‘WASHING MACHINES MAKE LAZY WOMEN’

Domestic Appliances and the Negotiation of Women’s Propriety in Soweto

◆ **HELEN MEINTJES**

University of Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

This article explores the multiple symbolic associations of two domestic appliances – the washing machine and the coal stove – in a neighbourhood in Soweto, South Africa, and examines the ways in which these appliances as symbolic objects are integral in the construction and negotiation of women’s ‘proper’ roles and relations. The (in some cases incoherent) multivalence of the appliances sets them up as ideal sites for contestation over the definition of desirable gender roles and identity. An examination of people’s attitudes towards, and actions around, these two appliances is thus revealing of their own notions of gender propriety.

Key Words ◆ domestic appliances ◆ gender roles ◆ ‘proper’ womanhood ◆ Soweto ◆ symbolic meaning

> 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

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objects that play important roles in the structuring and perhaps changing of women's and men's experiences of everyday life.' As she suggests, 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, historians of technology, in particular, have pointed out a hiatus in the social sciences' consideration of appliances in terms of their semiotic and social role (Lubar, 1996; Oldenziel, 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 prioritization 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, 1983, 1985; Ormrod, 1994).[1]

Thus in this article, I aim to consider Hansen's proposition further, by exploring how gender and generational relations within low-income households in Mzimhlope, a neighbourhood of Soweto, South Africa, are shaped and negotiated in interactions around certain domestic 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 (Miller, 1994, 1995, 1998; Tilley, 1999; Weiss, 1996) 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 article with a discussion of the attitudes towards washing machines vocalized by residents of Mzimhlope, 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 a symbol in ongoing intergenerational contestation over appropriate gender roles.

I briefly demonstrate and draw upon a notion of symbolic rub, by which I refer to the friction, the incoherence, between the various

symbolic meanings with which objects are imbued. My intention in this respect is to explore some of the ways in which Mzimhlope residents' senses of self and others are fashioned by domestic appliances around them, and to think about the way people act with and around the multivalence of these appliances in their multiple strategies towards defining themselves and others.

The neighbourhood of Mzimhlope is a segment of Orlando West, a part of Soweto built in the mid-1940s as one of many experiments in low-cost mass housing in Soweto (Venables,1948; White et al., 1998), and consisting of row upon uniform row of tightly packed pre-cast concrete semi-detached houses, colloquially known as 'matchboxes' in reference to their minute size (approximately 40 m^2). In most instances, the two tiny bedrooms and a kitchen-cum-living space that comprised the original 'matchbox' have been further divided by a wall separating the kitchen from a living room. Generations of occupant families have slowly carried out alterations and improvements, and accumulated domestic furnishings, equipment and decorations, commonly by entering into high-interest long-term 'hire-purchase' payment agreements. Corrugated-iron shack structures have been built in the back yards of many of the houses, to accommodate an overspill of household members or to rent out to tenants as a means to income. Although the neighbourhood was not originally electrified (a situation to which the large numbers of old coal stoves still to be found filling many kitchen spaces bears testimony), electrical reticulation was eventually installed after 1976. The material that I present in this article is drawn from my research with residents of 59 of the 'matchbox' houses in this neighbourhood between 1995 and 1998. In 1995, their average household income was less than R900 per month (approximately £78 per month), with a rough per capita income of R150 per month (£13).

A QUESTION OF PROPRIETY: WASHING MACHINES AS GENDERED SYMBOL

The households documented contained a wide range of electrical appliances. In most, 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. Giant double-door refrigerator-freezers towered over tiny kitchens, hi-fis sporting all the available bells and whistles took their place in wall-units, large televisions blared American soap opera melodrama daily. In the light of this, there existed one glaring exception: virtually no labour-saving domestic cleansing appliances were owned. Amongst the 59 households studied, only 8 washing machines, 4 geysers, 5 urns, 2 vacuum cleaners and 3 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. Consider the Ngcobos, for example, who refurbished their house with all that opens and shuts, shimmers or shines, chops, blends, heats, cools, bakes, boils, and entertains.

1. The Ngcobos; Everything but Electrical Domestic Assistance

From the inside, the Ngcobos' home was barely recognizable as one of the original Soweto 'matchbox' houses. Thandi, 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 20th 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 Ngcobo 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 Thandi 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', Thandi 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.

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? Thandi Ngcobo smiled at my surprise. Most of the laundry, she said, was done by a woman who lives down the road. She charged R40 (± 35p) per garbage bag of washing. The children's clothes were washed by hand, by Thandi. '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]', Angelina complained. 'Exactly!' Tebogo, a 25-year-old man, responded firmly, 'washing machines [make] lazy women. Our culture doesn't allow for washing machines.' Tebogo presented a patriarchal notion of the 'proper' role of African women as hard-working 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 Tsepo, 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 'modernized' too much'. Grandmother Betty was not entirely correct when she retorted in response to these two that 'They're men, that's why they say that'. Tebogo's and Tsepo's sentiments were certainly not held only by men. Joyce, mother of three and gentle grandmother to four-year-old Lebo, for example, agreed wholeheartedly with them. Pointing with disdain at the

carefully manicured and painted fingernails of her young woman friend sitting alongside her, she asserted that 'I won't have a *makoti* [daughter-in-law] with long nails like that. Why? Because she is lazy!' Soft well kept hands, Joyce implied, suggest to others that a woman does not do her washing by hand, and most likely does little else around the house either. Joyce'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 most of the drudgery of domestic tasks in her new home (Magona, 1999; Mathabane, 1994). Joyce'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. Attitudes towards washing machines were not split cleanly along generational lines: contrary to Tsepo'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 reveals 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 that 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.[2] 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 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[3]. Sinah, who laboured daily over a tub of her baby's nappies, and longed for a washing machine to assist with this task, said 'Washing machines save time. It's three in one: washing, rinsing and wringing'. She muttered with infuriation at Tsepo and Tebogo'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 15, 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, Nonhlanhla, laughed at Tebogo'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 Nonhlanhla, mentioned earlier) 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 house-owners' integration into a modern, consuming, 20th-century world.

WASHING MACHINES AS 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. In the process of developing multiple biographies, fields of what I choose to label semiotic friction can arise around objects. In other words, the various symbolic meanings with which objects are imbued do not necessarily cohere. The symbolic associations of the objects can operate in opposition to one another, resulting in a process of 'symbolic rubbing' that charges objects with a potency greater than they would have were their meanings uncontested. It is in part because these meanings/biographies rub against one another, that Sowetan residents cannot ignore them in the process of negotiating and marking their personhoods. Washing machines in Mzimhlope emerged as one such object.

Consider the choices and actions of the Mtimkhulus mentioned here, which provide a vivid example of how people converse with and act around the incoherent symbolic meanings that objects can develop, thereby demonstrating the enduring nature of 'proper' gender roles in Mzimhlope.

2. THE MTIMKHULU'S LAUNDRY ARRANGEMENTS

Eunice Mtimkhulu, 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 Eunice'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 small hair salon in Diepkloof, and employed one of her nephews to help her. Agnes was employed full time at a major insurance company as a general assistant. To augment their incomes and her pension, Eunice ran a *spaza* – a small general store selling basic household supplies – from the back yard.

> In 1995 Eunice Mtimkhulu set about renovating and refurbishing her 'matchbox' house. She built two bedrooms, one for each of her adult daughters, and the *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.
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> When I met Eunice, 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 toasted-sandwich 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 Eunice's adult and working daughters. (She noted, for example, how they had owned a 'very good two-plate [electric stove]' before her offspring replaced it with a fancy stove).
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> 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', Eunice said of these basins, 'you can wash one side, rinse the other!'

In this case, the Mtimkhulus 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 Mtimkhulus 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 processes of semiotic friction centred on 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 Ngcobo household described earlier chose a different approach to the Mtimkhulus 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 Mtimkhulu and Ngcobo households demonstrated their subscription to the normative criteria of 'good' women through their daily practice, and also ensured that their womanhood was not undermined by the presence of a machine in their homes.

GENDER AND GENERATION: COAL STOVES AND CONTESTATION

Whilst most women I encountered in Mzimhlope 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. Opinions about owning the appliance were more polarized, on the whole between elderly and younger women. Of the 59 households, 34 (58%) in the formal housing sample from Mzimhlope owned large coal stoves, most of which were kept in the kitchens of these houses. The majority of these were inherited from the parents or grandparents of the current household members.[4] Most younger[5] 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!'[6] exclaimed Sobahle with vigour, 'coal

stoves make too much smoke in the house. And that makes a lot of work!' In addition, many commented that these non-electric stoves are 'old fashioned', appliances that are found in houses stuck in the past, not homes moving into the future. Furthermore, for many young people, coal stoves were imbued with symbolic associations of old times, of bad old times of apartheid, when black people's poverty and marginalization was institutionalized by law in South Africa, and electricity wasn't deemed by the state as a necessary service in African townships.[7]

Pensioner grandmothers and mothers, however, on the whole 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 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 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 Betty, 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, 'it's not the same [using electricity]'. Rose 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. 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.[8] Muttered Eunice, 'The children don't want to touch coal . . . they must have plastic [bags] over their hands so they don't spoil their nails!' Jeanette agreed, explaining to me that 'these children, they don't know what it was like before. These white [enamel-coated] stoves are easy to clean. You should see with the old black [cast-iron] ones. You must scrub and boot polish. Yo! It was a lot of work! Now all you need is Handy Andy [a popular brand of ammonia-based cleaning agent].' So, according to Jeanette, 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 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 Eunice, '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, Tshidi 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 utilization 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 characterize 'lazy' women. Yet coal stoves were being jettisoned by some of these selfsame 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 symbolize 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 quoted earlier, 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. When she asserted that coal stoves simply 'make *too much* work', 25-year-old Rachel echoed the views of many other women. They lock women into a role of hard domestic labour that these younger women considered to be excessive. Rachel 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 amongst these Mzimhlope residents with each of the 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 processes of symbolic rub.

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 in Mzimhlope, 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.

Thus each appliance became loaded with meaning – through juxtaposition of symbols, and through the processes of rubbing that occur as a result. And it is through manoeuvres around and in interaction with the multivalence of these appliances that women in Mzimhlope acted to define themselves and others.

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. 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 the multi-generational households prevalent in Mzimhlope, 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 prioritized by men over appliances that would alleviate some of the domestic workload that women faced. I would postulate similarly (and indeed my data seem 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.

CONCLUSION

The symbolic dialogues that I have described here reiterate and affirm recent material culture theorists' positions on the conversive, interdependent, engaged (as argued by Weiss, 1996), inseparable (Miller, 1995) relationship between people and things, while providing an insight into a specific set of negotiations around the constitution of women's propriety in Mzimhlope in Soweto.

The two domestic appliances – the washing machine and the coal stove – were integral to the construction and negotiation of people's gender relations and identities in Mzimhlope. In a context where for many, women's propriety was seen to be located in their dedicated commitment to domestic tasks, the washing machine emerged as a powerful symbol of laziness, and was rejected by most on the grounds that it undermined their image as 'good' women or as the men related to such women. The coal stove provided an interesting corollary as an appliance associated with hard work, but considered by many young women, in particular, to be excessively so. Many of these young women rejected it (in the midst of consternation and disapproval from the older generation) in a challenge to the extent of domestic labour necessary for the definition of 'good' and 'proper' womanhood. This sometimes subtle, sometimes conspicuous dissension and debate that arose between individuals over the appliances – and concomitantly, which images, actions and roles were appropriate for women and which were not – marks the heterogeneity and flux of women's propriety as a concept-in-process, as a

concept of which the meaning and expression is continually being reworked in the process of its use.

The multiple symbolic associations of each appliance manifested as a site of creativity and reflexivity in which women worked with, around and against the multivalence, the incoherence, the interplay of the symbols in their searching for comfortable (or contesting uncomfortable) personal associations. In some instances, like that of the Mtimkhulu household, a semiotic friction pitting good womanhood against modern living and upward mobility was in effect made neutral by women's actions around the washing machine. In others, like the Ngcobos, the discomfort of the machine was avoided altogether and alternatives found. Importantly, the appliances' multivalencies resonated differently for different people – what for some was an uncomfortable contradiction was 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. Whatever the case, women were revealed to live with or at times naturalize the contradictions, enabling the contesting images to reside comfortably alongside each other, and demonstrating women's capacity to make sense of and live within the fractious social spaces they inhabit.

Thus, conspicuous by their presence – or their absence – in a Mzimhlope home, washing machines and coal stoves produced and reinforced both experiences and images of gender roles and relations. Furthermore, 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.

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Notes

1. There are of course a few exceptions. In particular, Silverstone 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 (1992) by Cockburn, Haddon, Hartman and Gray, Hirsch and Morley, Livingstone, Miller, Murdoch, Silverstone, Wheelock. See also Bowden and Offer (1996) for a consideration of the reasons behind the slow take-up of household appliances in inter-war England.

2. See Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988), Bozzoli (1991), Mathabane (1994) for corroborative evidence.

3. I discuss the notion of electric appliances as symbolic markers of modern living in more detail elsewhere (Meintjes, 2000).

4. 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.

5. I use this category loosely, to refer to both teenage and older, working-age women.

6. A common expression of emphasis.

7. In an incomplete manuscript, Spiegel (n.d.) quotes Victor Raynal, chief distribution engineer in the Johannesburg municipal electricity provider 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 that were provided were those that were payable.

8. 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.

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◆ **HELEN MEINTJES** is a researcher in the HIV/AIDS unit at the Childrens Institute at the University of Cape Town. Her recent research was concerned with notions of belonging, home and propriety amongst migrant women living in an informal settlement in Cape Town. *Address*: The Childrens Institute, University of Cape Town, 46 Sawkins Road, Rondebosch, 7700, Cape Town, South Africa. [email: hmeintjes@yahoo.com]