances (and other domestic possessions) that is generally understood to partake of the essence of what is fit for 'proper' living.

## **2.2. 'Proper' living in 'improper' dwellings: shacks and propriety**

Residents of shacks were allowed more leeway because their attempts at 'proper' living were undermined to some extent by the structures they lived in. In other words, they had an excuse not to conform to all the criteria for 'proper' living. As a result, it seems that judgement of people living in shacks who owned 'improper' appliances and domestic furnishings was not as severe. It was generally understood that, as shack dwellers, their homes necessarily contained appliances and other furnishings which would not be considered good or appropriate equipment inside a brick house.

Shack dwellers were, however, subject to other kinds of pressures, from which residents of formal houses were spared. Shack living is undignified. Residents often compensated for this embarrassment by mimicking the ideals of design, equipment and space usage of those living in formal houses, for the symbolic pointers of propriety which they impart.

In Lusaka City in particular, emulation of 'proper' living - specifically via the mechanisms of semiotics of objects and space - was common. Remember Thembi and Vincent Ngcobo's, and Rachel and Godfrey Kettlele's displays of unused and broken electric appliances (cited earlier in ii. and iv.) for example. Compared to the other shack settlements, house constructions in Lusaka City tended to consist of a greater number of rooms: of the twenty households in Lusaka City that participated in the study, sixteen had built a shack of more than one room, whilst of those fifteen households which participated from the Mzimhlope backyards only five lived in more than one room, and in Powa Park, only nine (also of fifteen).

In Lusaka City, attempts were made too, in many instances, to make the shack structure itself look as 'proper' as possible. For example, in Powa Park and the Mzimhlope backyards, almost half of the shacks did not have any wall insulation. In those that did, the most common types of insulation were disassembled cardboard boxes or layer upon layer of newspaper advertisement sheets. In contrast, in Lusaka City many of the participating householders covered the interior walls of their shacks with wooden factory palettes or white plastic-covered cardboard sheets which not only insulate the shack well, but also "make it look smart" (as both Susan Makeke and Rachel Kettlele of Lusaka City pointed out to me). The move away from newsprint insulating techniques to others which, in image, appear more similar to painted brick or cement walls - more like 'proper' walls - suggests a symbolic imitation of propriety. (Recall that in some instances, like that of Thembi Ngcobo in case ii, uninsulated walls were seen as a preferable and far more 'proper' alternative to newspapered layers of insulation).

On the whole, greater emphasis also seems to have been placed on the acquisition of the object markers of 'proper' living in Lusaka City than was the case in the other two shack settlements. People resident in Lusaka City shacks more often invested in furniture and equipment types that they associated with propriety. Consider the following table, which indicates a range of appliances regarded as 'proper' owned by households in Lusaka City and the Mzimhlope backyards. (In terms of appliances, only Lusaka City and Mzimhlope backyards are comparable, because of the absence of electricity in Powa Park).

**Table 12. Distribution of appliances regarded as 'proper' in Mzimhlope backyard sample and Lusaka City sample**

Appliance	Mzimhlope backyard shacks		Lusaka City shacks	
	n=15	%	n=20	%
four-plate stove with oven	1	6	3	15
electric kettle	4	27	10	50
refrigerator and/or freezer	3	20	11	55
television	7	47	12	60
hi-fi (with or without CD player)	0	0	7	44

Whilst the differences between ownership patterns of some appliances (TVs in particular) in these samples is not that great, the marked gap between ownership of refrigeration appliances, or hi-fi's, or electric kettles, seems to point to a difference in patterns of prioritising these important symbols of propriety. In Lusaka City, it appears, there was, on the whole, a greater emphasis on accumulating these goods than in the Mzimhlope backyards.

A consideration of the appliance choices of backyard residents in Mzimhlope helps explain the actions of these Lusaka City households. The backyard residents who owned these 'proper' appliances (above) all had a strong local urban orientation. In each case of fridge ownership, for example, householders had no alternative dwelling in another area and did not remit money or goods to family elsewhere. The same applied to the household owning an oven, as well as to three of the four kettle owners, and six of the seven television owners. In most of these instances, a selection of the appliances had been accumulated over time: those who owned the fridges also owned a kettle and a TV, and in the single case, an oven. Reflect on the contrast between Gertrude and Metro, both backyard shack residents in Mzimhlope.

vii. ***Gertrude Mogoshane's urban orientation***

In the shade of a lush pomegranate tree in her older sister Elizabeth's backyard in Mzimhlope, Gertrude had built a two-roomed shack for herself, her children Precious and Michael, and Precious' daughter, Relebohile. She laughed that the walls were skew because she had built it herself, but in fact it was a well constructed shack. The outside walls were built from second-hand corrugated iron pieces, painted creamy white. On the inside, Gertrude had nailed masonite boards and wallpapered them in brightly-coloured Sales House<sup>41</sup> advertisements. Holes in the roof boards were sealed with bitumen, and plastic bags had been shoved around the joins between the walls and roof to keep the wind and rain out.

Gertrude had accumulated an impressive array of furniture and appliances with the help of Precious, who had been employed as an office assistant since completing her schooling in 1996. A huge double wardrobe replaced the pile of suitcases previously used for storage in the bedroom. A large double bed, and two armchairs - acquired soon after Gertrude secured her first job in eight years - squeezed into the living space, cosy around the large colour TV and video (the second and third purchases). Kitchen appliances abounded: into

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<sup>41</sup> A popular general store.

the small space, Gertrude managed to fit a four-plate stove with oven, a fridge-freezer, a rotogrill, an electric two-plate stove, and a kettle.

Gertrude was born in 1954, in the house in Mpotso street in which her sister Elizabeth now lived, and which at that time belonged to her parents. She lived there until her marriage in 1981, when she and her husband Meshack (who came from near Pietersburg in the Northern province) secured a 'family unit' in the Meadowlands hostel accommodation just across the highway. Later, during a spate of vicious hostel violence, she returned, with Meshack and their two children, to live in Elizabeth's backyard. Gertrude's only connection to a rural area dissipated when her husband Meshack left her and their children and went to live in their rural abode near Pietersburg in the Northern Province, maintaining no contact with any of his family.

**viii. *Metro Lekokotla's rural responsibilities***

Metro Lekokotla arrived on the Reef for the first time aged 24. He had worked as a crane-driver ever since. His wife Paulina and two small children stayed in GaMatlala, near Pietersburg in the Northern Province. There they ran a spaza to augment Metro's salary: both parents were determined to give their children the good education they had never had themselves. Metro visited GaMatlala once a month if he could, taking with him provisions and money procured in the city.

During the 16 years that had passed since he first arrived in Gauteng, Metro had always lived in cheap rented accommodation - in a selection of single men's hostels, and more recently in a backyard shack (so Paulina could stay with him when she visited). In all this time, Metro had accumulated nothing but the most basic domestic furnishing and appliances for use in his city accommodation: he cooked on an electric two-plate stove, had a small radio to enliven his solitude, and a two-bar heater for winter. His bed and a plastic chair - his only two pieces of furniture - filled most of the space in the shack. Instead he had directed all his spare cash into establishing a home in GaMatlala. At home, he said, they own a large colour TV, and "even a fridge" which they use for their own food, and for spaza supplies.

The different, yet complementary, choices made by Gertrude and Metro over equipping their backyard shacks are striking. Gertrude's two-roomed shack - the multiple rooms in themselves unusual - separated kitchen space from bedroom space, and was crammed with many other trappings of 'proper' living, whilst Metro's shack, like many other backyarders, was small, simply built, and scantily furnished and equipped. The distinction sheds light on people's construction and comprehension of the 'protocol' around propriety. Metro appears to have remained free from pressures to conform to established (if unspoken) symbolic conventions around propriety in living, partly by the very fact of living in a shack, and partly by the fact that he had a home elsewhere which he decorated and supplied instead. In

effect, he - and others like him - were establishing their propriety elsewhere and were hence released from the demands of appearing proper through equipping their home spaces in Mzimhlope. Their dignity was secured elsewhere. Gertrude's focus, on the other hand, was entirely urban, entirely on the home she had created (and continued to create) in Soweto. She had no other home, and anticipated, she said, that a 'proper' house was not only a long time away, but also that it would be geographically nearby. She therefore invested more diligently in her current living space.

I have demonstrated how Gertrude, and other backyarders who were without rural - or other - homes, acted similarly to most Lusaka City residents around the symbolic conventions of propriety. The common thread running through both contexts is the shack residents' sense of permanence, of commitment to the place where they were settled. In Lusaka City, people had secured ownership of a private erf, most for the first time in their lives. They were there to stay. For Gertrude and other backyarders without alternative dwellings, the context was comparable: they did not envision being able to move into any more desirable structure and they were committed to this urban area. As a result, both this category of Mzimhlope backyard residents and Lusaka City residents tended to emulate the 'proper' living of those in brick houses more closely than others living similarly in shack constructions.

The nature of tenure (whether the living space is temporary or permanent, rented or owned) and the level of commitment of core household members to the city (ties to rural homes or migrancy versus permanent urban dwellers) to a large extent shaped the manner in which homes were equipped and decorated. Where tenure was secure and erven were considered to be long-term addresses even if the dwelling structures on them are temporary,<sup>42</sup> homes tended to be more fully equipped, with a wider range of (often better quality) appliances and furnishings than among residents who considered their homes to be temporary. With permanence, it seems, came both a greater expectation and a greater desire for propriety.

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<sup>42</sup> Most Lusaka City households lived in shacks, with the anticipation of building a brick structure as soon as they could afford to do so.

In the case of Lusaka City, the relationship between people's permanence and their establishment of their own image of propriety can be considered further. Yose (1999) observed that people in the shack area of Marconi Beam outside Cape Town disposed of furniture and equipment upon being moved to new formal houses nearby, and purchased new 'appropriate' furnishings. In other words, people in Marconi Beam delayed their acquisition of 'proper' domestic possessions until they obtained a formal - 'proper' - house. In Lusaka City by contrast, the whole process of 'becoming proper' was left to the residents themselves. Unlike people in Marconi Beam who were allocated ready-built houses through an upgrade project intended to stabilise the resident population (Yose, 1999), Lusaka City residents were responsible for building their own houses on the serviced sites with which they were provided. People in Lusaka City could thus choose whether to begin enacting their propriety by building a 'proper' house, or by accumulating the appurtenances of propriety in their shacks before they built. And they often did the latter because furnishing and appliances were more readily accessible, required less immediate cash outlay, particularly when purchased on hire-purchase (unless residents were willing to 'acquire' materials for free from building sites) and were quickly visible as demonstration of 'proper' intentions.

### **3. Conclusion**

When the women shared their thoughts about poverty on that sunny day amongst their shacks, I was failing to understand a central principle around which they orientated their practices and choices. Propriety. 'Properness'. And the importance to them of striving for it, achieving it, living it. Poverty fundamentally undermined their pursuits. Concealing their financial struggle was vital within this paradigm of propriety then, and was an undertaking which informed not only people's attitudes to borrowing food when hungry (as they were explaining to me that day), but also shaped the way in which they invested in their home spaces.

Objects in houses emerged as essential markers - implying, shaping, establishing their owners' propriety. Furthermore, house structures themselves, were seen to have symbolic significance (as proper or otherwise), around which people acted, or felt compelled to act, both in terms of acquiring particular 'appropriate' objects and in

terms of using space in particular ways. Apparent economic 'irrationality' was shown to be rooted in a clear *social* rationality, one which was oriented around a known 'code' which embodied shared values of propriety. In other words, people's spending of their limited (and often tenuous) income on top-end, seemingly 'excessive' domestic appliances may have placed them in increasingly fragile financial situations, but also functioned to the important ends of concealing the extent of their poverty. I turn now to further unpack these notions of propriety and the significance of domestic things for the people I worked with in Soweto and Lusaka City.

## Chapter Four

### Connecting into the world 'out there': consumption and 'proper' participation in a global(ising) world

#### ix. *The Chinakas and their focus on the brand-new*

From the inside, the Chinaka's home was barely recognisable as one of the original Soweto 'matchbox' houses. Zodwa, the adult daughter who was living with her parents, her two small children, her older sister's eight year old daughter, and the two children of another sister who had died some time before, told the story of the renovations.

In 1994, she said, her father decided to refurbish the house to honour the twentieth wedding anniversary of his marriage to Elizabeth. It was time at last, he thought, to improve his family's lifestyle. And so he began with the transformation: He demolished the wall between the sitting room and the small front bedroom, in so doing creating an extended sitting room which stretches right across the front of the house. An elaborate dark wood-panelled ceiling, with decorative carved designs in the centre replaced the previous boards. Having removed the aged plywood room-divider that separated the kitchen from the sitting room, Mr Chinaka built a face-brick archway between the two rooms instead. Two brick rooms were built in the back yard (as new, more private, bedroom space for Zodwa and the various grandchildren), as well as a bathroom (with geyser) - a rare luxury in this neighbourhood.

The reshaped sitting room was uncluttered, but plush. An imitation-leather lounge suite filled most of one half, a dark dining room suite (with velvety seat covers kept free of grime by plastic covering) the other. Ornaments were few; a couple of plants in brassy pots decorated the sitting area. A large colour television, video and hi-fi filled compartments of a wall-unit. The kitchen was similarly ordered, fitted with brand-new units, and a range of up-to-date appliances, including a built-in electric hob and separate wall oven, and a two-door fridge-freezer. With the refurbishment, the household disposed of a perfectly-functioning electric four-plate stove and a coal stove. "It is better to have a *new one*", Zodwa explained. In addition, a microwave had subsequently been purchased. The kitchen surfaces were kept clear of everything but appliances: a food processor, a snackwich-maker, an electric frying pan, and an automatic kettle. It was a scene of clean modern simplicity, of well-equipped living.

In the previous chapter, I discussed briefly the concept of an appliance 'hierarchy', a categorisation of appliances that labelled some more 'proper' than others. Electric appliances, I noted, were deemed by my research participants to be symbolically preferable to non-electric ones. Furthermore, certain models of particular electric appliances were preferred to others. Generally, these were the larger, newer,

fancier, flashier models of appliances. In this chapter, I contemplate further why it is that these particular appliances were favoured in Soweto and Lusaka City; what it might be that made them more 'proper' than others; why people like the Chinakas (ix. above) disposed of working appliances to replace them with newer ones. I build upon and develop the paradigm of propriety which emerged in the previous chapter, by further exploring why people placed themselves under financial strain by purchasing costly domestic objects, often at the expense of other things or aspirations they claimed to value. On the basis of this discussion, I then unpack some of the generational issues which resulted from people's conceptions of propriety. As in the rest of the dissertation, I consider the symbolic relevance of the consumption of appliances in particular, but in this instance draw on other items not associated with equipping the home, as comparative material. Throughout the chapter, I draw extensively on one particular household – that of the Phalas - to exemplify the processes to which I refer, and interweave aspects of their experiences with those of others amongst my research participants.

### **1. The world 'out there': being poor in the late twentieth century**

December 1998. Connie and I were hanging at her place for the first time in ages. Hot outside, it was cool and dark inside the house, the bare concrete floors cold underfoot. The living room where we sat was unchanged since the last time I had visited, six months previously. The alterations that she and her husband had undertaken - to convert two rooms into one - were complete, but the room remained unfurnished, save for an old dining room suite, their aged fridge and a single bed immaculately made up in brown blankets. Connie was tired and anxious. In debt to the tune of R26 000 and unable to make ends meet on a day to day basis, she regaled me with the details of her household's plight<sup>1</sup> and their inability to achieve the particularities of living they desired. She expressed her disappointment at having to compromise her children's and grandchildren's education because of her strained financial resources, her concern over the mounting electricity and rates bills that she had not paid for months, her embarrassment at the absence of appropriate furnishings and equipment in her home. Desperate and frustrated at the

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<sup>1</sup> See iii. in Chapter Three for details of her situation.

hopelessness of improving her situation in the manner she craved, she concluded: "Eh Helen, when you are poor, you are always *otherwise*."

In her comments, Connie revealed her experience of poverty as one of continually being at odds with a broader world, that world 'out there' in which, from her perspective, living 'really' happens, where life is not one long struggle towards unattainable goals. She articulated her sense of existing on the peripheries of proper living, of being marginalised from those key global processes of production and more specifically consumption. And she envisioned a world operating beyond her realities, in which she assumed that participation in networks of production and consumption is taken for granted by those with access to them.

Connie's day to day living did of course hook her into a global system of consumption. She worked at a major clothing store. She shopped regularly in city supermarkets. She watched soap operas of gilt-edged American lives on TV. These repeated moments in which her life intersected with the world which she conceived of as being 'beyond' her own reinforced her images of its nature by bombarding her with goods and lifestyles accessible to others not tripped up by their poverty.

Our turn-of-the-century world is characterised by ever-burgeoning processes of mass commodification and consumption, coupled with processes of mass production, economic globalisation and, crucially, the media and information technology boom (Castells, 1998, 1999). It comes as no surprise then that people such as Connie, who have access to few resources and little hope for accumulating any, experience a sense of marginalisation - of "always [being] otherwise" - from today's global processes. Poor people - unable to afford the trappings of a consuming world - are easily relegated to the peripheries of its networks. Ferguson (1999) presents a corresponding argument. "What we have come to call 'globalisation' is not simply a process that links together the world, but also one which differentiates it" (1999:243), he reasons. He points out how marginalisation of some is an integral component of the processes which characterise the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. Writing less in terms of individuals than at a level of the state (though the effects on individuals are implicit), Ferguson draws attention to the exclusion that he argues is

part and parcel of the processes of today's global capitalism: "Expulsion and abandonment..., disconnection and abjection... occur within capitalism, not outside of it. They refer to processes through which global capitalism constitutes its categories of social and geographical membership and privilege by constructing and maintaining a category of absolute non-membership: a holding tank for those turned away at the 'development' door; a residuum of the economically discarded, disallowed, and disconnected" (1999:242).

Certainly then, as Connie pointed out too, poverty is an exclusionary experience. Furthermore, it is one which locates 'proper' living ever further from one's grasp. I would argue that amongst the research participants, a concept of a world 'out there' was enmeshed with the notion of proper living that I introduced in the previous chapter. Proper living, the participants in my research intimated, is comfortable living, financially secure living, living that happens in brick houses, stylish living that is equipped with matching furniture and contemporary appliances. Proper living is hospitable, permanent, dignified. Proper living, they implied, is what takes place in the world 'out there', in networks of lives where poverty is not an everyday state of being and people have the wherewithal to make secure choices from a wide range of options.

Cut back to Connie's household for a moment. Whilst she was constantly contemplating ways to improve their home furnishings and equipment, her teenage and adult children chose to focus more on achieving a similarly integrated image through different material means. They were hip trendy youngsters, who prioritised looking good, who paraded the latest fashions no matter what it took. Tebogo and Valerie, both in their twenties, spent hours braiding, curling, relaxing, styling each other's hair. Before either of them had paid employment, they would beg Connie for money to buy clothes. "And you can't just buy them anything", she explained, "They want this name and that!" Kangol. Nike. Stussy. Ellesse. Expensive Italian shoes from an importer. These women wore it all. While still at school, Tebogo formed a clothing *stokvel* with a group of friends. She chose to walk an hour to school so as to save up her taxi fares for her weekly R5 contributions to the rotating credit group. Once working in a part-time job, she blew her income on stylish acquisitions. Her

mother shrugged her shoulders despairingly: "She went crazy! I told her not to open accounts, but she bought on account from Foschini, from Edgars, from Truworths<sup>2</sup>..." Connie's sons also wore nothing but cool clothing and gear. Matthews, Wiseman, and Ignatius skanked about in street fashion: baggy trousers hanging low off their hips revealed the right underwear labels, large shirts with logos, dreads that turned heads. When Matthews' dance troupe received funding to set up a project in Soweto, said Connie, he and his friends first headed straight out to get cell phones, and clothing to match. Out on the streets, who would ever have guessed these people lived in a home where there was sometimes nothing more than a single basic meal a day to be had, where their mother peered anxiously to see whether there were lights in the house windows each time the taxi dropped her off after work and each time breathed a sigh of relief that the electricity supply had not yet been disconnected as retribution for non-payment?

Connie's family was not unique in its choices and actions. Consider the Chinakas' (ix. above) removal of old appliances and accumulation of only the newest, most up-to-date appliances and furnishings in their home. Remember too Lawukazi Molefe (p. 70 of Chapter Three) whose open-plan kitchen was fitted with everything that opens and shuts. Others acted similarly, though rarely in one fell swoop like the Chinakas and Molefes. Maria Mosia, for example, struggled along with her daughter, her nephew and her elderly grandfather. Nobody in the household was employed, but Maria received a disability allowance because she suffered from epilepsy, and her grandfather received an old-age pension. Their Mzimhlope house was dark, dank and dirty. On the walls hung posters of Nelson Mandela, Chris Hani, and Lionel Ritchie. They owned few appliances, most of which had been given to them by relatives, and did not work properly. In the context, Maria's brand new and fancy hi-fi stood out prominently. In 1997, she was slowly paying it off on a hire-purchase scheme. Her next acquisition was already planned. The TV, she said, was "too old" (even though, according to her grandfather, it worked perfectly). She planned to invest in a new one as soon as she had completed her hire-purchase payments on the hi-fi. Further along the road, Granny Winnie (see i. in Chapter Three) was disappointed when her daughter Ouma moved out to her own place and took with

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<sup>2</sup> All three are large clothing and accessory stores in South Africa.

her the microwave oven she had bought. Having reluctantly hauled out her two-plate electric stove from storage in the back yard shack, Winnie muttered that she was keeping her eye out for a good deal on a four-plate stove with an oven to get her kitchen back in appropriate shape. In the meanwhile, she was reupholstering the lounge suite in a dark maroon imitation velvet, and covering it with plastic ("that way it is easy to clean so it will look smart and new for a long time"). It was fraying at the edges, explained Winnie, so Ouma suggested she should take them for fixing. Winnie agreed, "because it's not nice when she brings friends here and they find what she comes from, that it's a shabby old place". Just around the corner, Regina planned to tear down the elaborate pressed ceilings that her husband's father had installed long ago, because "they are old-fashioned". She was envious of her neighbour, Olga, who (at considerable outlay) was able to replace the ceiling boards in her living room (the 'public' space within the domestic arena) with pine panelling, varnished to a warm yellow glow.

Amongst a number of residents living in electrified shacks, comparable processes of acquisition were discernible. Remember Rachel and Godfrey Kettlele and Thembi Ngcobo who lived in Lusaka City (see i. and ii. in Chapter Three) and Gertrude Mogoshane who lived in a backyard shack in Mzimhlope (see vii. in previous chapter). All made a point of accumulating (however slowly) new and 'proper' domestic objects and appliances to furnish their home spaces. In Lusaka City, particularly, residents strove to amass for themselves collections of fashionable new items from popular home appliance and furniture stores. Russels, Bradlows, Ellerines and others offering hire-purchase schemes do a roaring trade in Soweto and on the West Rand.<sup>3</sup>

Through their consumption choices, Connie, her family and the others cited here were attempting not only to conceal the degree of their deprivation and struggles, but also to symbolically mark some intersection of their own lives with a world outside of this poverty. The extents to which they went, often delaying or sacrificing other needs and aspirations (as is seen in iii. in Chapter Three which details more explicitly

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<sup>3</sup> The role of stores offering hire-purchase agreements is clear: They enable people to acquire the symbolic capital they desire, but in so doing, often trap them into crippling financial agreements.

Connie's family's juggling of finances), demonstrate how experiencing a sense of integration - at least to some degree - into the worlds that operate beyond the bounds of hunger and lack of resources was of fundamental importance to them as low-income Gauteng residents. Fashionable clothes, the latest hairstyles, refurbished homes, contemporary furniture, fittings and equipment – all acted as emblems of participation in broader networks of living and provided important links into the worlds that their owners perceived of as more 'proper'. By wearing up-to-date gear and equipping their homes with contemporary trappings, they marked themselves – through this shared 'code' of items – as integral members of a modern (and consuming) world.

In the brick houses in Mzimhlope, coal stoves were frequent fatalities to the symbolically expressive processes of renovation and redecoration described above.<sup>4</sup> Most coal stoves owned by research participants in the Mzimhlope sample were inherited from forebears who lived in the houses prior to the installation of electricity in Soweto. Very few of the current residents had themselves invested in coal stoves. The expense of purchasing them new was prohibitive and, perhaps more importantly, for many the symbolic associations of coal stoves were unappealing. Coal stoves may be "handy", as pointed out by Winnie Modise, "because they make the house hot and you can cook on them. It's killing two birds with one stone ... we don't waste electricity. Not to pay a fortune, I use the coal stove [in winter]." But they were also considered by many to be out of date. Coal stoves are "old fashioned", a number of women commented. Said Sinah for example, "coal stoves are for old people. It's old fashioned to have a coal stove.... Now a fireplace, that is what I would like in my house". Her neighbour Lindiwe agreed: coal stoves are antiquated appliances, not for modern homes. (Some others – largely pensioners – contested otherwise, arguing that coal stoves are central to 'proper' home life and appropriate gender roles, among other things. Their views will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five).

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss only Mzimhlope coal stove ownership here because commercially manufactured coal stoves are rare in the other settlements. Only one was owned in the Mzimhlope backyard shack sample, one in Powa Park, and none in Lusaka City. See Table 7 in Chapter Two.

So when the Chinakas, the Molefes, the Mabuzwenis, the Tsambos, the Mawashas, the Baloyis and Ma Magaqa embarked on processes of refurbishing their kitchens, they all chose to get rid of their coal stoves. Sandra Mawasha shed light on her reasoning:

x. ***The Mawasha's disposal of their coal stove***

Sandra and her husband Patrick had lived most of their married life in a house acquired by Patrick in Mzimhlope. Patrick's parents lived only two streets away so, when his father died in 1993, he and Sandra moved home to escape the crowded space they shared with their five children. These (two of them already in their thirties) they left living in the other house. Patrick's parents had not altered the structure of their 'matchbox' home. And he and Sandra had never subsequently had sufficient spare cash to do so either. It thus remained a small, dark, three-roomed space with concrete floors and no ceiling, a stark contrast with the living setup they had enjoyed in their other home. (They chose to live there however, because it was better situated for running their shebeen and spaza business). Unable to envisage a time when they would be able to improve their house structure, in 1995 Patrick and Sandra embarked instead on a process of updating their furnishings. Their first step was to dispose of the coal stove. "I'm renovating," Sandra asserted by way of explanation, "I want to get electric things".

Sandra articulated a frequently held association: coal stoves are appliances that don't belong in up to date houses, lived in by up to date residents. For many, coal stoves were imbued with symbolic associations of old times, of bad old times of apartheid when black people's poverty (and marginalisation) was institutionalised by law, and electricity wasn't deemed by the state as a necessary service in townships.<sup>5</sup> In "renovating", modernising their living space by equipping their homes with fancy electric appliances and ridding themselves of those with unattractive semiotic connotations of the past, Sandra and the others promoted their image as people moving with the times.

All the people described here were engaged in similar symbolic decorative pursuits. In their actions and commentary, they indicated how, from their perspective, the

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<sup>5</sup> In an incomplete manuscript, Spiegel (nd) quotes Victor Raynal, chief distribution engineer in the Johannesburg municipal electricity during the 1970s commenting that "at no point [in the early development of Soweto] was electricity considered, because they [the residents] seldom bathed, and there was therefore little need for hot water. In any case, they could hardly afford food, they were so poor ... and electricity was non-payable. The only things provided were those that were payable".

world 'out there' where 'proper' living happens is connected. It is contemporary. It is modern. It is the place of fashion, of trend. It is developing and progressing, changing through time. It is upwardly mobile. In these low-income Sowetan and Lusaka City homes, many people thus placed importance on accumulating contemporary, modern goods not merely to mask their poverty (as discussed in the previous chapter), but also as salient markers of their connection into the world 'out there'. In the same vein, many chose to discard possessions – like coal stoves - which were considered to be old-fashioned, or reminiscent of the past. Thereby, I argue, they intimated their citizenship of a world from which they easily felt excluded by their poverty, and, in so doing, created for themselves (and for others) some sense of their own propriety.

## **2. Using and being current: the status of electricity**

### **xi. *Technikon Student project***

It was D-day for the 1997 final year Industrial Design students at the Witwatersrand Technikon. Each of the seven students had been charged with the task of designing a paraffin stove that improved on those currently on the market. Today they were presenting their models to lecturers, several relevant stakeholders and Rebecca and Irene, two of the women from Powa Park whom the students had visited to kick-start their research for the project.

Rebecca and Irene sat alternately riveted and bemused, occasionally amused, always reflective, as each student discussed his design. One model, futuristic in appearance, looked too odd for their liking, though the projected price was attractive. Another they liked for its practicality: the litre-sized fuel container was removable and could be taken to the *spaza* for filling. With this design, no risky decanting from bottles into the stove was necessary. However, in their eyes, one design far outshone all the others: with dimensions approximating 50 cm x 30 cm x 4 cm, the cream-enamelled stove had a single hot plate, with space alongside to which the pot could be removed while adjusting the flame. The reason for their preference, Rebecca and Irene commented with delight, "It looks just like an electric two-plate!"

In their reactions, Rebecca and Irene reaffirmed the notion of the symbolically-based status associated with electricity and electric appliances raised in the previous chapter. While electric appliances were, of course, recognised by most as easier, safer and more pleasant to use than other fuels (with the quick flick of a switch, and no dangerous open flames, unpleasant odours or dirty emissions), Rebecca and Irene specifically drew attention to the *symbolic* desirability of electric appliances. They responded in favour of this particular paraffin stove because of its resemblance

to an electric one. At a glance, they suggested, the paraffin stove would (deceptively) flaunt the symbolic qualities of an electric two-plate stove.

But why is it that electricity and its associated appliances are imbued with these high status symbolic qualities, over and above any other fuels and appliances? I would argue that the answer lies not only in the ease, safety and labour free qualities of the energy source, or its likely association with men's sphere of responsibility rather than women's (as discussed in the previous chapter), but is furthermore located in people's perceptions of the character of the world 'out there'.

Not only is the world 'out there' perceived of as current. It is also inter-connected by a network of current: electricity courses through cables joining house to house, road to road, suburb to suburb. As such, electricity and – through a trickle-down effect – its associated equipment, assume symbolic importance. Electricity literally links Randburg to Rosebank, Kempton Park to Killarney. It links Sandton to Soweto, providing a rare conduit between the areas – the first a setting locally considered to be the epitome of wealth and comfortable living in Johannesburg, the latter the archetype of South African township life. The literal link is one that becomes symbolically understood: electricity is the fuel associated with 'proper' lifestyles, with comfortable, successful lives that are lived in the worlds beyond experiences of poverty and historical discrimination. As the current appears to course between those who undeniably live 'properly' and many of those who strive against odds to do so, it symbolically brings those proper lifestyles that much closer.

In his engaging new book, Ferguson (1999) reaches a similar conclusion about the symbolic significance of electricity in the Zambian copperbelt. Pointing to the symbolic effects of the literal connection of the world by networks of telephone and power cables, he goes as far as to suggest that "electrification has provided the twentieth century with perhaps its most vivid symbol of modernisation and development" (1999:242). For Zambians' specifically, he argues, as producers of the copper wire from which the cables were made, copper - and concomitantly, electrification - "provided a vivid symbol of a specifically modern form of world

connection”, and “was a compelling symbol of inclusion, a sign that Africans, too, were to be hooked up with the ‘new world society’” (1999:242)

However, it is not only the fact that homes are physically linked by the electricity network that earns electricity and electric appliances symbolic favour. Electricity also links people into a less tangible network of global citizenry and institutions. With electricity lighting up rooms (rather than single candles flickering in the darkness), it is easier for people to study, for example, thereby allowing people improved access to the modern world simply through better education and opportunity. It powers televisions and radios at a fraction of the cost of Duracel or Everready,<sup>6</sup> in effect bringing aspects of a wider world right into Soweto and West Rand living rooms. Television and radio broadcasting of global news events, soap opera melodrama, educational input, documentary information, consumer enticement through both advertisements and portrayed lifestyles, the latest music – all provide people with important links into ideas, experiences, activities and access taken for granted by those with greater resources. Electricity and electric appliances are thus assigned symbolic weight because of the way in which they literally insert users into a greater-than-local network.

### **3. Shared concerns, Contradictory complaints: generational questions over ‘proper’ participation in the world ‘out there’**

Although research participants of all generations in Soweto and Lusaka City accumulated (or aimed to accumulate) markers of their modern, “connected” living, parents consistently claimed to be less concerned about owning contemporary appliances or fashionable furniture than their offspring or their grandchildren. Bemused, frustrated, surprised, amused, parents debated and criticised younger people’s choices and actions amongst themselves. So, when Ouma arrived home one day from work with a brand new microwave oven, her elderly mother Winnie simply laughed about it with me. “You can’t control what your children spend their money on”, she commented with resignation, “If you’ve got children who work, anything they see, they buy”. She believed that young people feel that they have to “keep up with the Joneses”, and so spend far too much money on fancy “things that

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<sup>6</sup> Two widely used brands of battery in South Africa

they don't really need". "But that is how they like [it]", Winnie added benignly, "Our children, they demand to have this and that. Eh, these nineties!" Not only does Winnie's comment suggest that it was not as important to her as it was to younger people to maintain appearances at all costs, she also observed that increased consumerism is a driving force in the 1990s. Younger people in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, she argued, are preoccupied with accumulating goods in order to look good and compete with others. Elsie Mabuzweni commented along similar lines that her employed daughters had bought most of the mod-cons in the house, including a new four-plate stove, even though they owned, according to Elsie, "a very good two-plate".

However, although perhaps both these women would not have invested in these particular luxury appliances themselves (and this in itself is debatable), both were pleased to have them smartening up their kitchens and in the case of Winnie, when Ouma moved out of the house taking her microwave with her, she was disenchanted at having to display her old two-plate stove in the open again. "Tell me, Helen", she asked me when I subsequently visited, "do you know of any places I can get a good price for a big [four-plate] stove?"

Ironically then, despite all their comments, parents were in effect often behaving no differently to the children they criticised. Think back to Connie who consistently expressed concern over her children's spending, despite the fact that she herself chose to spend large portions of her earnings on (and in fact had gotten herself into unmanageable debt over) altering the house to a design she preferred. Lawukazi too, mother of teenagers Solomon and Thabo, who had gone to great lengths to kit her house out in a flamboyant display of modern luxury (right down to an electric heater built to mimic a log fire in appearance) nonetheless was amused by the importance her sons placed on wearing the 'right' clothing and fashion-labels. And she bemoaned their pleas to replace the small portable radio the family owned. "They want a music centre", Lawukazi explained, "'Oh Mum', they say, 'this radio doesn't have sound!'" This radio doesn't look cool, or sound cool, her sons were declaring, this radio can't beat right down the street. They expressed their desires not just for any radio on which to tap into the latest tracks, but one which was big

enough, flashy enough, loud enough to attract attention from their friends. Yet their mother's smart kitchen (see again p. 70 in Chapter Three), fitted with new appliances of almost every kind, all matching the décor (right down to the fridge magnets and stacks of tupperware on the counter), and of which she was very proud, essentially proclaimed the selfsame message of modern, up-to-date living.

Both Hansen in Zambia (1997), who did her research in low-income Mtendere on the edge of Lusaka, and Jelin (1991), who studied working class households in Buenos Aires, encountered consumerist desires and patterns of consumption amongst youngsters similar to those which parents in Lusaka City and Soweto were complaining about. Furthermore, their analyses both introduce (albeit briefly) a similar notion of a world 'outside' to that which Connie first pointed me when she complained of the sense of marginality that poverty brought with it. Jelin documents the importance that adolescents placed on having the latest commodities, including colour TVs, though she focuses on their demands for fashionable clothing in particular. "The possibility [for youth] of talking with friends about colour TV ... opens up a field of definition of 'integrated' social identities, not marginal to the 'advances' of the consumption world", she argues (1991:188). Hansen comments similarly that "modern kitchen and household technology interacts with lifestyle ideas conveyed by television, magazines, books, and popular music to expand the horizon of today's young adults in Mtendere. Taken together, such objects and media are implicated in complex ways in constructing what it means to be a young Zambian in our late twentieth-century world" (1997:160). Both authors thus observe how modern appliances and other contemporary goods (be they fashion or foodstuffs) operate and interact to feed into young people's sense of themselves as members of a global world of opportunity and change (and not simply as people trapped in a local existence of poverty).

However, Jelin's (1991) and Hansen's (1997) arguments suggest that it is central only to youngsters to engage with a wider world, and to mark their place in it. Hansen, in particular, implies that this is important to young people in a way that it is not for their parents. My observations of consumption patterns support Jelin's and Hansen's stress on the importance of a feeling of global integration for youngsters.

However, I have demonstrated how, amongst the research participants in Soweto and Lusaka City, it was not only teenagers and young adults who favoured stylish modern possessions. Older adults also tended to prioritise their accumulation, drawing similarly on their symbolic effects in a desire to achieve the same ends.

I propose that this distinction may lie in South Africa's specific history of apartheid and its subsequent dismantling since 1994. In apartheid South Africa, the law institutionalised exclusion - and therefore poverty - for the majority of black South Africans. In other words, unlike in Lusaka or Buenos Aires, black South Africans were marginalised not simply by a lack of resources, but by laws which ensured their exclusion from global processes, from greater than local processes, from privileged society, from societal decision-making - and hence from 'proper living'. With the dismantling of these laws, and the subsequent emergence of a more substantial black middle class, it is likely that poor black South Africans (no matter their age) are experiencing a renewed sense not only of their rights but also of possibility for their integration - for their 'proper' participation - in the wider societal processes in which they perceive 'proper living' to be located. Amongst those who participated in my research, this sense of expectation of their proper integration in a post-apartheid South Africa was experienced by both adults and youngsters, and was marked by their deliberate (if often gradual) accumulation and display of modern goods taken for granted by those not similarly limited in their consumption by their financial resources.

Whatever the explanations might be, the fact remains that parents were concerned about their offsprings' desires for stylish 'contemporary' items that they, as parents, considered to be unnecessary, unimportant, sometimes extravagant, often irresponsible. Some explanation for their discontent may lie in a question of consciousness – it is possible that parents were not seeing that they themselves were consuming 'similarly' to their offspring, and that, moreover, they might have been behavioural models for their children. These are both questions which beg further research. I would argue however, that parents complaints were rooted not in questions regarding the nature of 'proper' modern living, but rather were reflective of

different concerns. I turn now to explore some of the roots of this generational contestation in more detail.

### **3.1. The public vs. the private: different symbolic markers of 'proper' modern living**

In Soweto and Lusaka City, teenagers and young adults socialise on street corners and sidewalk verges (where they exist), sometimes on collected rocks, or discarded metal drums placed there for the purpose. A burnt-out car, left to rust, was a favourite spot for Mzimhlope's youth to hang. The street is their territory, the place where they meet to chat, catch up, flirt – and to parade their image to their friends (and beyond). The house, on the other hand, is essentially their parents' domain, the space where adults socialise. Except perhaps when 4.30 p.m. strikes and it's time to congregate around the TV set for the day's string of soapies. *The Days of our Lives*. *The Bold and the Beautiful*. They bring everyone indoors for an update on the gossip and scandal of America's rich and bitchy soap characters (and a reminder of how the world 'out there' apparently lives).

The tension then, between parents and offspring, seems not to be based on disagreements over the importance of being participants in a world larger than that defined by the limitations of poverty and South African historical processes, but rather a friction over different priorities with respect to the markers of that participation. Consider the items young people prioritised. Modern clothing, trendy hairstyles, the latest footwear, cell phones, ghettoblasters, TV sets and hi-fis – items relating to individual 'enhancement, to individual glamour and adornment, to things 'hot off the press', fashionable and contemporary (even disposable), movable. All things which could be displayed out there on the sidewalk for all to see, or could be shared in domestic spaces in those moments deemed open and relevant to all. Parents and homeowners on the other hand, desired domestic items – comfortable modern furnishings, new high-tech electrical equipment – acquisitions that would impress visitors and friends with their up-to-date domestic lifestyle, and their respectability, dignity, stability and able provision for their family.

In each case, people were marking their greater-than-local participation in ways that were appropriate to their stage in life. For youngsters, modern lifestyles needed to be marked by items which not only marked their individuality, but were also visible outdoors, so that they could look cool, and feel cool, out on the streets. For the middle-aged, a change in focus to establishing (and socialising in) homes meant that domestic items played the same role of symbolically presenting their success, their integration into broader society. In other words, the general principle of 'modern' propriety was the same across generations, however it differed in the substantive value being expressed.

### 3.2. 'Proper' family obligations and expectations

It cannot be denied that pleas made by unemployed offspring were a pressure for parents. Not only were the financial implications of the demands often harsh, but also the sense of failure, of guilt, of not being a 'good' parent were intimately tied into an economic inability to provide the 'right' items for their children.

"How can you expect us to stay at home without a TV?", Precious and Michael protested endlessly, until their mother relented and bought both a TV and video machine for their shack, despite the fact that she had only recently found a (meagrely paid) job after having been unemployed for many years. Dumi, in his early twenties, complained to his long unemployed and impoverished mother each time he was served (yet another) meal of *pap* and spinach. He wanted to eat more often like his friend Thabo, who lived a few doors away. Thabo's mother, Lawukazi, had managed to find a financially viable way to satisfy her sons' eating preferences. "The kids' favourite is Chicken Licken"<sup>7</sup>, she said, "So I've learned to make it. I can't buy it from the shop everytime". Lawukazi added how "when your child is small it is easier. You just cook porridge". Connie agreed: "It is the big ones that want to buy". Her older children refused to take packed lunches to school, preferring to purchase cooldrinks and 'quarters' from vendors on the premises. But the younger children in primary school, "Tumi and Vusi, they don't complain about taking scoff tins"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Chicken Licken is a chain of popular deep-fried chicken take-away stores, booming country-wide, and advertised by popular contemporary black actors.

Connie was particularly expressive of the predicament of her children's consumption desires. She passionately reflected upon her experiences as a mother, describing how, when she is reluctant to succumb to her daughter Tebogo's wishes for new things, Tebogo accuses her of being ungrateful for all the housework she does while Connie is at work. "I feel guilty, because she's telling the truth. She wants to look nice, and she works very hard here with washing and ironing, cooking and cleaning". As a result Connie often acquiesced, despite the fact that she could not really afford to do so. Her two older daughters demanded to be treated equally. Valerie, her firstborn child, complained that Tebogo "gets more nice things than her" and that this isn't fair. Connie, wracked with guilt, often relented.

Her teenage sons also played on Connie's guilt at not being able to provide them with the lifestyle they desired. When she was concerned about them spending too much time away from the house (out of her sight, up to no good, with people she doesn't know), Connie requested that they hang out at home more often. They responded with criticism of the limitations of the home she has provided them. "They say they can't bring their friends here because the house is otherwise. The house is dull. The TV isn't working well. They're not interested anymore because the picture is bad. And they say 'we can stay in the house if we've got a video'. Their friends have got TVs and videos", she said with despair.

On the occasions that Connie gave in to her children's pressures, her husband Reuben berated her. "He says I'm irresponsible with the kids. That it is my fault that the boys mess about. He's fighting with me that they've got enough". She disagreed. "Me as a mother, I know they've got nothing. I don't satisfy them. Not to say they need a lot, but I can't even get them something often, so that their things don't get worn out quickly. So that they don't wear the same shoes every day... But I told him, its not surprising that our boys are *tsotsis*, because their parents don't give them anything, not good clothes, nothing...".

Connie's story reveals how her guilt at being unable to provide her children with sufficient trappings of 'proper living' fed into her own sense of herself as a parent.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Scoff tin' refers to lunch boxes of food taken from home to work or school.

Furthermore, she viewed her children's dissatisfaction as justified complaints about her own shoddy parenting. She blamed herself for her sons' criminal activities, and interpreted them as yet another marker of her failure as a parent. If she had provided for them 'properly', they would not be *tsotsis*, she suggested. A good parent, she indicated, would satisfy her children's material desires. A good parent would not embarrass her children by being unable to equip them and their home with markers of 'proper living', and thereby deny them a sense of their own participation in a wider world.

Grandmother Elsie Mabuzweni's justification of the renovation and redecoration of own Mzimhlope house confirms that Connie's anxiety over the symbolic markers of the state of her parenting was well founded. "It is not for me" Elsie asserted, "I don't need it. Its for my children. I said to them, 'when I die, people must see your mother has done something for you'". Unlike Connie, Elsie was in a position to put these signifiers of her 'proper' parenting in place. She had refurbished her Mzimhlope 'matchbox' house to a state of well-equipped, colour-coordinated, bronze-tipped finery, installed an inside bathroom and, in 1997, was in the midst of redoing the kitchen. All this, she claimed, would unequivocally prove to others that she was a good parent, a mother who managed to provide properly for her children.

In other words, people's notions of proper living and proper integration, and the ways in which they interacted with these notions, were rapidly and easily refracted into issues around 'proper' parenting. Parents were not contesting the importance their children placed on achieving a sense of integration, nor the pivotal nature of the markers of that integration for its realisation. Rather, their ability or inability to provide those markers for their children (and hence decrease or increase their children's sense of marginality) was implicitly linked to their sense (and public signification) as good, 'proper' parents or otherwise.

However, the notion of being a 'proper' parent has an inverse. In the case of those parents with children who earned incomes (however small), their comments hinted at the friction between notions of their children's obligations to their parents and the household, and their children's consumerist actions in the process of expressing the

image they desired. Winnie, for example, was explicit in her expectations of her daughter Ouma's financial contributions to the household coffers. She expected little (if anything) from her businessman son, a director at a regional radio station, who earned well, dressed stylishly, drove the newest BMW polished to a blinding shine, touted a tiny lightweight cell phone and lived in luxurious comfort in Mafikeng, a town a few hours drive away. "He's got a wife", she said, "If he helps me [by giving me money], [his wife] will say 'Oh, you feed your mother, why not mine?'". "Daughters help much more," she added, "They must always help their mothers". Small wonder then, that she questioned Ouma's purchases of new appliances (see also p. 88 above), since the more Ouma spent on the items which marked the image she herself desired, the less cash came into the household budget. In other words, parents' complaints revealed a tension between the obligations of being a "good daughter" (who contributed "properly" to household survival and shared household priorities) and a "modern woman" (participating effectively in the world "out there"),<sup>9</sup> and possibly a similar conflict between obligations and desirable image for unmarried sons.

### **3.3. The ironies of consumerism**

I would argue further that there is a striking contradiction inherent within these processes of marking modern lifestyles. Despite the fact that Soweto and Lusaka City residents subscribed to a notion of proper living in which it was central to achieve lifestyles integrated into a modern world, their financial circumstances meant that, for the most, the associated consumerism was difficult, if not impossible, for them to sustain. Ironically then, attempts to symbolically mark their integration often also exacerbated exactly the marginality from which people were trying to escape (or to mark their escape).

I return to Connie Phala as an example. Although she did her utmost to kit both herself and her children out with as many contemporary items as possible - hairdos and hipsters for the kids, fancy house alterations and adornments (a solid wood door with carved design being the prize) for herself – her expenditure on these pursuits

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<sup>9</sup> This notion will be explored more fully in Chapter Five, which is dedicated to a discussion of gender and propriety.

left her severely in debt and unable to afford either her grandchild Thato's pre-school fees, or her daughter Tebogo's college fees. Both had to take a year out from their education.

Rachel and Godfrey Kettlele from Lusaka City (see ii. in Chapter Three) who bought a fancy new fridge on hire-purchase but struggled to muster the cash to pay their instalments each month, faced threats of repossession of the fridge and the loss of all their contributions to that date.

In each instance, in the process of marking their participation in a modern world by accumulating its symbols and signifiers, the realities of their marginalisation within it was in fact reinforced by the compromises they had to make (such as postponing education in the Phalas' case) and the potential losses they faced due to their expenditure. In other words, in their inability to sustain their integration into the world 'out there', their sense of being 'otherwise, of being peripheral to its processes, was inadvertently profoundly deepened.

#### **4. 'Proper' living as a multifaceted concept**

I have reflected on how the world 'out there' where 'proper living' happens was idealised in multiple ways by the participants in my research, as a place of easy and abundant consumption, of access to services (such as electricity), of comfort, of security of tenure, and of financial security, among others. I have shown how people's desire for integration into this world was both marked and realised (at least to some degree) through their consumption of items, objects and appliances symbolically connected to it. Importantly however, in my efforts to reflect these processes I do not wish to obscure the complexity of people's consumption practices, or of their play with multiple symbols and multiple notions of propriety in the decoration and equipping of their domestic spaces. Certainly, challenging marginality through consumption of the 'modern' was an essential part of their sense of propriety for the majority of people whom I encountered. However, whilst greater intersection with the world 'out there' was desired by those who participated in my research, I do not wish to suggest that Connie and others imagined that world as perfect, nor that people wished to give up everything that that being a Sowetan

represented. Consider Joyjoy, who provides just one example of the complex nature of the construction of personhood through things.

**xii. *Joyjoy Laubewu's array of meaningful appliances***

Joyjoy was a giant, in stature and in personality. She was also a shrewd and creative business whizz. She had not been formally employed since the early 1980s, and instead had survived on a range of informal money-making activities. "It is lazy people who are crying", she assured me, relating her mentor grandmother's philosophy, "it is better to have no money and brains, than money and no brains! My granny taught me so well". So she sold second-hand clothes, organised a neighbourhood coal-purchasing co-operative in the winter, and collected cash from children who came to play on three rented video arcade games.

With the proceeds of her enterprises, Joyjoy had altered and refurbished her 'matchbox' house in Mzimhlope, extending the space and adding a bathroom. In addition, she had built three brick rooms in the backyard. One she rented to tenants, her nephew stayed in another, and in the third, the video games blipped and exploded all day at the hands of local children.

She had styled the exterior of the house to emulate her perception of a Mexican home, by painting it white, laying on a flat red tiled roof, and painting the gutters bright red. On the wall at the entrance hung a plaque of a sombrero-clad *amigo* sitting under a cactus. Indoors, the house shimmered with spotlessly clean mirror clocks, a glass-topped table, the polished leaves of waxy indoor plants, and brass wall hangings. The sitting-room was plush, matching, comfortable. Through an archway, the kitchen was jam-packed wall to wall with appliances on display - including, in pride of place amongst all the modern equipment, an old coal stove.

Its presence was a surprise to me in a place so clearly styled to be contemporary. Yet Joyjoy was adamant about its importance and that she would never get rid of it. She lit it once weekly at least, on Sunday during the sweltering summer, to cook the family meal. "My granny told me that if you don't make fire, there will be hunger in the house", she explained, adding that "It's true! Otherwise the ancestors go away".

Alongside the coal stove, stood an electric stove with an oven, on top of which was perched an electric two-plate stove. I questioned why she had both (especially since she also had a small table-top oven on a nearby surface). She retorted with a smile, "The big stove is not working ... It is a souvenir!"

Joyjoy's choice to retain a whole range of stoves constituted a deliberate collation of different purposes, images and values. The two-plate electric stove was that which she used to prepare daily meals. Its function was purely practical. The broken electric stove with an oven carried with it memories (she said) and a symbolic suggestion of modern living coherent with the rest of her home decorating. The coal

stove marked her past and fulfilled a cultural role that was important to her. By keeping all three on display in her kitchen, she demonstrated that her notion of a proper lifestyle was not a question of either respecting 'traditional' practice or of achieving modern, integrated, upward mobility. Rather, her choices imply that, for herself, 'proper living' needed the value of each associated with it. Joyjoy exemplifies how, for many, 'proper' living was not a simple unidimensional concept but rather one that could be constituted by a "comfortable contradiction" (Frankental, 1998) entailing a recognition of the past, a respect for tradition, as well as participation in the modern consuming world. I will elaborate further on the diversity in notions of propriety, of the apparent contradictions, and their (re)presentation through appliances, in the following chapter.

## **5. Conclusion**

This chapter reaffirms the fundamental roles that objects perform as symbols in shaping and presenting not only people's image, but also their experiences of and in the world. Without the trappings of the modern world, poor people in Soweto and Lusaka City experienced an increased sense of marginalisation from the world 'out there' where 'proper' living was perceived to happen unequivocally. By acquiring up-to-date items associated with modern living (and in this respect electricity and electrical goods held particular symbolic potency), they inserted themselves into the networks of consumption and access that are at the foundation of today's world.

The chapter further reveals some of the ways in which constestation occurs around these symbols of integration. In this case, the importance of being – or feeling - part of the modern world was shared by people of all generations, but aspects of the symbolic aesthetic thereof were slightly different between generations. Importantly then, in this instance, any tensions around consumption priorities were not categorical generational differences over the conception of what constituted proper integration and what did not. If there were tensions, they were over being able to obtain the markers of 'proper' living appropriate for both parents and children from within the situation of serious economic constraints in which they lived. I have shown how these were tensions which arose out of the struggle of juggling resources, out of notions of parental and filial obligation and support, and out of disappointments at

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the failure to be able to sustain a “proper” lifestyle, and the constant reminders of the marginality that they, as poor people, faced.

A number of different levels of propriety were entwined with and embedded in each other. A marking of ‘proper’ citizenry, of participation in greater-than-local everyday processes, was, for many, an important component of moving towards a state of ‘proper living’. Concomitantly, a notion of ‘proper’ parenting was integral to each, furnishing lives with those things which enable, or at least imply, the integration, comfort, style, status, and success that were envisaged as central aspects of the world ‘out there’ where ‘proper living’ happens.

## Chapter Five

### Symbols at gendered work: negotiating women's propriety

*"Gender identity is what people do, think and say about material and immaterial things in relation to other people conceived of as sexed. It is necessarily relational. Technology too ... is increasingly understood as relational. As deployed in production, in everyday life, in the household, technological artefacts entail relations. They embody some (those that went into their making). They prefigure others (those implied in their use, abuse or neglect). But they also enter into and may change relations they encounter. There is yet nothing gendered about this perception, but gendering is inevitably present" (Cockburn, 1992:40, original emphasis).*

In her study of urban Zambian households, Hansen (1997:160) comments that "It was quite evident that [electric appliances] are cultural objects that play important roles in the structuring and perhaps changing of women's and men's experiences of everyday life". She does not, however, document in any detail how they do so. In this chapter I carry her proposition further, by exploring how gender and generational relations within households are shaped, negotiated and changed in interactions around certain appliances. I demonstrate how the symbolic significance of different appliances converses with widely held conceptions of the 'proper' place of men and women, adults and youth. The dialogical nature of the interaction (Weiss, 1996; Miller, 1998; Tilley, 1999) not only defines but also has the potential to alter the meanings and understandings both of the appliances as symbols, and of intra-household (and extra-household) gender and generational identities and social relations. I begin the chapter with a discussion of the attitudes towards washing machines vocalised by participants in the research, not because these appliances are the only symbol of how gender or generation operates in the household, but because they capture these issues particularly clearly. I then examine the use of coal stoves as symbol in ongoing intergenerational contestation over appropriate gender roles within the household. Finally, I briefly discuss the propensity of appliances present in domestic space to effect changes in the nature of intra-household social relations. I draw almost exclusively on stories, views, experiences and observations collected amongst residents of the formal houses in Mzimhlope, for the reasons that this was the only neighbourhood in which I worked which had the indoor plumbing necessary for washing machine installation, and in which full sized industry-produced coal stoves were prevalent (see Table 7 and discussion in Chapter Two).

Throughout the chapter, I demonstrate and draw upon a crucial notion of symbolic rub, by which I mean a friction, an incoherence, between the various symbolic meanings with which objects are imbued. My intention is to illustrate how people's senses of self and others are fashioned by objects around them, and also to think about the way people act with and around the multivalence of objects in their multiple strategies towards defining themselves and others.

### **1. A question of propriety: washing machines as gendered symbol**

I have already indicated in chapter two that sampled households living in the long-electrified matchbox houses of Mzimhlope owned a wide range of electrical appliances. In most households, every domestic energy function - cooking, space heating, refrigeration, ironing, entertainment was covered by an electric appliance, often of an expensive make and high-tech design. Save for one glaring exception: virtually no labour-saving domestic cleansing appliances were owned. Amongst the 59 households sampled in this neighbourhood, only eight washing machines, four geysers, five urns, two vacuum cleaners and three floor polishers were observed. No dishwashers or tumble dryers were noted. Daily, many hours of women's time were spent labouring over soapy tubs, scrubbing, rinsing, wringing clothes and linen. More were consumed heating water, pot after pot, kettle after kettle, preparing bath water for members of the household. Still more time disappeared as women toiled on hands and knees, polishing floors to a glistening shine. Yet there had been - and continued to be - little priority given by members of these households to acquiring appliances which could have alleviated the time and labour involved in domestic chores. Even those households that had found means to fit out their homes way beyond the bounds of simple utilitarian necessity had tended to avoid investing in labour-saving appliances for domestic cleansing. The Chinakas (see ix. in Chapter Four), for example, refurbished their house with all that opens and shuts, shimmers or shines, chops, blends, heats, cools, bakes, boils, and entertains. Where then, was the washing machine? The vacuum cleaner? The floor polisher? Where, in this home furnished with many 'luxury' appliances, were those which could lighten the drudgery in a woman's day? Zodwa Chinaka smiled at my surprise. Most of the laundry, she said, was done by a woman who lives down the road. She charged R40

per garbage bag of washing. The children's clothes were washed by hand, by Zodwa. "We just prefer it that way", she quipped, and changed the topic of conversation.

One afternoon, I discussed with a group of neighbours living in Mzimhlope the absence of washing machines in their homes. At first, concerns that washing machines are harder on clothing, that they don't clean as well, and that they break buttons and fray collars, were raised. But the central thrust of the discussion revolved around the social relational aspects of these appliances. "Our husbands say we are lazy [if we desire washing machines]", Sinah complained. "Exactly!", Tshidiso, a 25 year old man, responded firmly, "washing machines [make] lazy women. Our culture doesn't allow for washing machines". Tshidiso presented a patriarchal notion of the 'proper' role of African women as hardworking domestic labourers, who keep their houses and households clean and well cared for, no matter the time, sweat or strength necessary. His opinion was supported by Tsehla, an older man who lived in the same street. He too rejected having a washing machine in his house: "I marry somebody, she must work for me. She's got two hands. No machines are necessary for polishing or washing or anything". He added that "These young girls [who are eager to own and use washing machines], they are good for nothing. They are 'modernised' too much". Granny Winnie was not entirely correct when she retorted in response to these two that "They're men, that's why they say that". Tshidiso's and Tsehla's sentiments were certainly not held only by men. Gertrude, mother of three and gentle grandmother to four year old Relebohile, for example, agreed wholeheartedly with them. Pointing with disdain at the carefully manicured and painted finger nails of her young woman friend sitting alongside her, she asserted that "I won't have a *makoti*<sup>1</sup> with long nails like that. Why? Because she is lazy!" Soft well kept hands, Gertrude implied, suggest to others that a woman does not do her washing by hand, and most likely does little else around the house either. Gertrude's comment in addition hinted at the specific impropriety of having a daughter-in-law who appears "lazy". It is fairly common amongst black South Africans (more especially in rural areas) for women to move into the homes of their husband's family. There it is widely accepted by many that one of the primary roles of the *makoti* is to carry out

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<sup>1</sup> *Umakoti* is the Zulu word for 'daughter in law'.

the most of the drudgery of domestic tasks in her new home (Magona, 1999; Mathabane, 1994). Gertrude's comment suggests that not only would it be objectionable for a *makoti* herself to be seen as lazy, but it would also reflect badly on the public status of her mother-in-law. The stereotype of women who own washing machines as inappropriately slovenly and slack was, moreover, not only valued by men and older women. Nor were attitudes towards washing machines were split cleanly along generational lines: contrary to Tsehla's assertion, a number of the younger women refused to own or use a washing machine. Exclaimed one young woman participating in the discussion, "I am a washing machine myself! I have got hands, I do my washing!"

The discussion between these Mzimhlope residents indicates how washing machines in their neighbourhood had acquired symbolic meaning that interacted with and reinforced notions of appropriate gender relations and identity. For many, they objectified domestic indolence in women, a quality which was judged by both women and men to undermine 'proper' womanhood, as well as the masculinity of the men involved in domestic relationships with such women. A 'proper' woman works hard around the house to keep it, its contents and its inhabitants scrubbed clean, and well cared for<sup>2</sup>. In choosing to avoid self-representation as women faltering in their social roles, women in Mzimhlope elected not to own objects such as washing machines, for fear of suggesting an image of impropriety in their domestic roles and relationships. Similarly, men non-verbally asserted fitting relations with their wives and daughters by shunning investment in household objects that, through their symbolic meaning, would tarnish the propriety both of intra-household relationships and extra-household images: the absence of washing machines in their homes asserted (and simultaneously ensured) both their own masculinity - as husbands and fathers associated with women who know their 'place' - and the 'propriety' of the women and girls affiliated to them.

Though projected as an absolute by many men and women, the symbolic associations of washing machines with aspects of appropriate gender roles and

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<sup>2</sup> See Ramphela and Boonzaier (1988), Bozzoli (1991), Mathabane (1994) for corroborative evidence.

relations did not go uncontested. Some women rejected outright their labelling as lazy or 'improper' women on the basis of their owning such appliances, and instead appreciated washing machines for the time and effort they can save, as well as for alternative semiotic associations of modern living (as elaborated in Chapter Four). Said Sinah, who laboured daily over a tub of her baby's nappies, and longed for a washing machine to assist with this task, "Washing machines save time. It's three in one: washing, rinsing and wringing". She muttered with infuriation at Tsehla and Tshidiso's unflinching stereotyping of women on the basis of the appliances they own and use. A young girl, whose grandmother was contemplating investing in a washing machine because her arthritis was undermining her ability to scrub easily, relished the idea but anticipated disapproval: "The boys will see the machine and think I am lazy, but I don't mind", she said. Aged fifteen, one of her main tasks in the household was to wash all the adults' clothing and linen. This was very time-consuming, and had to be juggled with school work and other domestic chores. A third woman, Lawukazi, laughed at Tshidiso's interpretation. "Lazy wives!" she retorted, "Lazy wives? There's no such thing!" She pointed out that a washing machine only diminishes one task of many that a woman is expected to do. "So you have a washing machine. You still have to do the cleaning, the cooking..." This same woman however, was quick to assert that the reason she herself had bought a machine in the first place was because she had arthritis in her hands, and handwashing was therefore painful. In other words, whilst she claimed to reject judgement on the basis of her washing machine ownership, she nonetheless defended herself from criticism in the very terms that construct the notion of a good woman as a hardworking (handwashing) person, and not in terms that assert resistance to the basic concept itself. Despite contesting any criticism anticipated for her ownership of a washing machine, her remark that her arthritis was all that rendered her incapable of doing laundry by hand, still carried with it the implication that her value as a woman lay in her dedication to domestic work.

In the eight recorded instances where washing machines were owned, these self-same symbolic meanings and their related notions of gender roles were not discarded: the women owners of the machines all appeared to subscribe to the paradigm that their 'proper' womanhood lay in their domestic vigour. However, they

overcame the consequence of the unwanted symbolism by acting (or professing to act) around the washing machines in positively sanctioned ways. Two women (including Lawukazi, above) publicly justified their ownership of the machines in terms of their suffering from arthritis, whilst other women members of these two households claimed they did all their washing by hand. Another machine was said to be used only "if [the woman] comes home late" or for its spin function "when it's raining". Otherwise, I was told, all washing was done by hand. Two were said never to be used (nor were they seen to be used) at all. Three machines were broken, and remained so for the duration of my research. Of these eight machines, six were stored out of sight in the private space of bedrooms, their undesirable symbolic insinuations thus hidden from most visitors to the house. The remaining two were found in kitchens which had been recently renovated and refurbished, where a collection of new and modern appliances, furnishings and decorations together provided symbolic consensus of the houseowners' trendiness.

## **2. Symbolic rub/Semiotic friction: Washing machines as conundrum/contradictory symbol/uncomfortable object**

Building on Kopytoff's (1986) and Appadurai's (1986) notion of object biographies, Silverstone *et al* (1992) point out that objects tend to develop more than one biography, and therefore more than one symbolic path of meaning. They do not, however, develop this idea any further. I would argue that in the process of developing multiple biographies, fields of semiotic friction - of 'symbolic rub' - arise around objects. In other words, the various symbolic meanings with which objects are imbued do not necessarily cohere. Their multivalence need not be congruent, and the symbolic associations of the objects can operate in opposition to one another.

Consider the choices and actions of the Mabuzwenis, xiii. below, which provide both a vivid example of the incoherent symbolic meanings that objects can develop and how people act around this incoherence, as well as a demonstration of the enduring nature of gender roles.

### **xiii. *The Mabuzweni's laundry arrangements***

Elsie Mabuzweni, a pensioner who had lived most of her adult life in Mzimhlope, shared her home with two of her daughters, Magdalene (41) and Agnes (35). Agnes had a daughter aged 13 living there. Two of Elsie's other grandchildren stayed there as well. They were the sons, aged 25 and 27, of her own son who had died some years previously. Magdalene owned a hair 'saloon'<sup>3</sup> in Diepkloof, and employed one of her nephews to help her. Agnes was employed full time at Sanlam (a major insurance company) as a general assistant. To augment their incomes and her pension, Elsie ran a *spaza* from the backyard.

In 1995 Elsie Mabuzweni set about renovating and refurbishing her 'matchbox' house. She built two bedrooms, one for each of her adult daughters, and a *spaza*, all in the back yard, and restructured the interior of the old building to create a large living and dining room, a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. Each room was then colour-coordinated: the bedroom blue and green, the bathroom simply blue.

When I met Elsie, the kitchen was not yet complete, but she said she planned for her next investment to replace the kitchen units and install a double sink. It was nonetheless jam-packed with fancy electric appliances: an oven with a four-plate hob, a microwave, an electric frying pan, a snackwich-maker, a food-processor (very seldom used, but displayed on a counter), a large two-door fridge-freezer, and a single-drum washing machine. Most of these mod-cons had been purchased by Elsie's adult and working daughters. (She noted, for example, how they had owned a "very good two-plate" before her offspring replaced it with a fancy stove).

The washing machine was purchased soon after renovations began. Yet, in the three years since, it had never once been used. There were accessible water taps, and it would have been simple and effortless to connect the pipes. However, all the women in the household chose instead to do their washing by hand in the double basins installed in the yard outside the back door. 'They're perfect', Elsie said of these basins, "you can wash one side, rinse the other!"

In this case, the Mabuzwenis drew on an alternative set of semiotic associations of the washing machine to its apparently normative symbols of laziness and hence inferior womanhood. By displaying the spanking new washing machine alongside other 'luxury' appliances in their upgraded kitchen, they presented their lifestyle as affluent, modern, moving with the times. Whilst a washing machine was on the one hand associated with lazy womanhood, it was, on the other, also a symbol of modern

living and of financial ease. In effect, by purchasing and displaying a washing machine in their home, the Mabuzwenis chose to compromise on symbolic appropriateness relating to one arena of social life - their (good, hardworking) womanhood - in order to achieve symbolic effects relating to another - their modern upward mobility. Their *actions* around the machine however, indicate that its purchase was not a statement of resistance to the dominant gender symbolism centred on the machine. It was not a refusal to submit to the paradigm of domestic subordination. By performing their washing in the open and public space of their yard (in clear view of their neighbours), they acted out and displayed their 'proper' womanhood for all to see. In so doing, they engaged with the semiotic friction inherent in the washing machine, working *with* and around its symbolic inconsistencies in a way that achieved a coherent image of their being 'good' women. In effect, the symbolic 'rub' of the machine was made neutral, the uncomfortable made comfortable, both through their installation of double laundry-basins in the yard - an object which contradicted the symbolic insinuations of the machine - and their actions around these.

The women in the Chinaka household (see p. 102 earlier, and ix. in Chapter Four) chose a different approach to the Mabuzwenis in presenting their image, but to similar effect. They equipped their house with a selection of those appliances which signalled their living as modern and upwardly mobile. But they shunned the semiotic benefits that washing machine ownership could have contributed to this image. By avoiding investment in a washing machine, but paying someone else to do some - but, importantly, not all - of their laundry, they eluded judgement of their womanhood as well as escaped most of the domestic drudgery associated with the task. They avoided the symbolic discomfort of a washing machine, but nonetheless achieved an image of both modern living and 'good', 'proper' womanhood.

Thus, despite the differences in their approaches, the women in both the Mabuzweni and Chinaka households demonstrated their subscription to the normative criteria of

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<sup>3</sup> In Soweto, as in many other parts of South Africa, hair salons are commonly advertised as 'saloons'.

'good' women through their daily practice, and also ensured that their womanhood was not undermined by the presence of a machine in their homes.

### **3. Symbolic rub and contestation/Gender and generation: Coal stoves and contradiction/contestation**

Whilst most women in the Mzimhlope sample reacted to washing machines in the same way - as markers of the lazy women they did not want to be, or to be seen to be - this was not the case with another equally 'gendered' household appliance: the coal stove.<sup>4</sup> Opinions about owning the appliance were more polarised, on the whole between elderly and younger women. Fifty eight per cent<sup>5</sup> of households in the formal housing sample from Mzimhlope owned large coal stoves, most of which were kept in the kitchens of these houses.<sup>6</sup> The majority of these were inherited from the parents or grandparents of the current household members.<sup>7</sup> Most younger<sup>8</sup> women however, rejected retaining - let alone using - these coal stoves in their houses and battled to get rid of them. They protested that coal stoves require arduous labour to prepare the fires, that they are an effort to clean, and that their emissions make the house dirty - curtains need regular washing, walls become grubby, ceilings grey, and so on. "Eish!"<sup>9</sup>, exclaimed Sobahle with vigour, "coal stoves make too much smoke in the house. And that makes a lot of work!" In addition, as indicated in Chapter Four, many commented that the stoves are "old fashioned", appliances that are found in houses stuck in the past, not homes moving into the future.

Pensioner grandmothers and mothers, however, lauded both the practicality of the stoves' use and their symbolic meanings. Coal stoves provide heat for cooking, efficiently heat water for bathing and for washing dishes, and warm the house once

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<sup>4</sup> Note that I refer to mass produced coal stoves, not those of the home-made or small entrepreneur variety as seen in a number of the shacks sampled. See Chapter Two.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Two, Table 7.

<sup>6</sup> Four of seven broken coal stoves included in this statistic have been moved outside or into backyard shack storage, to save space in the kitchen.

<sup>7</sup> In the remaining 42% of sampled households, coal stoves were owned at some stage, but had been thrown out: some with the advent of electricity in the area in the late 1970s, some because they were broken, some because they were no longer considered necessary or appropriate appliances.

<sup>8</sup> I use this category loosely, to refer to both teenage and older, working-age women.

<sup>9</sup> A common expression of emphasis.

the weather becomes chilly. "A coal stove makes your body and your home feel warm *right through*, not like electric heaters", said one woman in Mzimhlope. Another who refused to part with her coal stove pointed out, "It's part of our culture". Aside from its practical value as a cheap<sup>10</sup> space heater and cooker, she thus indicated that the coal stove was steeped in what she perceived to be and presented as a culturally specific symbolism. Granny Winnie, who lit her coal stove daily throughout winter, hinted further at this kind of semiotic attachment: "You know, old people, we like the coal stove. Young ones, they're always in a hurry with cooking, they just want it quick quick. But", she stressed, "its not the same [using electricity]". Joyjoy elaborated in a similar vein, pointing to her grandmother's teachings that coal stoves - as the place of fire in an urban house - provide a link to ancestors (see xii. in Chapter Four). She and others thus suggested that the coal stove embodied the essence of the home, and constituted an important locus of 'traditional' living around which household relations should operate.

As a result, grandmothers in Mzimhlope continually complained about the attitudes of younger generations. The terminology they chose for their criticism was revealing. Consider, for example, the following discussion between four grandmothers over a mid-morning cup of tea one winter's day.<sup>11</sup> Muttered Elsie, "The children don't want to touch coal ... they must have plastic [bags] over their hands so they don't spoil their nails!" Rose agreed, explaining to me that "these children, they don't know what it was like before. These white stoves<sup>12</sup> are easy to clean. You should see with the old black ones. You must scrub and boot polish. Yo! It was a lot of work! Now all you need is Handy Andy." So, according to Rose, the labour necessary to maintain a coal stove in good and visibly acceptable condition has decreased with the advent of enamelled stoves and modern cleaning agents. Nodding her head, MaLerato concurred with her friends: "Coal stoves warm the whole house, but our children don't want to make it [fire]". The discussion sparked a vivacious rant between the

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<sup>10</sup> All the coal stoves owned in this sample are old, very few were bought by the current household members. Removing appliance purchase costs from the equation transforms them into a far cheaper energy source for heating than electrical heaters for example.

<sup>11</sup> Note that the references to 'child' and 'children' made by these elderly women can mean anything from young school girls to mothers well into adulthood. These are statements of relative, rather than absolute, youth.

<sup>12</sup> Rose was referring to the standard enamelled coal range currently found in these Soweto homes.

four women about their children (all of whom were well into adulthood) and grandchildren. "Children don't want to work!" one exclaimed, "they want to watch TV all the time!" Added Elsie, "When we were children we used to work *hard*." "Exactly!", clamoured MaLerato, "the children, they just boycott work!" "Eh! But these young girls are *lazy*!", Granny Emily concluded.

The use and upkeep of coal stoves (and the other domestic work produced through their use) *is* laborious, even if the labour required today is less than it was in times gone by, as the grandmothers suggested. It was rare that any male household members in Mzimhlope were tasked with preparing the fire in the stove. It was virtually unheard of for men to clean the burnt ashes out, let alone to participate in cleaning the resulting grime around the house. (Two cases were recorded in which a teenage son assisted with domestic chores such as lighting the coal stove in instances where women members were unable to be home from work in time to do so. But in all other households that participated in the research, at least one woman was available to do the job). Rather then, it was women who had to ensure that there was coal and kindling in the house to burn. They had to stoke the fires slowly from the mid-afternoon to be ready for cooking by the evening and to clean out the stoves daily. If this isn't done diligently, Octavia explained that "they smoke too much!", making it unpleasant to be inside the house, as well as creating additional dirt around the house. Women had also to regularly wash the dirty curtains, and scrub soot accumulation from the walls and ceilings. This was a 'women's appliance', inescapably domestic in its utilisation and ramifications: its use created for women yet more work beyond its basic function as a cooker and space heater, in the form of house cleaning.

Clearly there appears to be a contradiction in the sampled women's opinions and responses to owning washing machines and coal stoves. Washing machines were rejected on the basis that they characterise 'lazy' women. Yet coal stoves were being jettisoned by some of these self-same women because they were considered to generate domestic work. On the one hand, an appliance which undermines 'propriety' was avoided. On the other, an appliance which would appear to symbolise just that hard work which 'propriety' demands, was also renounced.

This is not a reflection of an inconsistency in gender ideology, but rather a contestation within it. Through action and interaction over the coal stoves, women across generations appear to be challenging the *limits* of domestic labour required for their definition as 'proper' women, wives and mothers. Elderly women, like those caught in the moment of conversation cited above, admonished the negative attitudes towards coal stoves held by younger women in terms of "laziness", of "boycotting work", essentially of being unwilling to fulfil domestic labour in the manner they consider to be 'proper' for women. In rejecting the presence of coal stoves in their homes, young women, these grandmothers contested, demonstrated impropriety in their notions and practice of their gender role. A 'proper' woman, they asserted, works long and hard at every domestic task. Young women, on the other hand, objected to the extensive labour related to coal stoves, and - as a concomitant - what coal stove ownership thus indicated about them as women. Twenty five year old Portia Mawasha echoed the views of many other women when she asserted that coal stoves simply "make *too much* work". They lock women into a role of hard domestic labour that these younger women considered to be excessive. Portia and others did not suggest that domestic work itself is outside of their 'proper' role. In dismissing coal stoves they were simply attempting to shift the boundaries of propriety. The very presence of a coal stove in the house seems symbolically to suggest that the women members of the household concede to a degree of domestic labour that is particularly severe. In other words, though few younger women suggested that their own value should not lie in their fulfilment of domestic work, they challenged and negotiated the *extent* of this definitive labour. They disputed not the *content* of the notion of their own 'propriety' as women, but the *degree* of labour necessary to achieve it.

Other qualities of the two kinds of appliances further enhance their nature as fitting for this particular symbolic conversation over gender roles and identity. As with all objects, coal stoves and washing machines are rich and complex in their multivalence. And the specific combination of multiple symbolic meanings associated with each of these two appliances predisposes them to this apparently contradictory response on the part of younger women. If washing machines are

semiotic markers of lazy women, so are they strong symbols of affluence and ability to move with the times. Similarly, coal stoves are not only symbols of (for some, excessively) hard working women, they are also associated with tradition, and often poverty. Consider for a moment the two complexes of symbols associated with each appliance in terms of semiotic friction.

For most women, the semiotic friction associated with washing machines is rough and jarring. On the one hand, these are attractive acquisitions. On the other, they undermine women's presentation of self as 'proper'. Thus most women, it appears, elected to avoid the troublesome semiotics with which washing machines were imbued. In contrast, for many young women coal stoves proffered a coherent symbolic complex, a multivalence which exhibited very little semiotic friction and thus did not present them with difficult contradictions. For younger generations who wished to be (and to be seen as) hip and contemporary, it made sense to respond vehemently against what, for them, was a double negative symbolism of the coal stoves as representative not only of women dedicated *in the extreme* to domestic labour but also of lifestyles rooted in the past. For elderly women, on the other hand, who felt a sentimental attachment to the traditions and lifestyles of their past, the symbolism of coal stoves did not present them with an uncomfortable representation.

Ferguson (1990) has presented a contrasting analysis of intergenerational struggle over entrenched practices around cattle in Lesotho that, while different in many aspects, is nonetheless useful to apply to the battle over coal stoves in Mzimhlope, where there is potentially a similar (though more low key) process at work. On the basis of his analysis of intergenerational contestation over livestock custom that he observed in Lesotho, Ferguson argued that generational differences were by no means an unequivocal signal of change in custom but rather an expression of opposing interests that are a result of different structural positions in the household as well as in broader society. Referring to his own data, he notes that "the loyalty of the older generation to 'traditional' livestock customs is rooted in real economic interests which they, as a category, possess, and is in no way a 'holdover' from pre-capitalist days" (1990:164). Thus he anticipated that, rather than the custom changing over time as a result of the struggle, the young who oppose the current

livestock customs would shift their position as they age because it would come to be in their interests to do so. In this instance, cattle in effect acted as a 'retirement fund' for people. They occupied a particular domain of property to which the elderly had special access ahead of other members of the society. For example, in one of the few instances in which cattle could be sold, the cash acquired was allocated specifically to the domain of the elderly. Thus many youngsters opposed the custom since it trapped valuable household cash resources out of their reach. For the elderly on the other hand, it was beneficial to maintain these rules of 'traditional' practice.

Considering Mzimhlope, it could be that the older women were particularly vocal and more vehement about retaining coal stoves because they rarely had to suffer the labour-related consequences of having them in their homes, while they were able to enjoy the benefits of a warm cosy house. In multi-generational households, the arduous physical work associated with coal stoves was relegated to the younger women. It could thus be that young women were objecting to coal stoves based on interests associated with their structural position in relation to the rest of the household, and that this was in turn challenging and reshaping their beliefs about womanhood in the late 1990s.

If one considers who benefits from these two kinds of appliances, another contrasting layer of gendering, superimposed on the gendered responsibility for operating the appliances, is uncovered. Coal stoves benefit all in the household by creating cosy warmth way beyond the internal kitchen doorway, in a manner that a single electric heater does not. Washing machines however, stand to benefit only the women who are responsible for the laundry. Their presence in a household does not affect anyone else's time or comfort. All members of the household will have clean shirts and socks whether a machine is owned and used or not. Yet machines are costly. The fairly widespread ownership of coal stoves, and the absence of washing machines and other domestic labour-saving devices, from these households can perhaps be partly attributed to this 'gendering' of benefits. Ross (1995) points out that in Galeshewe in the Northern Cape, TVs and hi-fis were prioritised by men over appliances that would alleviate some of the domestic workload that women faced. I would postulate similarly (and indeed my data seems to support the

argument) that if expensive domestic appliances are to be bought with household finances (even if the money is earned by women), they are likely to be those which benefit all, such as televisions, hi-fis, and fridges, rather than those which benefit women alone.

#### **4. (Entertainment) Appliances, catalysing change in intra-household social relations**

It is not only people's responses to the symbolism associated with appliances that shape and contest gender relations, but also the way in which appliances are placed and used in space. Other appliances which are not as obviously 'gendered' as washing machines and coal stoves, can be central to shaping - and reshaping - social relations within households, and to setting up situations in which both gender and generational propriety is contested.

Consider entertainment appliances. In every sampled Mzimhlope house, a formal sitting room is maintained, at least in appearance, as a reception room for visitors. In theory, this is a space demarcated for adult use, ideally for formal entertaining, though the lack of an alternative space often means that more informal socialising happens here too.<sup>13</sup> It can be argued that a well-furnished, well-kept sitting room signals (along with other symbolic markers) a household's potential for 'proper' hospitality. This room however, is also the 'proper' place in which to keep entertainment appliances. The kitchen or bedroom are not considered appropriate locations. However, inserting these appliances into the sitting room adds new social dimensions to the use of the room. Expressive Mzimhlope grandmother Elsie explained with frustration: "Before [we had a TV], the sitting room was for visitors. Now the children take over. They spoil the furniture and they put their feet on the table when they're watching TV". The advent of televisions and sound systems in these houses creates a space in which notions of propriety relating to domestic social relations are challenged. To the tune of 'The Days of Our Lives', sitting rooms immediately crowd with engrossed children, parents, grandparents, women and men, and sometimes neighbours too. Soccer match showings pack out the room similarly.

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<sup>13</sup> By 'informal socialising' I refer to pop-in visits from neighbours and close friends, and such like. In houses where seating is available in the kitchen, these kinds of informal gatherings are more commonly held there than in the sitting room.

'Cellulars', quarts and 'loosedraws'<sup>14</sup> are passed between men, in the company of their wives and daughters. Children's afternoon TV has tots glued to the screen, curled up on furniture reserved for their parents in the past. Teenagers bop to throbbing Music TV and Radio Metro, practising the latest moves to current grooves. Observing similar changes in social relations in households in Lusaka, Hansen (1997:159) notes how entertainment appliances bring about a "blurring [of] long-held distinctions about gender, age and space". Here too, these appliances act as catalysts, transforming the sitting room from controlled social space, into one in which the boundaries between genders and generations are confounded, and notions of propriety in terms of the nature of domestic social relations begin to shift.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Appliances as 'pragmatic' and symbolic objects were integral to the construction and negotiation of people's gender relations and identities in Soweto. Conspicuous by their presence - or their absence - in a home, they produced and reinforced both experiences and images of gender roles and relations. The struggles that occurred around them were deeper than simple disagreements over their use or disuse, and rather cut to the core of people's perceptions of women's 'proper' role as mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. By contesting appliance ownership and usage, women and men, old and young, made explicit their personal boundaries - sometimes battle lines - of their notions of 'proper' gender and generational roles.

In this chapter I have also looked beyond the symbolic content of the appliances to take a closer look at the working of symbols - their multiple co-existence, their influence, their interplay, and importantly, their incoherence, their 'rub' - and the creative, reflexive ways in which people worked with, around and against these features, in searching for comfortable (or in contesting uncomfortable) personal associations. In some instances, like that of the Mabuzweni household, a semiotic friction was in effect made neutral by people's actions around the appliance. In others, like the Chinakas, its discomfort was avoided altogether and alternatives found. Importantly, objects' multivalencies resonate differently for different people -

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<sup>14</sup> 'Cellular' is township slang for a halfjack - 350 ml of hard liquor; shebeens commonly sell beer in quart-sized bottles; 'loose draw' is slang for cigarettes bought individually rather than in

what for some is an uncomfortable contradiction is for others an untroubled coherence. Thus, whilst for some women having a coal stove in their kitchen reinforced not only appropriate and 'proper' gender identities but also an important link with their past, for others these two symbolic associations jarred with their images of themselves. In the first instance, the symbols were harmonious, in the latter, they were frictional. In each, the symbols were reason enough to shape choices about owning or discarding the appliance.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion: Poverty, Propriety and Personhood

Thus far, I have told stories of urban living. Of Soweto and Lusaka City. Of extensions, renovations, alterations; which expanded, enhanced, 'modernised', fantasised. Of accumulation. Rapid or gradual. Bit by bit. Or all in a flash. Of cramped but sparse backyard living, or cramped and cluttered, depending. Of rural homes that need equipping too. Of conscious, conscientious space-shaping, home-making. Of rejection, retention, acquisition. Of display. And concealment. Of pride and shame.

Picture again the telephones (sans connections) on crocheted doilies. The concrete porches cobra-polished<sup>1</sup> till they red-glow. The dust. Winter coal smog hanging silent, still, enveloping. Hear the roar of the highway. The buzz of high-density living. Picture the pigs in urban pens. Chickens in urban *hoks*. Flower beds or vegetable gardens. Grass struggling through hard, rocky earth. Dogs barking. The midday quiet, its heat bringing everyone into the shade indoors. To collapse in the cooler dark on rickety chairs or on scavenged beer crates or velvet couches or plush imitation leather lounge suites. Hear the hiss of a paraffin stove. Breathe its unmistakable smell. Sense its indignity. Feel the cosy warmth of the coal stove. Remember the labour attached. And its controversial image. Enjoy the ease and status of electricity.

Picture those shacks I described, whitewashed (or pink or red or green). Some immaculately kitted out with everything that opens and shuts. Others reflecting a mishmash of creativity, ingenuity, adversity.

Picture tiny kitchen spaces, a mostly empty double door fridge-freezer filling space alongside a bulky oven, a rack containing a stainless steel pot set, scoured till each pot is as good as new, and a melamine-topped table (covered with a lacy rose-printed plastic table cloth).

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<sup>1</sup> Cobra is a brand of polish used almost ubiquitously.

Remember the desirability of wall units filled with shiny pink ceramic dogs (long haired pooches a favourite) or figurines (farm girls with milk pails, or Victorian party-goers in ballgowns and frills), potplants, an etched copper plaque (a lion/impala/rose), a set of heavy drinking glasses, a TV in pride of place and maybe a hi-fi too.

I've written too of hot smoking braziers, placed centrally on shack floors ("*kushushu!*"<sup>2</sup> the children are reminded when they get too close) but never in houses.

I've written of unused hi-fis.

Of appliances - polished, dusted, spotless ... broken.

I've told stories of financial fragility.

Of risky hire-purchase traps.

Of debt.

Of poignant choices.

Of sacrifice.

Of resilience.

Of glitz. Of glamour.

Of global imagery.

Of avid soap opera fans (The Bolder, the more Beautiful, the better).

New appliances, right out of the box. Reupholstered furniture, plastic covered to keep fabric in tiptop condition. Hip labels, trendy gear, cool boombox beats.

Upward Mobility. Integration. Dreams of cosmopolitanism.

Exclusion. Marginality.

Of contestation, contradiction, coherence.

Of challenges to roles and responsibility. Of redefinition. Or agreement.

Of washbasins and washing machines (one preferred over the other)

Of dispute.

Of notions of culture. Culture.

Of calloused hands

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<sup>2</sup> "Its hot!" (in Xhosa).

Of women's work.

Of households. Of community.

Of generational responsibilities, obligations, guilt, and friction.

Of expectation. Desire. Longing. Choice. Sacrifice.

Of signification. Performance. Success. Risk. Struggle. Veracity. Tenacity. Failure.

Of symbols and sites of struggle.

Of the importance of things.

Of Propriety or Otherwise.

I now add a final vignette as a point of both departure and closure.

Napolean (who loved singing along to his Pavarotti cassettes and knew the words to all of Barry White's repertoire) leant over his *spaza* counter. NapJoy's Tuckshop, he'd called the business, named after the collaboration between himself and his wife Joyce and labelled on a bright handpainted sign above the window. The shelves were barer than usual (they were never very full, but the pair generally did good trade in Joyce's homemade *vetkoek*<sup>3</sup>) and that day displayed only a few biscuits on a tray and a couple of bottles of loose sweets for sale. Said Napolean in response to my questions that day, "Eish, Helen, we're too financially embarrassed".

Napolean's choice of words seemed to pull together so much of what I'd observed over the previous 18 months. In commenting on his poverty, he did not refer directly to being strapped for cash. Instead, his choice of words equated his poverty with embarrassment over that scarcity. His expression summed up his experience of poverty as constituted not simply by a lack of cash or resources, but by a sense of shame and indignity.

It brought into sharp focus the underpinnings of the kinds of consumption I had observed in Lusaka City and Soweto, and that I have described in the course of this dissertation. People's consumption choices, resting on a sense of potential

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<sup>3</sup> Deep-fried batter cakes, literally – translated from Afrikaans – "fat cakes".

embarrassment, in effect established a sense of their pride and dignity, of their propriety, and its marking for all to see. The objects and appliances that people invested in were crucial in positively constituting the “flesh” of their worlds (Tilley, 1999), by upending people’s experiences of financial shame and positioning them as consuming, participating, negotiating, engaged and engaging household members, community members and citizens.

It is in this respect that appliances are perhaps an especially powerful symbol. A qualitative difference exists between appliances and house remodelling or other domestic objects. Appliances require continuous cash flow in order to operate in terms of their pragmatic functions. However renovation or remodelling of buildings, or the purchase of a lounge suite, or kitchen units, requires nothing more than a single cash input. Often even this is avoided in the case of renovations, through the ‘acquisition’ of bricks from city building sites, and the use of household members’ labour. Appliances thus seem to be particularly rich in their symbolic value in this context of poverty, because not only does their presence in a house contribute to a sense of capital accumulation, but in addition also implies that its residents have continuing cash flow. A house jam-packed with appliances symbolically suggests that “financial embarrassment” is not a feature of its residents’ personal context.

Implicit throughout people’s consumption choices and the ways in which they spoke and acted around them, were notions of propriety. At its core, propriety related to basic human dignity – to standards of living that were considered within the bounds of decent – or ‘proper’ living. However, as I have shown, a complex of sometimes coherent, sometimes contradictory conceptions constituted the nuances of what was ‘proper’ and what was not. It emerged that it was ‘proper’ not to be poor, or at least to appear to be struggling somewhat effectively against poverty. Furthermore, for most, a lifestyle that emulated modern middle class living and its apparent comforts was considered to be ‘proper’. For some, a respect for that considered to be ‘cultural’<sup>4</sup> or ‘traditional’ was crucial to attaining propriety. Yet these were not

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<sup>4</sup> I use the notion of ‘culture’ here as it was used by the participants in my research and is used in popular convention, namely to refer to ‘traditional’ and ‘non-Western’ items, beliefs, practices. This usage amongst the participants in my research resonated with Ferguson’s experience in Zambia in the 1980s, in which he amusingly described his recurrent sense of finding himself “listening to an out-of-date sociology textbook” (1999:84).

necessarily mutually exclusive positions: some objects and the practices around them could align a homeowner with the middle class, while others displayed alongside them marked associations with ways of being championed as 'traditional'. Living was more proper if your dwelling was electrified than if you relied on non-electrical fuels and appliances, or if you lived in a brick house rather than a shack. In many instances, propriety was imbued with morality, or at least value judgements: a proper wife behaved in a certain manner, a decent woman too; proper parents ensured their children were provided for in a range of ways, good children fulfilled their filial obligations. In other words, the notion evoked a range of meanings, in effect constituting a matrix of ideas of 'properness' which cut across and connected various domains - of taste, of ideal living, of systems of values about personhood, and, importantly, of material culture. Domestic objects or object constellations affirmed, undermined or contested people's propriety within each of these domains.

This co-existent range of notions of propriety – which is throughout, so consistently marked and mediated by things – can constitute a contradiction both within and between individuals. These contradictions were explored in Chapters Four and Five, which demonstrated how people themselves are “internally differentiated subjects” (Moore, 1994:58), complex beings who live with a range of personal, internal, contradictions. Just as Miller (1994, 1995b) pointed out in his discussion of the dualism in identity and lifestyles that cars expressed amongst young Indian men in Trinidad, individuals in Soweto and Lusaka City were seen to espouse forms of propriety that appeared incompatible. For example, on the one hand aspiring to the perceived accoutrements of the middle class and, on the other, appealing to social roles that were nostalgic of 'old' ways of life; or, on the one hand, marking their 'properly' modern citizenship versus, on the other, asserting themselves as a good, 'proper' wives, mothers or daughters. However, through – among other things – their choice and sometimes avoidance of symbolic objects/appliances, and their social practices around these objects – people simply lived with or at times naturalised the contradictions, enabling the contesting images to reside comfortably alongside each other. Their choice of appliances and other objects were, to use Miller's expression, a “means of *enabling* contradiction” (1994:245, emphasis added). Thereby, they

demonstrated their capacity to make sense of and live within the fractious worlds/social spaces they inhabit.

Central here too is the multivalence of appliances (and other objects) themselves. Appliances could (but did not necessarily – depending on an individual's sense of themselves and their place in the world) contain a collection of symbolic meanings that did not cohere. Just as they assuaged their personal, 'internal' contradictions through choices of and actions around objects, people acted through and around this 'symbolic rub' of appliances to obviate the contradictions. In electing to own appliances that are explicit and uncomplicated in their symbolic meaning and either avoiding 'frictional' appliances or acting around them in ways that made clear their personal position, people negotiated their way through both a sense of their own propriety and the complex semiotic associations of the appliances. The instances of washing machines, described in Chapter Five, and coal stoves, described across Chapters Four and Five provided examples of this process.

My discussion in Chapters Four and Five also revealed the sometimes subtle, sometimes conspicuous dissension and debate that arose between individuals over which images, actions and lifestyles were 'proper' and which were not. Concomitantly, these conflicts revealed differing moralities, directly associated with differing notions of propriety. Remember, for example, Tsehla, quoted in Chapter Five, who vehemently disapproved of young women who he felt were inappropriately "modernised", and contrast his perspective with the many others (described at length in Chapter Four) who strove to be 'proper' in exactly the ways that Tsehla rejected; the manner in which parents discussed and sometimes controlled their offsprings' consumption desires and demands; or the way in which both men and women commented on women's 'proper' responsibilities; the resistance of certain people to owning washing machines and/or coal stoves; the refusal of others to consider parting with them: All marked the heterogeneity and flux of propriety as a concept-in-process, and shed light on the negotiations and conversations, mediated by appliances and other things, that happened between people around propriety. These symbolic dialogues, in which both the nature of social and societal forms and expectations, and the nature of appliances were implicitly shaped and debated,

reveal how the struggles that occurred around appliances were not only simple tussles over their use. These everyday tussles were also a pivotal process by which people's perceptions of propriety and proper roles, behaviour and status were defined. Furthermore, the symbolic dialogues I have described affirm and reiterate recent material culture theorists' positions on the conversive, interdependent, engaged (as argued by Weiss, 1996), inseparable (Miller, 1995a) relationship between people and things, that I discussed in the introduction and on which my work here is founded (cf. Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Miller, 1987, 1988, 1995, 1998; Tilley, 1999, Weiss, 1996, Wilk, 1989).

I have explored the flux in notions of propriety that I refer to here most significantly with respect to women's images and people's senses of what constituted 'proper' womanhood. Women's relation to home, to housework, and importantly to particular home appliances, intersected with, mutually provoked, sometimes supported, and sometimes challenged the validity of struggles over a notion of their propriety. As I pointed out in Chapter Five, through action and interaction over and around washing machines and coal stoves, men and women identified dedicated domestic labour as central to women's propriety, but simultaneously negotiated and contested the extent this labour was required for women's definition as 'proper' wives, mothers, sisters and daughters.

It is clear then, that notions of propriety operate at different levels – within individuals, within households, within the neighbourhood or 'community', and in relation to the world 'out there'. I do not wish to imply that these are discrete arenas, but rather that they converge in conversation with each other; they shape, revitalise, sometimes conflict with, each other. Propriety is constantly negotiated and renegotiated, made and unmade (Weiss, 1996). And one of the ways in which this happens is through discourse and practice around energy and appliances.

Of course, these different levels operate as a general principle in all socially constituted living. Soweto and Lusaka City residents highlighted the process because the economic stakes involved in playing with objects is so acute for them. They struggle with a dire lack of material excess with which to play with design and

symbol. In addition to representing a general principle and mode of struggle in the face of commodity capitalism and class-based society, the people in my study followed particular kinds of social and aesthetic patterns in their symbolic play around appliances and household decoration. These have to do with their responses to living in poverty – and to living in the kind and style of poverty that the history of apartheid forced upon them.

I would argue then that people's house equipping and decorating in Soweto and Lusaka City constituted an imaginative creativity that, in response to their experiences of poverty, rejects peripheralisation on a range of levels. By equipping their homes in the ways that I have described, poor residents in these areas refused to capitulate to the category of marginality, both in terms of local exclusion due to their apartheid past, and in terms of the broader global processes of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century world. By consuming various items, objects and appliances considered to be contemporary and 'properly' modern, these residents in Soweto and Lusaka City marked, 'performed' (Ferguson, 1999), demanded their participation in, rather than exclusion from, the wider world.

The sense of possibility, of potential for change, for improved and 'real' integration into the wider world that was displayed by those who participated in my research is interesting when related to Hansen's (1987) and Ferguson's (1999) perspectives on Zambia's experiences in the late 1980s through to the mid-1990s. Both Hansen and Ferguson comment on Zambia's sense of "living at the margins of a complex world that is interpenetrated by global commodity chains and rapid circulation of ideas" (Hansen, 1997:160) In this respect the Zambia's they describe do not differ from those I worked with in Soweto and Lusaka City. As I described in Chapter Four, many expressed – verbally or through their material possessions or desires – their sense of being 'otherwise', of being peripheral to the world 'out there'. However, their consumption practices, among other things, marked their imagined and intended possibilities for living that was integrated, and 'proper'. In contrast, Ferguson and Hansen suggest that the Zambia's with whom they did their research did not experience a comparable sense of potential. The anthropologists contrast slightly with each other, however, in their reading of people's responses to their predicament of peripherality. Hansen, on the one hand, suggests that young people,

at least, have hope for a better future, and that “they want in, they want access, and they reach out [to alternatives] as best they can” (1997:161) albeit from within “an uneasy encounter with modernity” (1997:194). Ferguson, on the other hand, holds a less positive view, and describes Zambian copperbelt mineworkers’ sense of “abjection ... of being thrown aside, expelled, discarded...” (1997:236), of their “disconnection ... [from the] ... ‘new world order’”(1999:238). In other words, Ferguson argues an ever increasing real as well as self-perceived marginality of Zambian aspirants to greater-than-local participation.

Ferguson’s observations raise interesting questions for my work. The difference between his findings and my own observations could be enlightening to explore, especially in the light of the South African government’s current focus on attempting to participate competitively in the global economy, and, at least in theory, to alleviate poverty.

Differences in the historical contexts of each country’s economy alone could potentially be one factor that has shaped past experiences and will continue to shape future experiences of poor people’s sense of inclusion (and possible ‘actual’ inclusion) in the wider world. Zambia was both colonised and industrialised later than South Africa. Moreover, the economy in Zambia was built around a single key resource – that of copper (Ferguson, 1999). By contrast, in South Africa, a range of resources underpins industry, which is further bolstered by a range of secondary industries. The stronger economy that South Africa currently enjoys, partially as a result of this, may provide the resilience that will allow the poor in South Africa to participate (and have a sense of participating) increasingly effectively in processes central to the global world. However, if Ferguson’s well-argued predictions are correct, and a global process of increasing marginalisation, of Africa and Africans in particular, is indeed taking place, the South Africans who participated in my research are quite possibly facing a substantially different future to that which they desire.

A further factor which must surely influence their experiences in the future, is whether the promises made by the no-longer-so-new post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa are not only followed through, but, crucially, are appropriate. Are conditions which will lubricate a continued *sense of possibility* for inclusion, as well

as *real* and *perceived* integration, being enabled? For example, vocal debate is currently occurring over whether the South African government's policies are in fact alleviating poverty as they claim to do, or whether they are instead simply bolstering a (black) middle class at the expense of the country's poor, and thereby are increasing, rather than decreasing, divisions of internal inequality<sup>5</sup>.

Particularly in the light of Ferguson's important work, these questions about people's changing (or unchanging) experiences of poverty are a pertinent avenue for further research.

Whatever the explanation for Soweto and Lusaka City residents' sense of possibility, I have shown how their domestic objects – even if not strictly functional – created an imaginative reach into other sorts of living, more specifically those sorts of living envisioned as 'proper', as dignified. I have revealed how some objects housed a memory of the past, how others expressed anxieties about the present, while masking some of the difficulties of the everyday (and how the very need to conceal these difficulties, often exacerbated them). Furthermore, I have shown how objects expressed and generated visions of a better future. Some of these visions were realisable, and indeed were sometimes actualised; others were knowingly represented as fantasies – but objects and object constellations represented the only way to instantiate them. People both masked and managed, sometimes transformed their struggles of the everyday, of their 'financial embarrassment' and its legacies, through the semiotics of their things, the stories and meanings they both implied and created.

Propriety is thus a concept, a discourse, a set of values that is continually being reworked in relation to the historical contingencies of the local moment (which impinge upon the lives and belief systems of people) and within the texture of particular relationships among individuals (within their families/ extended families/ households/ generations/ across generations, and so on). Its meaning and expression is reworked in the very process of its use. It is employed by those who

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, 'Empowerment fails blacks – Ramaphosa', Mail&Guardian, 14.09.2000; 'Change slow for ordinary person', Malcolm Ray, Sunday Independent, 18.12.1999; 'Little Charity for the Poor and Jobless', Editorial, Mail&Guardian, 25.02.2000; 'SA's tragic leap to the Right', John Saul, Mail&Guardian, 27.06.2000.

care about it when they want to account for, shape, or contest the practices of those around them or of themselves.

Moreover, in the contexts of poverty that I have described in Soweto and Lusaka City, notions of propriety were a central organising principle for the ways in which people both made sense of and 'lived' their lives. Bearing this in mind, and remembering my discussion relating to Ferguson's (1999) predictions for Africa earlier, it is interesting to consider that the national government in South Africa define poverty simply in terms of a lack of income (Cape Metropolitan Council, 1999; May, 2000). This exceptionally narrow approach fails to take into account the range of social, political, environmental and spatial (CMC, 1999) experiences of the poor, and in particular their experiences of marginalisation in these arenas. The State's approach lacks a sensitivity to human agency, perception and experience, some elements of which I have explored in the course of this dissertation. And without which, the State's poverty alleviation strategies are likely to be at the very least, lacking in important nuance, but furthermore possibly ill-informed and misdirected. (See Bank (1999a) for a similar critique of South African energy policy).

I thus conclude with a call for ethnographic work in the social sciences, and for the greater emphasis on the use of practice theory in the anthropology of objects and, crucially, in the anthropology of poverty. Promulgated by theorists such as Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1979), Sahlins (1981) and Ortner (1984) among others, practice theory argues the importance of an agent-centred approach to the study of social settings and social systems.

In what I would argue is a complementary approach, Appadurai points out how it is not sufficient to consider objects in isolation. Rather, it is crucial to consider how people use them, what people do with them, how they act around them. "Things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations endow them with", he argues (1986:5). Moore (1994:74) suggests along similar lines that "meaning does not inhere in symbols, but must be invested in and interpreted from symbols by acting social beings". It is at this point that I would argue an agent-centred approach to research and a semiological approach intersect productively. A consideration of the ways people act and interact with and around

things, and the meanings with which things become invested (and disinvested), in conjunction with attempts to access and learn about people's experiences in, and understandings of, their worlds, can be an illuminating and important process.

In the case of appliances in the contexts of poverty I have described, I have attempted to show how people put them to use in a variety of ways, some more subtle than others. Most obviously, appliances are utilised for fundamental pragmatic purposes – in the course of cooking, heating, ironing, washing, and so on. In addition, appliances are put to social uses – such as sustaining particular relationships through loan systems (including family and rotating credit groups, for example), and keeping kids at home and off the street. And thirdly – and this has been the core focus of my work – appliances are used to semiotic ends, in this case in the marking and maintenance of propriety, of 'proper' living, 'proper' values, 'proper' personhood. In other words, to understand things, commodities, appliances, they must be considered not simply as objects in themselves, but linked into ever-changing social and political processes. It is through these processes that they are given meaning, implicating them in the self-same processes of which people who use, envy and reject them are also a part. Therein, lies their efficacy.

In order to access these meanings, processes and, in the case of my work here, people's apparently excessive spending of scarce resources on 'badly used', 'high-end' appliances and other domestic objects while staring in the face of disastrous consequences, fieldwork which embarks on understanding the ways in which people construct, engage with and make sense of their world is imperative.<sup>6</sup> My heavily ethnographic focus throughout this dissertation is thus intentional. It was only through close examination of people's lives, thoughts, symbols and practices that, I would argue, it was possible to begin to appreciate people's priorities, experiences and sense of themselves in their world. That I chose to enter their lives using objects as a conduit was but one of many possible approaches, one that provides a particular slant that I believe is illuminating, but need not be more effective than others.

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Taylor argues similarly for a practice theory approach to the study of music technology and the internet in his forthcoming "Strange Sounds: Music, Technology and Culture in the postwar Era (pers. comm, Louise Meintjes, Sept 2000).

Importantly, however, I argue that in order to pursue a more nuanced understanding of people's experiences of poverty, it is crucial to integrate ethnographic approaches and interpretive qualitative approaches into social science research. In this way, it is possible to achieve a perspective that goes beyond conceptualising poverty in the limited terms of scarce resources that I described of the South African government above, and enters people's meanings and interpretations of their world.

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## **Appendix A: Detailed Household Demographics**

The following tables illustrate the basic social and domestic features of each of the households included in the original sample of each settlement for the Energy research project. Details of interviewed households resident in Mzimhlope formal houses, the backyard shacks and in Powa Park were those ascertained during a questionnaire survey in August 1995. The details of households in Lusaka City were ascertained in July 1997. Note that there is less information represented on the Lusaka City table because a detailed household survey was not undertaken there. The second half of each table (marked off by broader column grid-line) represents the relevant details of households researched by my co-researcher, Tebogo Mafokoane. They are included because I draw on the quantitative information she collected from them (including their appliance ownership in particular) in the course of the thesis.

**Table 13. BASIC SOCIAL AND DOMESTIC FEATURES OF SAMPLED MZIMHLOPE FORMAL HOUSEHOLDS (August 1995):**

Household	Kgaje	Mawasha	Mdamiso	Modise	Moeng	Mosinyi	Phala	Zwane	Legoale	Makunyane	Masina	Mbuli	Ngwenya	Tabane	Tshehla
Ages of women <sup>i</sup>	33	42, 31,28	59, 53, 30, 25, 21	64, 31	62	48,25, 22	47, 38, 19, 22	42	79,29	42,25,23	51	39	79,53,43	85,59, 55,51,	59,31
Ages of men <sup>i</sup>	35	54, 29	46, 23, 55	84, 35, 32	61	60, 23, 18	48, 21	56, 21	40,25, 23,24	26,22,19	31	42	32,30,30, 24	34,31	23,19
Ages of children <sup>i</sup>	16, 10, 3, <1	10, 6	4, 2	3		7, 2	17, 15, 7, 10, 1, 10	14, 10	16	17,11,4,5	16,12	16,13	16,11,11	15,14,9, 4,10,8,1 2,10, <1	15,6
Total no. in household <sup>ii</sup>	5	7	10	6	2	8	12	5	7	10	4	4	10	15	6
Approximate total household income/ month <sup>iii</sup>	R460	unknown	R1800+	R1420	R820	unknown	R2144	unknown	R410	R5100	R440	R1220+	R410+	R410+	R1840+
Gender of earners + income source <sup>iv</sup>	M=inf Rent	M+F= inf	F=perm F=pce F=inf M=perm Rent	M=pens F=pens F=perm	M=pens F=pens	M=pens F=perm	F=perm F=pens M=pce Rent	F=inf M=inf	F=pens	F=perm F=perm M=perm M=perm	F=pce Rent	F=perm M=pens Rent	F=pens F=perm	F=pens M=perm M=perm M=perm	F=perm F=perm M=perm Rent
Split economic commitments <sup>v</sup>	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No

**Notes:**

- i. A **bolded** number indicates that the household member was resident in the household at the time of the survey.  
A *italicised* number indicates that the household member is a recipient of some income earned by household earners but was not resident in the household at the time of the survey.  
? indicates a person of whose specific age is unknown but who is known to be a recipient of some of the income earned by household earners.
- ii. All members of the household are included in this tally, whether they were resident in the sampled area at the time of the survey or were living elsewhere.
- iii. + indicates that income each month is at least as much as the amount cited. Usually in these cases, salary for fixed employment is known and recorded, but member/s of the household are also engaged in informal or piece work contributing to the overall income of the household. Amounts earned from these forms of income-earning are difficult to quantify because earnings tend to be erratic and fluctuating.
- iv. Abbreviations used in this category are as follows:  
perm = formal (full time or part time) permanent employment for which a regular salary is received.  
Inf = informal sector activity  
pens = state pension or other state-provided welfare grant  
pce = piece work (irregular temporary work)
- v. By 'split economic commitments' I refer to households which have a financial responsibility to children living elsewhere.

**Table 14. BASIC SOCIAL AND DOMESTIC FEATURES OF SAMPLED HOUSEHOLDS IN MZIMHLOPE BACKYARDS (August 1995):**

Household name:	Lekokotl a	Mahlasela	Mogo- shane	Mohamme	Sello	Setsana	Xaba	Mangadi	Ndabambi	Ndlovu	Ngo- bese	Noma- chaka	Selolo	Sotashe	Tshaba- lala
Ages of women <sup>i</sup>	27	20	41, 20	26	45, 19, 25	22	24	51	19	32	44, 19	30	45, 38	25	
Ages of men <sup>i</sup>	37		38	33	46, 20	31	25	47	29	?	?	35	46, 21, 21	35	25, 23, 23
Ages of children <sup>i</sup>	4, 1		14, 9, 3		16	1	2		3, 1		11	9, 5	16, 14, 11, 8		
Total no. in household <sup>ii</sup>	4	1	6	2	6	3	3	2	4	2	4	4	11	2	3
Approximate total household income/ month <sup>iii</sup>	R740	R150	R750	R950	+R1040	R1200	R480	unknown	R150	R1240	none	R1800	R1990	R873	R1710+
Gender of earners + income source <sup>iv</sup>	M=perm	allowance from parents	F=inf	M=perm F=pce	M=perm F=inf	M=perm	M=perm	M=perm	M=perm	M=perm		M=perm	M=perm M=perm F=perm	M=perm	M=perm M=perm M=perm
Split economic commitments <sup>v</sup>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

**Notes:**

- i. A **bolded** number indicates that the household member was resident in the household at the time of the survey. A *italicised* number indicates that the household member is a recipient of some income earned by household earners but was not resident in the household at the time of the survey. ? indicates a person of whose specific age is unknown but who is known to be a recipient of some of the income earned by household earners.
- ii. All members of the household are included in this tally, whether they were resident in the sampled area at the time of the survey or were living elsewhere.
- iii. + indicates that income each month is at least as much as the amount cited. Usually in these cases, salary for fixed employment is known and recorded, but member/s of the household are also engaged in informal or piece work contributing to the overall income of the household. Amounts earned from these forms of income-earning are difficult to quantify because earnings tend to be erratic and fluctuating.
- iv. Abbreviations used in this category are as follows:  
perm = formal (full time or part time) permanent employment for which a regular salary is received.  
Inf = informal sector activity  
pens = state pension or other state-provided welfare grant  
pce = piece work (irregular temporary work)
- v. By 'split economic commitments' I refer to households which have a financial responsibility to children living elsewhere.

**Table 15. BASIC SOCIAL AND DOMESTIC FEATURES OF SAMPLED POWA PARK HOUSEHOLDS (August 1995) :**

Household name:	Dinile	Gana	Kolobile	Maphanga	Mdingi	Nyati	Qalase	Radebe	Siqwana	Gqirana	Matsetse	Matyolwana	Mboxo	Mofo-keng	Nyanga
Ages of women <sup>i</sup>	23	29	37, 18	36,25, 19	32, 49	37	46, 34, 31	30	34	46	47	43	43	31	27
Ages of men <sup>i</sup>	46	40			58	45		33	35	54,23,25	24,21,18	?	48,21,18		35
Ages of children <sup>i</sup>	14, 11	5, <1	11, 14, 7,2		?, ?, ?, ?,?	12, 10, <1, 15	6, 2, ?	2, <1	10	12,9,4	11,6	?,16	14,10	12	9,7,2
Total no. in household <sup>ii</sup>	4	4	6	3	8	6	6	4	3	8	6	4	6	2	5
Approximate total household income/ month <sup>iii</sup>	R2334+	R1800	none	unknown	R1250+	R2000	R1000	very irregular, unknown	R2000	R1500	R150	R118	unknown	unknown	unknown
Gender of earners + income source <sup>iv</sup>	M=perm inf F= perm	M=perm m F=inf		F=pce F=perm	M=perm F=inf	M=perm m F=inf	F=perm	M=inf	M=perm	M=perm	F=pce	F=inf	M=pce	F=pce	M=perm
Split economic commitments <sup>v</sup>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Note:**

- i. A **bolded** number indicates that the household member was resident in the household at the time of the survey.  
A *italicised* number indicates that the household member is a recipient of some income earned by household earners but was not resident in the household at the time of the survey.  
? indicates a person of whose specific age is unknown but who is known to be a recipient of some of the income earned by household earners.
- ii. All members of the household are included in this tally, whether they were resident in the sampled area at the time of the survey or were living elsewhere.
- iii. + indicates that income each month is at least as much as the amount cited. Usually in these cases, salary for fixed employment is known and recorded, but member/s of the household are also engaged in informal or piece work contributing to the overall income of the household. Amounts earned from these forms of income-earning are difficult to quantify because earnings tend to be erratic and fluctuating.
- iv. Abbreviations used in this category are as follows:  
perm = formal (full time or part time) permanent employment for which a regular salary is received.  
Inf = informal sector activity  
pens = state pension or other state-provided welfare grant  
pce = piece work (irregular temporary work)
- v. By 'split economic commitments' I refer to households which have a financial responsibility to children living elsewhere.

**Table 16. BASIC SOCIAL AND DOMESTIC FEATURES OF SAMPLED HOUSEHOLDS IN LUSAKA CITY HOUSEHOLDS (July 1997):**

Household name:	Sangweni	Malinga	Mbijekana	Ngema	Makeke 1	Kettlele	Mbokazi	Ngoma	Ngcobo	Makeke 2
Ages of women <sup>i</sup>	30	29	28	35	<b>35, 49</b>	22	30	30	33	23
Ages of men <sup>i</sup>	29	34	39	39	<b>66, 40</b>	33	33	36	41	35
Ages of children <sup>i</sup>	11, 9, 6		0	15, 12, 7, 5	14	1	3, 2	8, 3	13	1
Total no. in household <sup>ii</sup>	5	2	3	6	4	3	4	4	3	3
Split economic commitments <sup>iii</sup>	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

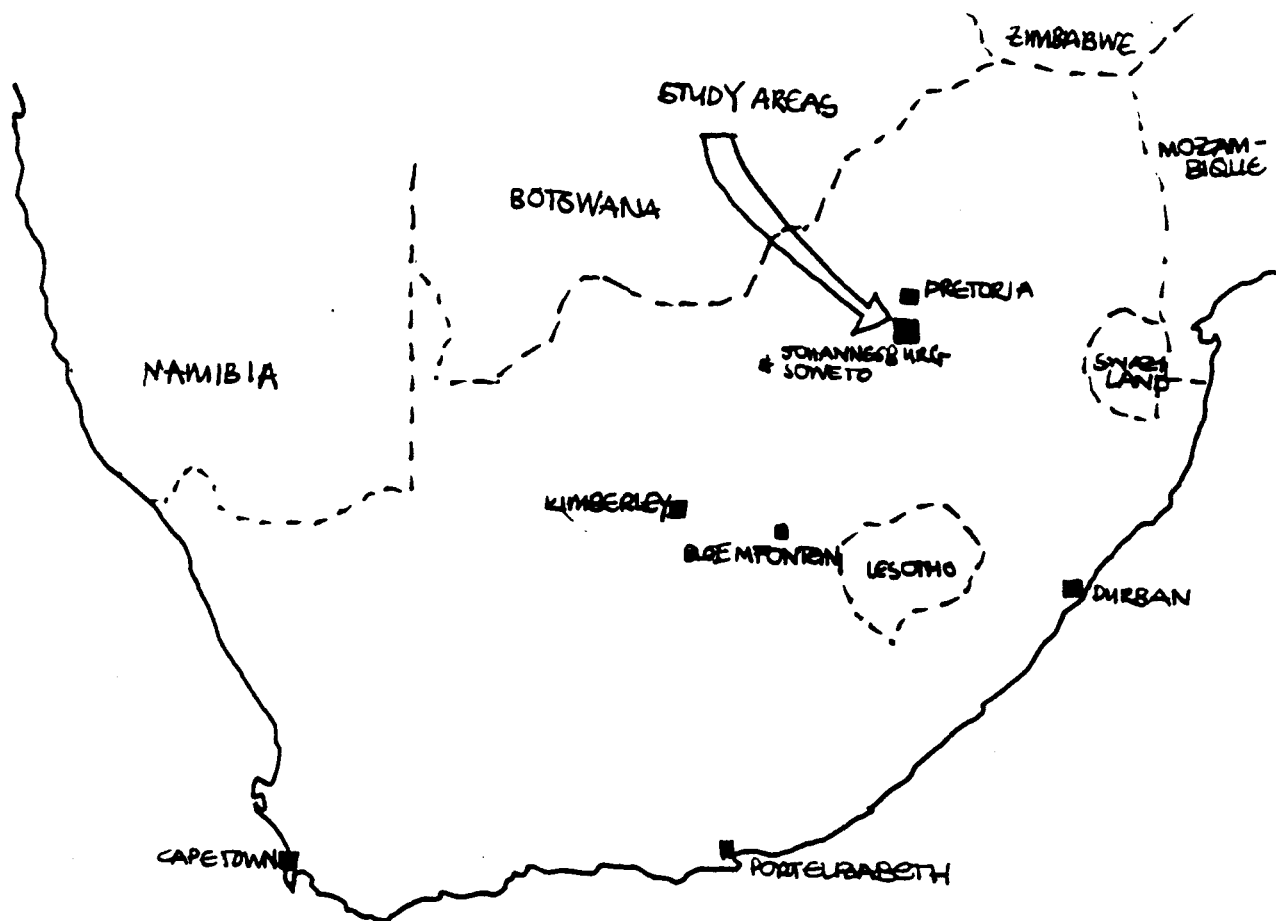
Household name:	Dlamini	Mabaso	Dlalisa	Mkhwebula	Mampho	Matshetsi	Thibedi	Msibi	Lekhuttle	Matendz e
Ages of women <sup>i</sup>	?	?, ?	25	26	30+	24		22	32	37
Ages of men <sup>i</sup>	?, ?		26	21	30+	26, 23	30	28	35	41
Ages of children <sup>i</sup>	?, ?	?, ?		6	12, 0	<1, 3		1		6, ? , ? , ? , ?
Total no. in household <sup>ii</sup>	5	4	2	3	4	5	1	3	2	8
Split economic commitments <sup>iii</sup>	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes

**Notes:**

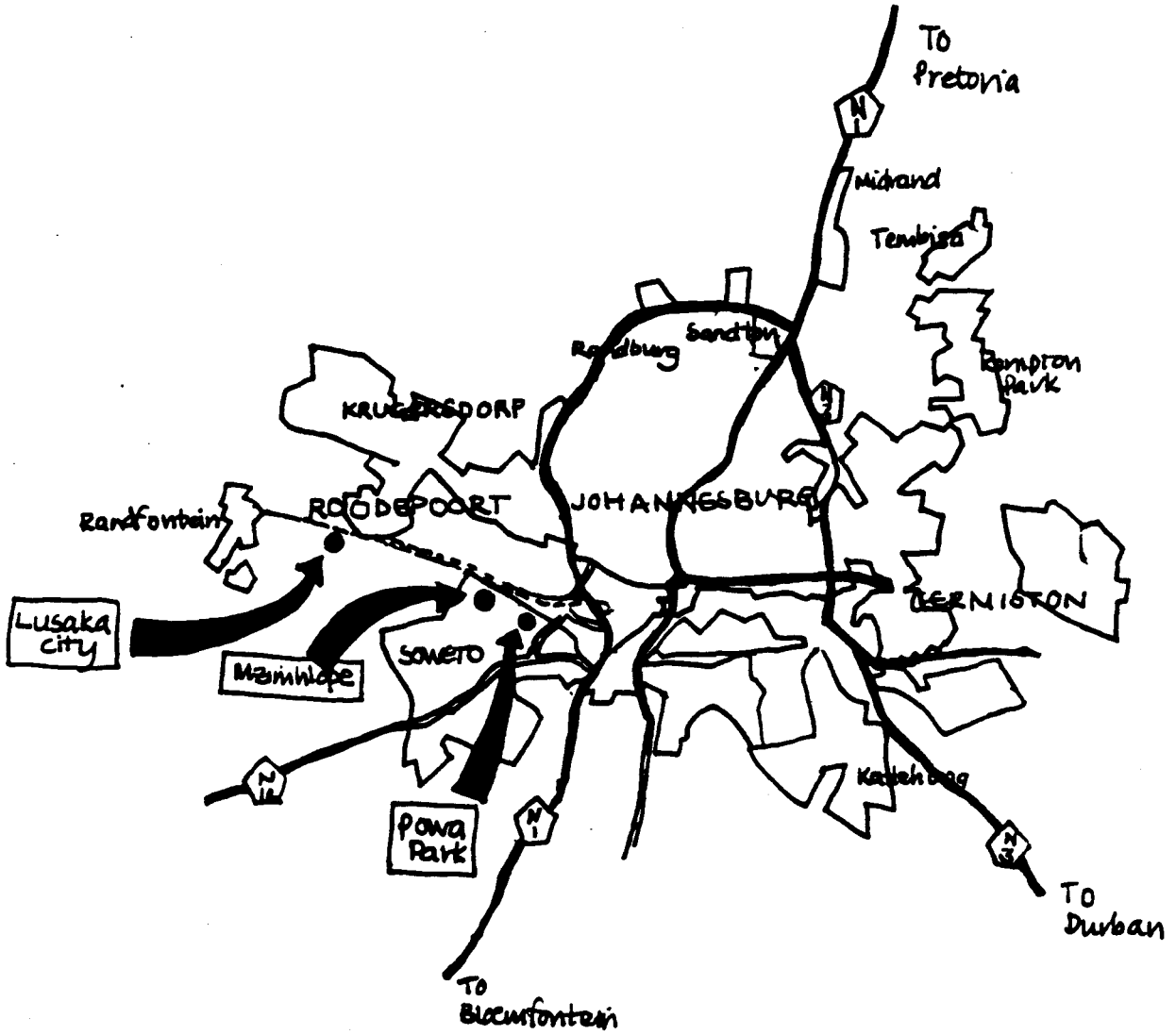
- i. A **bolded** number indicates that the household member was resident in the household at the time of the survey.  
A *italicised* number indicates that the household member is a recipient of some income earned by household earners but was not resident in the household at the time of the survey.  
? indicates a person of whose specific age is unknown but who is known to be a recipient of some of the income earned by household earners.
- ii. All members of the household are included in this tally, whether they were resident in the sampled area at the time of the survey or were living elsewhere.
- iii. By 'split economic commitments' I refer to households which have a financial responsibility to children living elsewhere.

## Appendix B: Maps of the Study Areas

### 1. Location of Study areas in relation to the rest of South Africa



## 2. Study Areas in relation to each other and to Johannesburg



## Appendix C: Glossary

Umkhukhu	Zulu word referring to shack structure
'matchbox'	Colloquialism referring to the tiny rectangular houses built en masse during the 1950s and '60s to house urban africans.
Hok	Literally meaning a 'cage' in Afrikaans, but also used to refer to shack constructions, usually those built in back yards rather than free-standing areas.
Spaza	A small general dealer, usually run from home premises, selling household supplies
Stokvel	A rotating credit association
Shebeen	A local (usually unlicensed) drinking spot, commonly run from home premises
Samp	A roughly pounded maize porridge, popular staple
Morogo/imifino	Mix of leafy plants (such as pumpkin and blackjack leaves) often collected from the wild.
Mielie	Maize
Pap	A staple dish, a stiff corn-based porridge
Amahewu	Home-brewed maize and yeast beer
Smilies	Slang referring to cooked sheep heads
Quarters	A popular meal consisting of a loaf of bread, hollowed out, and filled with other foodstuffs
Atchar	A spicy pickled vegetable relish
Madala	A term used to refer to, or address, old men, literally meaning 'old person' in Nguni languages.
Gogo	Zulu word meaning grandmother, but used to address old women in general, not only kin.
Umakoti	Zulu word for daughter-in-law, used across languages
Tsotsi	Ruffians/rascals, in street talk
Skorokoro	Slang referring to an old and dilapidated car

Mahala	A sotho expression, meaning “for free”, “for nothing”, widely used
Mbawula	A coal burning brazier, made from a tin punctured with holes.
Bathi	A children’s game, played with stones and tins
Bakkie	A small pick up truck.
SANCO	South African National Civics Organisation
ANC	African National Congress
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
SARA	South African Residents Association