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Electricity and the Changing Contours of Masculinity in Los Angeles, 1900–1930

Résumé
L'électrification des foyers à Los Angeles ouvre une fenêtre pour l'étude du changement des contours de la masculinité entre 1900 et 1930. En examinant le matériel publicitaire des deux principales compagnies d'électricité de Los Angeles (la Southern California Edison Company et le Bureau municipal de l'électricité et de la lumière), cet article examine dans quelle mesure la notion de masculinité est devenue de plus en plus complexe, multidimensionnelle et contradictoire avec l'avènement de l'électrification des foyers. En s'appuyant sur l'histoire de la technologie et du genre, ainsi que sur l'histoire urbaine, il souligne la constitution mutuelle des infrastructures énergétiques dans les espaces domestiques et les identités sociales de ses consommateurs.

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INTRODUCTION

1 Busy Buttons was not a real person. He was a character in a brochure that the Southern California Edison Company (SCEC) published in 1925. "The Story of Busy Buttons" presents a narrative of stunning urban growth in the once-tiny Spanish pueblo called El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles, whose growth was facilitated by the provision of water and electricity. The narrative aimed to familiarize readers with the significance of hydro-generated electricity for urban and industrial growth in Los Angeles. One year before publication, Los Angeles had crossed the threshold of 1 million residents, and this gave SCEC a reason to highlight electricity's importance for the growing city. Providing a short sketch of Los Angeles' history, the brochure claimed that the region needed water, transportation facilities, and electric power to grow. It detailed how Busy Buttons:

> scurried around, way back into the High Sierras, where the water was, and he found power there, too, for water was power in the rough. [...] And pretty soon all that tumbling water, or most of it, high up in the mountains, was put in harness, and the power it produced was brought miles and miles down into the valleys where people needed it, to pump water, and turn wheels, and do chores for them. That was the start of [t]he Southern California Edison Company, which is Busy Buttons, and the beginning of [...] that wonderful community prosperity which the whole world admires and envies.[1]

2 These lines from "The Story of Busy Buttons" are a good starting point from which to consider the nexus of technology, gender, and the far American West (fig. 1).

3 Bursting with self-confidence, the brochure celebrated the electrification of Southern California as a feat of engineering and as the clearest

Figure 1: "The Story of Busy Buttons" (Los Angeles: Southern California Edison Company, 1925). Source: The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, Southern California Edison Company Records, Box 323, Folder 9.

indicator of Los Angeles' modernity.[2] Not only were Busy Buttons' tales a story of urbanization in an inhospitable land ("How the Desert Became a Paradise and What Busy Buttons Had to Do With it"), but also one of how electric power transformed the American household and remade social relations in the domestic sphere ("How Busy Buttons Brings His Magic to You"). Gender relations featured prominently in this brochure, which asked: What did it mean

1 "The Story of Busy Buttons" (Los Angeles: Southern California Edison Company, 1925), The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, Southern California Edison Company Records (henceforth: SCEC Records), 323:9.

2 It is crucial to take into account that "electrification" is a problematic historiographical concept. For more on this: Graeme Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity: Technology, Uncertainty and Gender, 1880–1914* (London: Routledge, 2016), 14.

to be male or female in the age of technology? The answers it provided reflected the Roaring Twenties' intricate search for suitable gender archetypes. Tellingly, the brochure departed from older representations of electrification as a benign, fairy-like female being and portrayed Busy Buttons instead as a young boy. On one page, he is depicted spreading electric lightning from a watering can onto a suburban settlement. Urbanization, and urban electrification in particular, is presented as a male accomplishment. Furthermore, electrification was described as an age-specific achievement by a young generation.

4 The questions that the brochure raised are at the center of an ongoing scholarly exploration of technology and gender within the fabric of domestic spaces. Several groundbreaking studies have argued that the introduction of new household technologies profoundly changed gender relations and roles in the domestic sphere.[3] Focusing on electrical appliances' effects on women, Ruth Schwartz Cowan famously pointed out the numerous additional burdens that electricity imposed on housewives and the implications that this process had for their role and status in the household.[4] Most literature so far has focused on electricity, women, and femininity.[5] Tying in with this exploration, this article considers the intersection of domestic infrastructures with representations of masculinity. More specifically, this article examines how advertising materials produced by SCEC (the largest privately owned utility serving Los Angeles County) and the Bureau of Power and Light (the municipally owned utility serving the City of Los Angeles[6]) depicted the typical male user of electrical power and how they sought to influence his behavior, paying particular attention to the making and remaking of gender. The article uses Los Angeles as an exemplar because the city was a front-runner in electrification, and because household electrification was central to the city and its residents' self-understanding as an epicenter of urban modernity on the West coast.

5 Rather than providing a comprehensive account of how Los Angeles became electrified and how this changed household life in the city, the article will focus on a specific aspect of this process: contested representations about what it meant to be a man. Rich discourse on masculinities in the history of the 19th and 20th C already exists.[7] Scholars have argued that ideas about manhood are constructed socially and change over time.[8] In his groundbreaking sociological study, R. W. Connell points out that there was never just one singular concept of hegemonic masculinity, but that several competed with each other at different times.[9] These concepts often were in conflict with each other or were self-contradictory. Adding to Connell, Todd Reeser emphasizes that they were "fluid or unstable."[10] As a result

3 As examples, Mark H. Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Ruth Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women and Modern Machines in America 1870–1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999); Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity* (cf. note 2); Enrica Asquer, "Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, Family, and Concumption in Modern Europe", *in* Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 568-584.

4 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), esp. 63-68, 151-191.

5 Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Martina Heßler, *"Mrs. Modern Woman": Zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der Haushaltstechnisierung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2001).

6 In 1937, the Bureau of Power and Light and the Bureau of Water Works and Supply were consolidated into the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP).

7 As examples, Thomas Kühne (ed.), *Männergeschichte – Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1996); Frank J. Barrett, Stephen Whitehead (eds.), *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); Jürgen Martschukat, Olaf Stieglitz, *Geschichte der Männlichkeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2008).

8 Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity", *in* Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (eds.), *Theorizing Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1994), 119-141.

9 R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 185.

10 Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 39.

of these considerations, historians have emphasized that we should not conceive of masculinity as contrary to femininity, and that masculinity includes non-male characteristics.[11] This leads right to the heart of this article's focus.

6 The article proposes that the promotional work done by the two main water and power providers in the city and county of Los Angeles tried to popularize conceptions of masculinity that differed from more traditional ones. These conceptions no longer focused on masculinized qualities such as strength, assertiveness, and mastery of technology, but rather on more inclusive ones. First, I will argue that these conceptions in advertisements stressed a man's responsibility for safety training and the necessity to acquire knowledge about the proper handling of electrical devices, such as cooking stoves, vacuum cleaners, water heaters, or washing machines. Second, I will argue that these conceptions were at once complex, tense, and contradictory because they included feminine qualities, such as care and affection toward other household members, as well as support for female emancipation. As a result, these ads promoted a tamed or domesticated masculinity. My argument unfolds in three steps: First, I will provide a brief overview of Los Angeles' electrification, setting this case study in the historical context of American history. Second, I will investigate promotional campaigns to sell electricity to Los Angeles residents. Third, I will analyze conceptions of gender and masculinity in more detail.

ELECTRIFYING LOS ANGELES

7 The Busy Buttons brochure mentioned at the beginning of this article explains how Los Angeles' urban growth depended on water, transportation, and electricity. This explanation is certainly well-founded, but cheap land and big-money investors were no less important. From the very beginning, Los Angeles was a land speculators' project.[12] One of the most prominent figures from this "booster era" was Charles Fletcher Lummis, an influential journalist and owner of large lands, who introduced Southern California as a romantic place beyond the urban-rural divide.[13] Attracted by magazine and newspaper ads promoting abundant and inexpensive land, as well as business opportunities and a healthy climate, Midwesterners with high-flying business ideas, wealthy retirees from the East Coast, and health seekers from wet states—among others—came by the thousands to Southern California in the 1880s. As a consequence, the population exploded from roughly 5,000 in 1870 and 50,000 in 1890 to 100,000 in 1900.[14]

8 Existing scholarship reveals to what extent the city's attractiveness was based on the availability of plentiful water and cheap electricity.[15] In framing this story as one of stunning urban expansion in an environmental setting that was hostile to life and profoundly altered by man-made technologies, prior research has well-established the close connection between Los Angeles' rise as a metropolis, its water systems,

11 As an example, Miguel Vale de Almeida, *The Hegemonic Male: Masculinity in a Portuguese Town* (Providence: Berghahn, 1996).

12 Michael F. Sheehan, "Land Speculation in Southern California: The Roles of Railroads, Trolley Lines and Autos", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 41, n° 2, 1982, 197-209.

13 Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

14 Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 21, 78.

15 Like many other regions west of the 14-inch rainfall line, Los Angeles suffered from droughts as a consequence of huge population numbers, a lack of precipitation, and hot summer temperatures. On Los Angeles and its waters: William Deverell, Tom Sitton, *Water and Los Angeles: A Tale of Three Rivers, 1900–1941* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), esp. 1-18; Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking, 1986), esp. 3-6; Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Steven P. Erie, *Beyond Chinatown: The Metropolitan Water District, Growth, and the Environment in Southern California* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); William Deverell, Greg Hise (eds.), *Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

and its electric power.[16] The same massive 215-mile aqueduct (inaugurated in 1913) that diverted the waters of the Owens River to Los Angeles and fueled urban growth, also generated hydropower on a large scale long before the booming city received a further surplus of electric power from the Hoover Dam (completed in 1936).[17] The first arc lamps were installed in December 1882 at a busy intersection of what is today central Los Angeles, just a year after New York turned on its first electric lights.[18] The first electric trolleys began to drive through the town in 1887, providing the basis on which, after 1901, railroad magnate Henry Huntington built his empire of privately owned mass transit between Los Angeles and San Bernardino.[19] Rivalling Chicago and New York's Great White Way, city boosters praised the brilliance of Los Angeles' lights and its electric trolleys' reach.[20] Utilities in Los Angeles offered particularly low rates for electric power (22.5 percent lower than rates charged by San Francisco's utility[21]), and they had a major industrial customer—the film industry—which settled at the gates of the city, in Hollywood.[22] Therefore, residents soon were familiar with electricity, laying the groundwork for its remarkable triumph in Los Angeles after 1920. As an advertisement from the Bureau of Power and Light phrased it, "Electricity helps 'make' Los Angeles."[23]

Not only did Los Angeles have the world's largest system of electric street lighting in the 1920s, it also can be viewed as a pioneer in household electrification.[24] Appliances such as water heaters and cooking stoves sold well in Los Angeles relatively early in the 1920s. Air conditioning systems were also installed in places open to the public, such as department stores and movie theaters.[25] However, the breakthrough for household electrification in the U.S. only came with federal programs introduced under the New Deal in the 1930s and early 1940s.[26] The 1920s, nonetheless, with its economic upswing and relative prosperity, were a time of condensed change. As mass consumer society in the U.S. grew in the 1920s and 1930s, more and more products became affordable for more and more Americans. This development depended on increasingly sophisticated

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16 For a broader perspective on water and power in the American West: Carl Abbott, *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 150-161; Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 114-115.

17 William L. Kahrl, *Water and Power: The Conflict over Los Angeles' Water Supply in the Owens Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

18 Sandy Isenstadt, "Los Angeles: Light's Ephemeral Centers", *in* Sandy Isenstadt et al. (eds.), *Cities of Light: Two Centuries of Urban Illumination* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 51-57; Eddy S. Feldman, *The Art of Street Lighting in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1972).

19 Franklin Walker, "Pacific Electric", *in* John Caughey and Laree Caughey (eds.), *Los Angeles: Biography of a City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 218-222; Spencer Crump, *Ride the Big Red Cars: How Trolleys Helped Build Southern California* (Los Angeles: Crest, 1962).

20 As this book vividly demonstrates, using the Los Angeles Times as an example: Robert Gottlieb, Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers, and Their Influence on Southern California* (New York: Putnam, 1977).

21 Comparison of Rates of the City of Los Angeles, Bureau of Power and Light with Rate Schedules of Southern California Edison Co. For Southern California District Outside City of Los Angeles And Rate Schedules of Pacific Gas % Electric CO. For the City of San Francisco, December 20, 2019, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power Records Center, Historical Records Program (henceforth: LADWP Records Center), WP05-26:10.

22 David Robinson, *Hollywood in the Twenties* (London: The Tantivy Press, 1968); Tom Sitton, William Deverell (eds.), *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

23 Bureau of Power and Light for Economy [Advertisements], LADWP Records Center, WP05-44:13.

24 Isenstadt, "Los Angeles: Light's Ephemeral Centers", 56 (cf. note 18).

25 However, air conditioning did not become affordable for private households until the 1950s. On the history of air conditioning in the United States: Salvatore Basile, *Cool: How Air Conditioning Changed Everything* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Marsha E. Ackermann, *Cool Comfort: America's Romance with Air-Conditioning* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); Gail Cooper, "Custom Design, Engineering Guarantees, and Unpatentable Data: The Air Conditioning Industry, 1902–1935", *Technology and Culture*, vol. 35, n° 3, 1994, 506-536; Raymond Arsenault, "The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture", *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 50, n° 4, 1984, 597-628.

26 Ronald C. Tobey, *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 111-119.

production methods and simplified access to credit, which enormously increased middle class purchasing power and transformed societal expectations of domestic comfort.[27] Advertising also developed into an industry in its own right.[28] The Depression of the 1930s caused a sharp dent in mass consumption, but it could not stop its continued rise after the end of World War II.[29]

10 The "domestication" of electricity took place in micro-spaces of everyday life, but also was embedded in a global history of technological adaptation occurring in most parts of the Western Hemisphere and in colonial spaces through the early to mid-20th C.[30] Historians such as Julia Tischler and David Arnold have shown how this appropriation of technological devices produced both regional variances and global similarities in Central Africa and India.[31] It was also at this time that electrification became associated with globally circulating ideas of modernity and progress—and the promise of more freedom, prosperity, and equality.[32] As a consequence, electricity's boosters and the utilities' advertising departments promoted Los Angeles as the paradigmatic modern city.[33] We should recognize, however, that electricity's promise was deceptive, given that its availability was limited to those who could afford it. These were Euro-American middle-class and upper-middle-class residents.[34] It is important for any understanding of electrification to note that many people remained excluded from accessing electric power, specifically poor people and immigrants from Mexico, China, and Japan—the largest minorities in Los Angeles at the beginning of the 20th C. To the extent that they could not benefit from supplied electricity due to multiple levels of discrimination, this modernization was confined to the Euro-American and affluent middle classes.

SELLING ELECTRICITY AND A LIFESTYLE TO LOS ANGELES

11 With regard to how electricity was brought into the household, Los Angeles did not differ much from other major cities in North America or Western Europe. One important factor to note, and which was common to all these places, was that electrification was not inevitable.[35] The attempt to domesticate electricity coincided almost everywhere with other technologies that already had been established in the household. In particular, domestic natural gas was used widely for lighting, cooking, and heating in homes in cities as diverse as London, Berlin, Boston, and New Orleans.[36] Los Angeles was

27 Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), 222-271; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kathleen Donahue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

28 James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1885–1905* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

29 Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 111ff.

30 On the concept of domestication: Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity*, 3 (cf. note 2); Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat* (cf. note 3).

31 Julia Tischler, *Light and Power for a Multiracial Nation: The Kariba Dam Scheme in the Central African Federation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); David Arnold, *Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

32 S.M. Kennedy wrote in 1912, "I believe that progress only means more light. That in the world today electricity leads the van of progress, and is the greater agent for doing the greatest amount of good to the greater number of people. That in advocating the use of electrical service I am helping to make life more cheerful, hopeful, healthful[,] and useful." S.M. Kennedy, "Credo!", *Edison Current Topics*, September 1912, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:1.

33 David Alan Karnes, "Modern Metropolis: Mass Culture and the Transformation of Los Angeles, 1890–1950" (Ph.D diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1991). To contextualize, Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure*, 5-6 (cf. note 13); Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

34 David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 239.

35 Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity*, 1 (cf. note 2).

36 As examples, Frank Trentmann, Anna Carlsson-Hyslop, "The Evolution of Energy Demand in Britain: Politics, Daily Life, and Public Housing, 1920s–1970s", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 61, n° 3, 2018, 807-839: 12; Timothy Moss, *Remaking Berlin: A History of the City through Infrastructure, 1920–2020* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 80-82.

no exception in this regard. Connected to the persistence of rival energy forms, prevalent cultural fears of electricity were a second major obstacle to the domestication of electricity in Los Angeles, as they were elsewhere.[37] Even if electricity became vital in creating the image of a truly modern city over the course of the first half of the 20th C, a large number of inhabitants remained wary of this new form of energy. Homeowners feared electricity's alleged threat to their physical health, and they perceived electric lighting as an "aesthetic provocation" to their established sense of brightness.[38] Female homemakers in particular were reluctant to accept electric lighting in their homes.[39] As a result, the domestication of electricity was a contingent process, and this becomes abundantly clear when we examine Los Angeles more closely.

12 Just like in other major cities, power utilities tried to sell electricity to Los Angeles' affluent upper-class and upper-middle-class residents through newspaper and magazine ads, as well as through model electric houses.[40] These selling campaigns started in the 1890s, but gained significant momentum after 1910, when electrical appliances became more affordable for wealthy homeowners. Of course—given the fact that Los Angeles is located in a geographical area characterized by abundant sunshine and year-round mild temperatures—advertising for heating systems was hardly important, but advertising for air conditioning systems was omnipresent.

13 Who were the people driving these campaigns? Subaltern workers (including salespeople, technicians, meter men, demonstrators, and maintenance workers) did a significant amount of the utilities' promotional work and functioned as go-betweens, mediating utilities' promotional work and consumers' needs. To be sure, selling electricity to the upper middle classes and educating them in the proper handling of electrical appliances did not reveal much about how homeowners actually received and used these new appliances. Even if a focus on the adaptation to electricity in the domestic sphere goes beyond this article's scope, it should be mentioned that recent scholarship on user behavior has made it clear that no causal link existed between conventional views on intended use, and the creative and productive ways in which users from various social and ethnic backgrounds adapted (or rejected) electricity.[41]

14 An early SCEC ad in March 1914 presented to readers "Twenty Reasons for Using Electric Light" in the household.[42] Among the reasons mentioned were the affordable cost of electric lighting, as well as its cleanliness, safety, convenience, and odorlessness. In addition, the ad highlighted how electric lighting was "modern and stylish" and "[a]dvertises a progressive spirit."[43] Such terms marked a semantic word field that denoted what was important to the emerging middle classes. The desire for a clean, convenient, and comfortable home indicated "entitlement thinking," which characterized the self-confident citizen at the beginning of the 20th C.[44] In this context, Meg Jacobs refers to "economic citizenship," a term that precisely captures the nexus of consumption, economics, and politics in the U.S.[45]

37 On this and the following: Linda Simon, *Dark Light: Electricity and Anxiety from the Telegraph to the X-Ray* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2004), 70-95.
38 Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity*, 10 (cf. note 2).
39 Ibid., 154.
40 On advertising's rise in magazines: Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (cf. note 28); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1885–1905* (cf. note 28).
41 Nelly Oudshoorn, Trevor Pinch, "Introduction: How Users and Non-Users Matter", *in* Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch (eds.), *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technologies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 1-25; Trentmann and Carlsson-Hyslop, "The Evolution of Energy Demand in Britain" (cf. note 36).
42 "Twenty Reasons for Using Electric Light", *Edison Current Topics*, March 1914, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:3.
43 Ibid.
44 Frank Trentmann, Vanessa Taylor, "From Users to Consumers: Water Politics in Nineteenth-Century London", *in* Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 53-79: 65.
45 Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 2 (cf. note 27).

15 Similar lines of reasoning can be found in numerous other ads, directing prospective consumers' attention to electrically wired model homes. For instance, a 1915 report published in *Edison Current Topics* introduced readers to the upper-class luxury home inhabited by Anita M. Baldwin, owner of the Santa Anita Ranch, 15 miles east of Los Angeles.[46] The Baldwins were a well-known and affluent family in the region who were among the first to electrify their residence. To the extent that they readily took part in the advertising campaign for electricity, they can be understood, like Lummis, as city boosters. Trying to make electricity attractive to others in the region, SCEC's outreach workers singled out exemplary residences to showcase the benefits of electric lighting, cooking, and heating.

16 In a similar vein, Albert Warren Atherton, a faculty member at Los Angeles' Polytechnic School, shared his desire to have his home wired with fellow readers of *Edison Current Topics*:

> One thing that so determined us, was our visit to a friend whose kitchen was fully fitted with electrical appliances. [...] Here was a kitchen, done in spotless white, airy, fresh, and scrupulously clean. At one end stood an electric range[,] and, set candidly about on shelves, were the electrical appliances, mysterious to me, but very useful, as I was soon to learn. She pushed a button here, turned down a switch there, put in requisition some shining pots and pans[,] and, almost before we knew it, without heat, or smoke, or fuss, or noise, and without ruffling her delicate plumage, put up as fine a lunch as I have eaten—and I've bought them all.[47]

17 Women featured prominently in these ads and reports. In 1912, the Corona Gas and Electric Light Company ran a newspaper ad displaying an affluent upper-middle-class house with two women in the front. With one of the two praising the social status of the household, the other replied, "Yes—electric light makes a house so cheerful, you know, and our friends cannot resist the attraction."[48] Linking electricity to domestic sociability, the ad presents socializing as a predominantly female activity, and it epitomized women as among the prime beneficiaries of electrified homes (fig. 2).

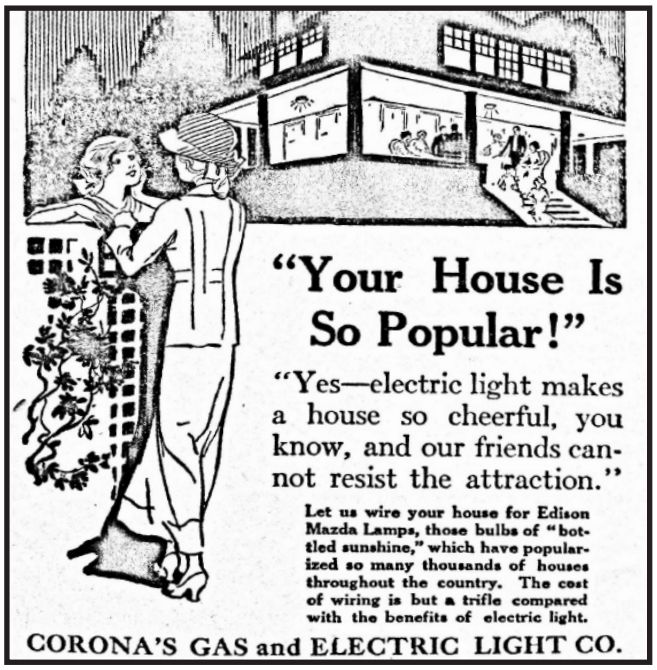

Figure 2: "Your House Is So Popular!" 1912, [Advertisement Corona Gas and Electric Light Company]. Source: The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, Southern California Edison Company Records, Box 300, Folder 13.

18 Gender relations were an important issue that was brought into focus by household electrification. The municipal Bureau of Power and Light celebrated electricity, and the electrified kitchen in particular, as technology for women to free themselves from household work. Quoting the old phrase, "A man's work is from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done," an op-ed in 1933 claimed that electricity "has removed one burden after another from the lives of millions of homemakers."[49] The authors publishing in *Edison Current Topics* proved to be particularly creative,

46 Frederick Schwartz, "An Electrified Home", *Edison Current Topics*, February 1915, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:4.

47 Albert Warren Atherton, "The Ultimate in the Kitchens", *Edison Current Topics*, January 1917, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:6.

48 "Your House Is So Popular!" 1912, [Advertisement Corona Gas and Electric Light Company], Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 300:13.

49 "Modern Kitchen for the Modern Women", *City-Owned Department of Water and Power Official Bulletin*, February 1933, vol. 1, n° 2, LADWP Records Center, WP05-45:9.

colorfully describing electricity's benefits for the domestic sphere. For instance, Emmett D. Cheesman promised that female homemakers would have more leisure time at their disposal, "more time to be given to the whims and fancies," so that "work becomes part of the day's pleasure, and happiness and health prevail where the strain of the old methods of housekeeping are relics of 'olden times.'"[50] Upper-middle-class women in Los Angeles were bombarded with information about electrical kitchen appliances' benefits. This occurred with regional variations throughout the industrialized part of the world, but in Los Angeles, this discourse was particularly strong. The promise of liberation from household work—and the associated progress in terms of equality between women and men—was a main selling point for electricity in the early 20th C. However, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan convincingly has shown, this promise was an elusive one.[51] The numerous materials alone—ranging from suggestions on how to prepare an "electric breakfast" to recipes for the electric stove[52]—indicate that electrical equipment certainly meant "more work for mother."[53]

19 This campaign for electricity thus tried to sell a whole lifestyle associated with the use of electricity. In almost every major urban center in North America and Western Europe, the introduction of electric power into the domestic sphere came hand-in-hand with specific notions about how men and women should work and spend their leisure time.[54] Scholars have provided ample evidence as to how this played out in such places as Paris, London, and Berlin.[55] Los Angeles can be seen as part of this entangled history in which transregional and transcontinental connections were involved profoundly in the domestication of electricity. Nevertheless, the advertising campaign for electricity in Los Angeles did take on a specific form. The film industry in Hollywood and numerous cinemas across the city made electricity omnipresent in urban everyday life. This new energy form consequently developed into one of the central vectors with which urban dwellers in Los Angeles negotiated their self-understanding. Without falling into stereotypes, one can state that the promotion of electricity was closely linked to the promotion of values such as autonomy, freedom, and self-determination.[56] Electrical equipment companies promised that electricity would make households more autonomous and independent, and—outside the city—electricity was advertised for its potential to help aspiring inhabitants realize their business dreams. This corresponded to the development of socio-cultural preferences among people in the early 20th C's far American West.[57] Aiming at domestic comfort, convenience, and increased leisure time, the promotion of electric power and appliances also nurtured values such as safety, economy, and efficiency. As David Nye has put it, the salespeople and demonstrators' advertising work fostered a specific conception of domestic "modernity."[58] Essential to this notion of modernity was

50 Emmett D. Cheesman, "Triumph of Electricity in Modern Architecture: West Adams Villa Apartments: Acme of Convenience", *Edison Current Topics*, December 1917, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:6.

51 Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 210-216 (cf. note 4).

52 As an example, H.B. Fletcher, "When Home Has all the Comforts", *Edison Current Topics*, December 1913, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:2; see also recipes in *City-Owned Department of Water and Power Official Bulletin*, January 1933, vol. 1, n° 1, LADWP Records Center, WP05-45:9.

53 Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 62 (cf. note 4).

54 As an overview: Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 220-226; Nye, *Electrifying America*, 238-286 (cf. note 34).

55 A few selections out of a number of studies, from which I have learned most: Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 106ff; Trentmann and Carlsson-Hyslop, "The Evolution of Energy Demand in Britain" (cf. note 36); Moss, *Remaking Berlin* (cf. note 36); Nina Lorkowski, *Warmes Wasser – Weiße Ware: Energiewende im Badezimmer 1880–1939* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2020); Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Leif Jerram, *Streetlife: The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

56 A historiographical approach to values in the American West can be found in Nathalie Massip, "The Role of the West in the Construction of American Identity: From Frontier to Crossroads", *Caliban*, vol. 31, 2012, 239-248.

57 For the bigger picture: Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

58 Nye, *Electrifying America*, 284 (cf. note 34).

a binary gender order. This article now shifts the focus to a more thorough analysis of the representations of masculinity featured in the utilities' promotional materials.

HOUSEHOLD ELECTRIFICATION AND THE DOMESTICATION OF MASCULINITY

20 The ads, alongside reports about model electric houses, clearly displayed (and reinforced) gender dichotomies. Representations of men and women as opposites were conspicuous in most of the promotional materials. Men were depicted as producers and as superior both in knowledge and practical skills. Conversely, women were portrayed as consumers who, because of their knowledge deficit, relied on male expertise. To some extent, these ads took up traditional gender attributes: male roles were associated with being dominant, active, and rational, whereas female roles were characterized as submissive, passive, and irrational. For instance, a 1926 Bureau of Power and Light news release told the fictional story of a Los Angeles woman who was unfamiliar with electrical appliances.[59] Assuming that the woman lacked essential knowledge about available types and sizes of electrical appliances, the bureau's outreach workers advised her to visit one of the display stores that the utility operated:

> If this woman goes to the Power Bureau's Domestic Service Section[,] she will be shown every sort of reliable vacuum cleaner by expert attendants. No one will try to sell her any particular make of vacuum cleaner because nothing is for sale. But she will be given accurate information on the cost of each cleaner, the cost of operating them and the most efficient method of using them.[60]

21 The moral of this story was that women had to entrust themselves to sales experts whose expertise was represented as objective ("accurate information") and whose practical know-how was for the women's benefit. Several promotional articles recounted situations in which the (male) salesperson or technician explained to the prospective (female) consumer how to use electrical appliances properly in her household, assuming that there was an insurmountable difference in knowledge and skills between men and women.[61]

22 In the early days of the attempt to domesticate electricity, masculinity very much remained associated with superior rationality and knowledge. Addressing maintenance workers and repairmen, a 1916 article by W. L. Frost in *Edison Current Topics* spoke of the "electrical man" whose "[e]lectrical education has broadened his scope of knowledge."[62] Central to the trope of the "electrical man" were qualities such as "common sense, hard work, and an enthusiastic desire to learn," which Frost branded as male. As vague as these traits might have been and linked as they were to well-established gender differences, they indicated a partial problematization of traditional conceptions of masculinity. The ability to hold one's ground, which could go as far as the brute assertion of one's own interests, was no longer regarded as the primary characteristic of manliness. Rather, male superiority, more strongly than before, was associated with refined skills, knowledge, and an acquired rationality. Subaltern technicians, such as maintenance workers and repairers, best embodied these notions of masculinity. The gradual departure from the model of the "brutish man," who most clearly embodied the core idea of being masculine, can also be seen manifested in broader societal transformations. Elizabeth Pleck has pointed out how the rise of American social policy against physical violence committed by men in the household transformed gender relations between the 1880s and 1930s.[63] The

59 "News Release", September 2, 1926, LADWP Records Center, WP05-27:1.
60 Ibid.
61 "Los Angeles Homes Have More Electrical Devices Than Any Others", *Public Service Bulletin*, December 1919, vol. 3, n° 12, LADWP Records Center, WP05-45:13.
62 W.L. Frost, "The Modern Electrical Man", *Edison Current Topics*, September 1916, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:5.
63 Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy Against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 108-163.

contemporaneous shift in attitudes toward manliness is thus very clearly reflected in the change in acceptance regarding domestic violence that took place in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th C.

23 However, it is crucial when examining these transformations to acknowledge that a significant number of salespeople were women. The advertising and sale of electricity encompassed a field that was particularly open to female employment in the 1920s and 1930s.[64] Furthermore, there is plenty of archival evidence indicating that female electrical appliance demonstrators held shows in the municipal bureau's display rooms on Van Nuys Boulevard. In these demonstrations, they prepared meals on an electric stove or weighed in on the advantages of electric power *vis-a-vis* other fuels, such as wood, oil, and gas.[65] Often, these demonstrators were travelling salespeople, moving across the country sharing their know-how and advertising their products. For instance, as another news release by the Bureau of Power and Light announced, Harriet Langworthy came from Hamilton, Ohio, and provided a free demonstration on an electric stove in Los Angeles in 1930.[66] With Ann Martin serving as the chief home economist at the bureau, women even climbed into top management positions. It is hard to overestimate the role of upper-class and upper-middle-class women in promoting domestic electricity.[67] This indicates that technical rationality was not viewed as being limited to men—which further complicates gender representations—but that women played an important role in the dissemination of electricity and actively participated in the co-constitution of technology and gender.

Even if the ideal of masculinity constructed by 24
promotional articles visibly centered around knowledge and expertise as the decisive traits of men, other emerging, contemporaneous notions of masculinity were more inclusive. This gave rise to novel masculinities that would encompass many traits previously thought of as feminine: emotionality, intimacy, nurturing, and caring.[68] Macho masculinity was not replaced as the hegemonic image of man by these new conceptions, but it was made more complex and multilayered. Several ads presented men not only as knowing home managers, but also as caring husbands and fathers. Male roles were no longer envisioned as centering only around working lives and economic contributions to the family's well-being. Rather, promotional materials showed men as emotionally affective, with private space as their prime (or at least a legitimate) field of concern. This change certainly paralleled similar transformations in the fields of consumption, politics, and warfare, as some extant studies have demonstrated.[69] In this regard, the 1920s and 1930s were a time of condensed social change, in which traditional conceptions became increasingly fluid.[70]

An ad for water heaters that the Bureau of Power 25
and Light published in 1939 addressed the male head of a household, stating that a water heater would increase "family health and hygiene," as well as the "happiness of your home."[71] This was a long way from older conceptions of masculinity, when male activity was bound to public spaces. Adding to the text, the ad had an illustration showing a middle-age family father lacking any traditional male attributes, almost appearing androgynal. Wearing an elegant, if not extravagant, bathrobe, his manly body is depicted as standing in front of the bathtub, checking

64 Carolyn M. Goldstein, "From Service to Sales: Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920–1940", *Technology and Culture*, vol. 38, n° 1, 1997, 121-152.

65 Veda M. Ebert, "Electric Range Way: Its Vantage Points", *Edison Current Topics*, January 1917, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:6.

66 "News Release", February 28, 1930, LADWP Records Center, WP05-27:1.

67 Goldstein, "From Service to Sales: Home Economics in Light and Power, 1920–1940" (cf. note 64).

68 R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, n° 6, 2005, 829-859.

69 As an example of the study of masculinities in the warfare of Nazi Germany: Thomas Kühne, "Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich", *Central European History*, vol. 51, n° 3, 2018, 390-418.

70 Trentmann, *Empire of Things*, 260-262 (cf. note 27).

71 "No Need to Skimp on Hot Water", 1939, LADWP Records Center, WP21-6:6.

on the water temperature. He looks pleased and relaxed. This portrayal of domesticity and intimacy ran counter to traditional masculine attributes, behaviors, and roles, such as dominance, strength, and independence. Certainly, social differentiation and class structure played an important role in this ad, as only the middle-class man could afford to buy into this kind of masculinity; the worker was more likely to remain associated with traditional masculine traits.

26 In the utilities' promotional campaigns, masculinity appeared to include feminine qualities. Male traits seemed to have been tamed and controlled. In other words, promotional campaigns advertised new expectations of masculinity in order to nudge men into new consumption habits. Historically, the campaigns for consumerism must be linked to processes of broader socio-cultural change that increased receptivity to new masculinities. This connected to the ads' emphasis on safety rules. It has been well-established by prior research that the call for "Safety First" was a running theme in early ads for electricity.[72] However, it is less known whether this safety campaign implicitly aimed to tame male traits. For instance, a notice to maintenance workers and repairers that SCEC sent out in 1915 claimed that safety was:

> the foremost thought of an efficient workman. His skill, knowledge[,] and experience must be exercised at all times in the proper handling of tools and in the use of the proper safeguards. [...] Reckless, careless, thoughtless workmen endanger themselves, their fellow-workmen[,] and oftentimes cause hundreds of dollars damage. The good man, the trusted man, the go-ahead man is the "Safety First" man.[73]

27 Interestingly, this campaign against traditional masculinity not only addressed the heads of households, but also the company's own staff. Urging technicians to not be "[r]eckless, careless, [and] thoughtless," this notice rejected some of the most central qualities traditionally attributed to men. Behaving like a "good man" involved an apparent redefinition of manliness. In the age of electricity, they should always act responsibly: "Think[,] then Do It!" insisted another warning, in a similar vein.[74] According to these notices, this was the only way for men to retain their masculinity personas. Certainly, these safety campaigns had their origins in the dangers that emanated from careless use of electricity. The potentially life-threatening characteristics of electricity thus contributed to the transformation of notions of masculinity in the 1920s and 1930s.

28 Finally, the advertising work by SCEC and the Bureau of Power and Light pushed men to support female empowerment. When the ads and promotional articles encouraged male consumers to ease their wives' household work by buying electrical appliances such as vacuum cleaners and stoves, they attempted to exploit them as collaborators in this early women's movement.[75] Speaking of appliances as "faithful electric servant[s]," the municipal utility's *Official Bulletin* in May 1933 urged husbands to ease "terror for the housewife."[76] The next month, the same periodical pressed male heads of household to "Marry Your Sweetheart but Not Your Kitchen."[77] Demanding that men help their partners free themselves from household work certainly implied an act of complicity with female empowerment—even though in the end, these appliances did not relieve the housewife of gendered work. The messages that

72 Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity*, 91-118 (cf. note 2). About campaigns to fight the dangers of industrial work, Mark Aldrich, *Safety First: Technology, Labor, and Business in the Building of American Work Safety, 1870–1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

73 "Safety First", *Edison Current Topics*, November 1915, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:4.

74 "Safety First!", *Edison Current Topics*, April 1915, Huntington Library, SCEC Records, 308:4.

75 Gayle Gullett, *Becoming Citizens: The Emergence and Development of the California Women's Movement, 1880–1911* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

76 *City-Owned Department of Water and Power Official Bulletin*, May 1933, vol. 1, n° 5, LADWP Records Center, WP05-45:9.

77 *City-Owned Department of Water and Power Official Bulletin*, June 1933, vol. 1, n° 6, LADWP Records Center, WP05-45:9.

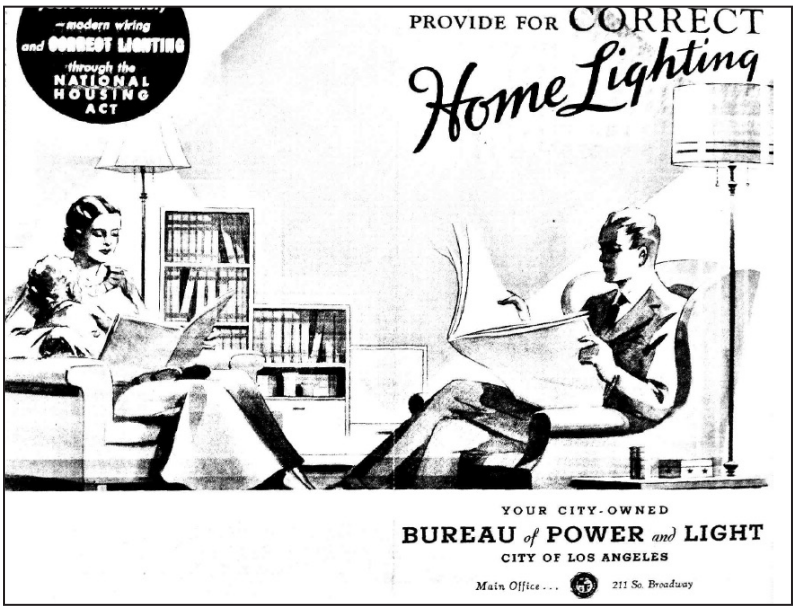

Figure 3: "Let Modernization Plans Provide for Correct Home Lighting" [Bill Insert, ca. 1934]. Source: Los Angeles Department of Water and Power Records Center, Historical Records Program, Communications Division, Consumer Relations Publications, WP05-45:8.

the promotional articles conveyed further subverted traditional notions of masculinity, encouraging men to develop a greater understanding of the problems that women face. Perhaps the ideal form of gender relations envisioned by the SCEC and Bureau of Power and Light's outreach workers is expressed best in a bill insert from around 1934 (reference in the image to the National Housing Act) promoting proper home lighting. This graphic shows a young, fashionable couple sitting in armchairs on equal terms while reading a newspaper (man) and a magazine (woman). Neither needs to do any housework, and both enjoy the same educational and recreational activities (fig. 3).[78]

29 Even if the vision articulated here went further than the zeitgeist, the ad is evidence that dichotomous gender conceptions were transformed in early 20th C advertising. This process certainly did not dissolve traditional masculinities, but made them more inclusive, more complex, and perhaps more contradictory.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of electricity into households 30
is a significant case study through which to research the changing contours of gender and masculinities in the domestic sphere. This was particularly true in the case of Los Angeles, where the household was promoted as a key site of the modern city. As electric power was something new, both public and private utilities tried to sell this energy form to households as the highest proof of a convenient, safe, and modern home. In this regard, there was little difference between public and private utilities in Los Angeles.

The New Deal was ultimately responsible for the 31
final breakthrough of electricity in U.S. households, and electric power would profoundly change how people lived and worked. Electricity providers assured female users that electrical appliances would liberate them from tiresome housework, and they attempted to popularize transformed notions of masculinity. Against the backdrop of rising consumerism, an increasing number of available electrical appliances, and changing socio-cultural value systems, these notions tended to include traits that previously

78 "Let Modernization Plans Provide for Correct Home Lighting", [Bill Insert, ca. 1934], LADWP Records Center, WP05-45:8.

had been associated with women. Men were no longer to be only strong and assertive, and prove themselves in public places, but rather should take responsibility for the private sphere and appreciate values such as caring and nurturing. This was accompanied by the fact that these masculinities were combined with an emphasis on rationality and safety rules in the handling of technology. In short, the manliness that power utilities encouraged can be described as tamed or domesticated.

32 It is crucial to note that all this still says relatively little about the user side. While the fact that the utilities' promotional campaigns encountered considerable resistance underlines the openness and contingency of household electrification (with many gas users suspicious of the advantages of electricity), the question of how men and women have constructed their own gender roles is largely unexamined by the analysis presented in this article. Additional research must be conducted to assess whether masculine identities changed in the wake of these promotional campaigns, or whether these campaigns reflected social change. Examining the appropriation of gender is complicated further by the fact that notions of masculinity and femininity were complex and fluid, and could differ significantly from one household to another, as well as between people having different social, economic, ethnic, cultural, political, or educational backgrounds. This suggests that further studies are needed to determine if there were expressions of masculinity that were specific to the urban space of Los Angeles. There is a strong case to be made that specificity has less to do with Los Angeles as a whole than with the micro-spaces of homes and neighborhoods.

To this end, this article indicates that we should 33
move away from any dichotomous juxtaposition of "male" and "female" attributes. Investigating gray areas and nuances can reveal that an individual's gender identity moved along a fluid continuum between masculine or feminine characteristics. It is the uncertain and ambiguous that are historically interesting. This is particularly true of gender as a social construct that largely escapes disambiguation. What this article further underlines is that gender roles should not be viewed as abstract concepts detached from the reality of everyday life. Rather, they are something very tangible—formed and negotiated in local contexts, such as homes and neighborhoods, as well as through interactions with quotidian technological artifacts, such as vacuum cleaners, water heaters, and cooking stoves. In rethinking energy and gender, we should more strongly adopt such a praxeological micro-perspective.

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