

Domesticating the Betsiamites River:  
Modern Domesticity and Hydraulic Frontiers

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## ABSTRACT

### Domesticating the Betsiamites River: Modern Domesticity and Hydraulic Frontiers

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This paper considers how the modern domestic ideal and the better living standards it promised encouraged the transition towards the “all-electric home.” It examines how household electricity consumption in Montreal contributed to the expansion of Hydro-Québec’s infrastructure in what is today called the North Shore. Although many have promoted hydroelectricity as a sustainable alternative to carbon-based fuels, the rapid expansion of energy networks since the end of the Second World War has accelerated human activity and resource extraction, which in turn contribute to the current climate crisis.

From the interwar period to the late 1950s, homemakers were introduced to new technologies and sold the idea that the mechanization of the home was a means of performing their work with greater dignity and efficiency, and of signalling their worth as devoted Catholic mothers. This research examines how domestic ideals informed women’s decisions to adopt household appliances and the subsequent expansion of Hydro-Québec’s infrastructure along the Betsiamites River. The Bersimis complex and the subsequent hydroelectric projects in the Betsiamites-Manicouagan-Outardes watershed resulted in lasting environmental disruptions, establishing new forms of colonial control over traditional Innu lands and shaping the inequitable relationships between Innu communities and the state that continue to this day.

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## Introduction

The 1954 annual report published by the Commission hydroélectrique du Québec (Hydro-Québec) celebrated its achievements during its first decade. Since the nationalization of the Beauharnois Light Heat and Power generating station and the private utility, Montreal Light Heat and Power Co. (MLHP), initiated in 1944, the Commission had already increased the province's power-generating capacity by 188%.<sup>1</sup> Hydro's client base was increasing at a "rythme toujours accéléré,"<sup>2</sup> noting how more subscribers on the island of Montreal were adopting "home comforts," resulting in a 241% increase in electricity consumption per client.<sup>3</sup> The city of Montreal had already reached the milestone of one million people in 1951, with suburban growth doubling, from a little over one million to 2,110,000.<sup>4</sup> A point of pride in the report was the "launch of a bold, gigantic project," adding 2 million horsepower to the grid to "make available in Montreal electricity generated in the North Shore wilderness of Québec."<sup>5</sup> The Bersimis project was located on the Betsiamites watershed and the predecessor to the well-known Manicouagan-Outardes complex. As the Commission reported, the project had opened a new "frontier" for a string of megaprojects that would feed the province's hunger for electricity.<sup>6</sup>

Hydro-Québec's 1954 report offers valuable insights into the optimism surrounding state-led investments in the energy sector and the pivotal role they would play in the province's

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<sup>1</sup> Québec Hydro-Electric Commission, ed., *A Decade of Progress* (Québec, 1955), 15. Collections de BANQ.

<sup>2</sup> John McCammon, "Rapport Annuel 1950," Commission Hydroélectrique de Québec, February 1951, Archives d'Hydro-Québec.

<sup>3</sup> Québec Hydro-Electric Commission, *A Decade of Progress*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Paul-André Linteau, *The History of Montréal: The Story of a Great North American City* (Baraka Books, 2013), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Québec Hydro-Electric Commission *A Decade of Progress*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> "En survolant le Nord," *Entre-Nous*, 1956, 18. Archives d'Hydro-Québec.

prosperity. Electricity was already bound up in notions of modernity and progress. Historian David Nye, for example, has shown that electricity was “invoked as the panacea for every social ill and the key to a whole range of social and personal transformation.”<sup>7</sup> While he emphasized the technological sublime of urban street lighting, many others at the time - ranging from reformers to educators, consumer groups, and, not to mention, advertisers - believed that scientific and technological progress would benefit the private sphere just as it had industrial society. Many argued that electricity and the technologies it powered made women more productive by reducing the time spent on arduous tasks, enabling them to meet new standards of cleanliness and care necessary to maintain their families' health.<sup>8</sup> Electricity was the gateway to better living standards and “the good life,” the civilized, more comfortable life.

The historical connection between “home comforts” and the Bersimis project provides a snapshot of a pivotal moment in Québec's energy history, highlighting the interconnected themes central to this thesis. Specifically, I focus here on the first hydroelectric development project built by Hydro-Québec, Bersimis-I and Bersimis-II, as well as the promotion of household energy practices taught to young girls and women. As noted by historian Brittany Luby, “the cost of affluence was disproportionately borne in Canada: although status Indians accounted for 1.2 percent of the population, most environmental damages occurred on their lands.”<sup>9</sup> Scholarship on Hydro-Québec often bypasses the first phase of nationalization and the Bersimis projects. Yet these were the first in a long series of hydroelectric development projects across the North Shore,

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<sup>7</sup> David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (MIT Press, 1994), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Abigail Harrison Moore and Ruth W. Sandwell, “Anthropocene and Women,” in *In a New Light: Histories of Women and Energy* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), 6; Clarence Hatton-Proulx, “Creating Supply, Creating Demand: Gas and Electricity in Montréal from the First World War to the Great Depression,” *Journal of Energy History/Revue d’Histoire de l’Énergie*, no. 5 (2020), 9; Dorotea Gucciardo, “The Powered Generation: Canadians, Electricity, and Everyday Life” (The University of Western Ontario, 2011), 156.

<sup>9</sup> Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory*, Critical Studies in Native History (University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 12.

intended to empower the province and its people. This contrasts with the experiences of families from the Pessamit and Innu communities whose ancestral lands were lost due to the damming of the Betsiamites River.<sup>10</sup>

Social histories of energy and histories of science and technology have given little attention to “the material properties of various forms of fuels or energy – a.k.a. “resources”– used by new technologies,”<sup>11</sup> choosing instead to focus on the cultural and ideological impacts of the industrialization of modern societies. Industrial capitalist societies rely heavily on energy, yet the incentives shaping household energy use and the reasoning behind these practices remain underexplored. My research draws on the work of historian Ruth Sandwell by examining household hydroelectric consumption in Montreal in the 1950s, and the material impacts of infrastructure on the Betsiamites-Manicougan-Outardes watershed in the North Shore. Although previous research has examined the ecological costs and the effects on Indigenous and local communities resulting from infrastructure expansion, the relationship with the residential sector remains underexplored.<sup>12</sup> By juxtaposing these two themes, supply and demand, I show how the energy system directly connects energy production, household energy consumption, and their environmental impacts: crucial elements of energy histories that historians have often overlooked.

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<sup>10</sup> Justine Gagnon et al., “‘Where You Have to Bypass’: History, Memory, and Multiple Temporalities of Innu Cultural Landscapes,” *American Indian Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2021), 362.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth W. Sandwell, “Changing the Plot: Including Women in Energy History,” in *In a New Light: Histories of Women and Energy*, ed. Abigail H. Moore (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Gagnon et al., “‘Where You Have to Bypass,’” 363.; Stéphane Savard, “Concilier l’exploitation hydroélectrique et la protection du territoire: le cas de la Direction de l’Environnement d’Hydro-Québec, 1970-1980,” in *Pouvoir et territoire au Québec depuis 1850*, ed. Harold Bérubé et al. (Septentrion, 2017), 312.; Stephen R.J. Tsuji et al., “Green Energy—Green for Whom? A Case Study of the Kabinakagami River Waterpower Project in Northern Canada,” *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 13, no. 16 (2021), 2.; Tina Loo and Meg Stanley, *An Environmental History of Progress: Damming the Peace and Columbia Rivers.*, no. 92 (2011), 401.

By treating electricity as both a cultural symbol and a commodity, we can examine the locked-in systems created when homemakers adopted home comforts, as well as the expansion of infrastructures built by Hydro-Québec on the North Shore. Once an electrical outlet and an electric stove are in place, it is difficult to switch back to a wood- or gas-fired stove. The issue is similar to that of hydroelectric infrastructure. Once installed, infrastructure not only becomes a permanent fixture of the landscape but also increases the likelihood of subsequent projects in the same area. By connecting these seemingly disparate elements, my research considers how Western industrial societies became reliant on centralized energy services and how economic and ideological ideals organized and justified these developments. Given the current climate crisis, it is critical to examine key historical moments that were consequential to the global environmental emergency we face. The 1950s were a period of “great acceleration” during which energy consumption, from petroleum to hydropower, intensified dramatically.<sup>13</sup> However, research has focused on petroleum because of its importance to carbon dioxide emissions, hydropower has been less examined, in part because renewables, or “green energy,” are considered less harmful and could therefore maintain the status quo. In Canada and Québec, large hydropower projects are built in northern regions characterized by fragile ecosystems, leading to significant ecological changes that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities. Examining patterns of consumption and their associated impacts provides a broader understanding of the complexity of the climate crisis.

I adapt Andrew Needham’s micro-to-macro approach in *Power Lines*, in which chapters move back and forth between suburban demand and sites of production on Navajo land in what

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<sup>13</sup> J. R. McNeil and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 33.

is today the southwestern United States.<sup>14</sup> This dual structure allows the reader to trace everyday consumption practices and their connections through power lines to sites of coal extraction and power generation. The structure of this thesis replicates Needham's framework to focus on the expansion of Hydro-Québec's energy system into the Nitassinan and to tie it with energy practices that women were encouraged to adopt. By taking this approach, I was able to better understand the emergence of an energy culture where "particular subjectivities, institutions, and infrastructures of an energy system emerge and develop."<sup>15</sup> Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky offer frameworks for thinking about transitions and systems change to observe what fundamental principles are reproduced. They propose thinking about theories of change through the lens of discard studies, which allow researchers to examine the mechanisms that enable norms to become dominant, what is centred, and what is discarded in this process.<sup>16</sup> One way to do this is to "defamiliarize" oneself by looking at the history of how something became normal.<sup>17</sup> I believe that this framework offers novel ways to discuss energy histories. To examine women's roles and housework through the lens of discard studies is to ask who profited, which ideals were centred, and how both profit and ideals materialized in the kitchen and northern rivers. How did centralized systems influence women's work and shape new identities? What core ideals influenced the adoption and expansion of centralized energy systems?

With a few exceptions, historians have not extensively explored the relationship between household energy consumption and the colonial and environmental legacies of hydroelectricity

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest*. (Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Pfister et al., "Towards Studying Energy Systems as Energy Cultures," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 30, no. 3 (2017), 239.

<sup>16</sup> Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky, *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*. (MIT Press, 2022), 62-63.

<sup>17</sup> Liboiron and Lepawsky, *Discard Studies*, 120.

in Québec during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We can explain this underexplored relationship in part by the genealogical arc of historiography, grounded in economic history and industry studies, which fused electricity with the utility companies responsible for its production and distribution. The principal focus of early scholarship on hydroelectricity in Québec was the dynamics of the private sector and the economic impacts of nationalization.<sup>18</sup> Over the past two decades, scholarship has shifted towards the cultural significance of Hydro-Québec. Stéphane Savard and Caroline Desbiens have examined the lasting impact of the crown corporation on Québec culture. As an infrastructure, Hydro-Québec expanded and consolidated the provincial boundaries, serving as a symbol of economic emancipation par excellence.<sup>19</sup> Their analysis demonstrates how Hydro-Québec's cultural clout has overshadowed lasting environmental impacts and Indigenous dispossession. Nevertheless, their work focuses on the cultural meaning of Hydro-Québec rather than electricity. The narrow focus of this historiography has obscured the colonial, environmental, and gendered relationships sustained by large, centralized energy systems.

A rare exception in the field is Ruth Sandwell's application of a feminist framework to energy history. In the introductory chapter of *In a New Light*, Sandwell demonstrates how gender and domesticity are valuable concepts that enable us to examine the influence of energy on everyday practices. As homemakers, women were encouraged to modernize their household

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<sup>18</sup> Claude Bellavance, "L'État, la « houle blanche » et le grand capital: l'Aliénation des ressources hydrauliques du domaine public québécois au début du XXe siècle," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 51, no. 4 (2002), 487.; Claude Bellavance, *Shawinigan Water and Power, 1898-1963: Formation et Déclin d'un Groupe Industriel au Québec* (Boréal, 1994); Claude Bellavance, "Origines économiques et techniques de la Nationalisation de l'électricité au Québec : Expérience Du Régime Mixte (1944 à 1963)," *Cairn* 1, no. 1 (2003), 37.; John H. Dales, *Hydroelectricity and Industrial Development: Quebec, 1898-1940*. (Harvard University Press, 1957).

<sup>19</sup> Stéphane Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois: 1944-2005* (Septentrion, 2013), 79.; Caroline Desbiens, *Power from the North: Territory, Identity, and the Culture of Hydroelectricity in Quebec*, in *Nature, History, Society* (UBC Press, 2013), 12.

labour by using new energy sources and appliances to participate in the illusory march of progress, aligning their roles and work for the technological age.<sup>20</sup> Clarence Hatton-Proulx's *Travailleuse anonyme* similarly situates women's work in Montreal within the history of electrification, revealing a negotiation process that reflected localized needs, constraints, and cultural values.<sup>21</sup> An important facet of their analysis was that electricity served both as motive power and as a commodity used to redefine domestic labour. Hatton-Proulx's dissertation expands on the physical changes to Montreal's urban landscape, detailing the material impacts of a developing energy-intensive culture.<sup>22</sup> His work shows how ideals about modernity and progress materialized and shaped urban landscapes and everyday practices. Both studies underscore that homemakers, as consumers, were at the forefront of household energy transitions.

To understand the evolution of the relationship between women's work and consumer society, my research draws on feminist histories of technology and consumer studies. Ruth Schwartz Cowan's *More Work for Mother* has significantly influenced scholarship on the impact of industrialization on women's unpaid work and on changes in household dynamics. While distribution networks for consumer goods, technologies, and centralized systems imposed on them alleviated certain household tasks, they also shifted domestic responsibilities onto homemakers.<sup>23</sup> By making women's work visible, and indeed central to the maintenance of the household, Cowan argues that domestic labour was instrumental to the economic and political

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<sup>20</sup> Moore and Sandwell, "Anthropocene and Women," 35.

<sup>21</sup> Clarence Hatton-Proulx, "Travailleuses anonymes et modernité énergétique: l'industrie électrique et gazière et l'économie domestique à Montréal, 1904-1959," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française* 75, no. 3 (2022), 40.

<sup>22</sup> Clarence Hatton-Proulx, "Une histoire sociale et matérielle des transitions énergétiques urbaines : le cas de Montréal, 1945-1980," (Université du Québec à Montréal, 2023), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ruth Cowan Schwartz, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (Basic Books, 1983), 170-171.

growth of industrializing societies. Joy Parr's *Domestic Goods* complicates Cowan's narrative by examining the experiences of women as consumers from diverse backgrounds in Canada. Her research focused on women's agency in negotiating the meanings of objects sold to them and on how cultural values, such as thrift, mitigated overt mass consumption associated with the U.S. By examining homemakers' everyday choices and how they negotiated their role as citizen consumers, she demonstrates how the political landscape, class, and morality shaped modes of consumption.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Parr rejects the linearity and blind acceptance of American mass consumer culture that Canadian scholars had often adopted.

Recent scholarship on consumer culture has complicated the binary distinction between passive and active characterization of women's consumer behaviour. As Bettina Liverant argues, consumption and consumer behaviour are better understood at the "intersection of practices and the structures of government, capital, and society, precisely located in time and place."<sup>25</sup> In *Buying Happiness*, Liverant discusses the limitations of agency within a market economy by examining the evolution of discourse around consumption and its politicization by intellectuals, politicians and civil servants as a form of Canadian nationalism from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s. She demonstrates how standards of living, elaborated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and sharpened by the Depression, were pivotal in redefining the state's role and its intervention in household economies. *Buying Happiness* traces how discourse and policy initiatives transformed Canadian society from a culture of thrift to one in which citizenship and social welfare were linked to consumer spending patterns and purposes. In Liverant's chapter in the edited collection

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<sup>24</sup> Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*. (University of Toronto Press, 1999), 32-33.

<sup>25</sup> Bettina Liverant, "Negotiating Narratives: Recent Approaches in Consumer Studies," *Canadian Labour Studies*, 71, (2013), 222-223.

*North of America*, she examines how the American middle-class ideal set the standard by which the state defined Canadian living standards. While the model was unattainable for a large proportion of Canadian families, it nevertheless shaped conceptions of what an average household should possess in a modernizing consumer society.<sup>26</sup> The chapter argues that while Canadian historians have successfully demonstrated how culture, race, and class mediated imported middle-class ideals from south of the border, they nevertheless became models of “the good life.”<sup>27</sup>

The first chapter of this thesis supports Liverant’s argument by examining how modern domesticity evolved and was reconciled with Catholic morality in Montreal during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I examine how French-Canadian families in metropolitan areas altered their shopping, spending, and household routines in response to a new culture of mass consumption, drawing on the works of Denyse Baillargeon, Magda Fahrni, and Marilyne Brisebois. Their research allowed for a more nuanced analysis as norms around consumption changed, demonstrating how religion, politics, and shifting economic contexts shaped and constrained women's roles, particularly those of working-class women, and their relationship to consumer culture in Québec and Montreal. Studies of Montreal homemakers show the strategies women used to manage household budgets<sup>28</sup> and how some politicized this role and made demands upon governments for basic welfare measures.<sup>29</sup> A growing share of the population in postwar Canada and Québec fostered ideals about living standards that pushed households to consume more

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<sup>26</sup> Bettina Liverant, *Buying Happiness* (UBC Press, 2018), 114-115.

<sup>27</sup> Bettina Liverant, “Rethinking Postwar Domesticity: The Canadian Household in the 1950s,” in *North of America: Canadians and the American Century, 1945–60*, 143.

<sup>28</sup> Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family, and Home in Montreal During the Great Depression*, 24; Marilyne Brisebois, “« La maman est l’économe de la maison » : La ligue ouvrière catholique et la consommation quotidienne au Québec, 1939-1954,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française* 70, no. 1–2 (2016), 140.

<sup>29</sup> Magda Fahrni, *Household Politics: Montreal Families and Postwar Reconstruction* (University of Toronto Press, 2005), 126-127.

energy and goods. Historians who have examined how consumer behaviour intersects with institutions, social norms, and the political economy, show that the adoption of household appliances and electrification were not immediate or universal processes.<sup>30</sup> Their work underlines that women were actively encouraged and taught to incorporate these innovations into their daily routines. As such, women's labour within the home became inextricably linked and organized by an expanding industrial capitalist system that defined early twentieth-century Montreal. The spread of appliances and electrification was not only a matter of technological progress but a reflection of the cultural and economic principles that made these commodities available and desirable.

As valuable as this literature is, it tends to remain focused on domestic and cultural dimensions of consumption without considering their environmental consequences. What remains underexplored is how natural resources sustained middle-class ideals. Here, the insights of environmental historians have been essential. Andrew Needham's *Power Lines* exemplifies an approach that connects micro-level consumption with macro-level production, documenting the transfer of wealth from Navajo land in the form of coal deposits needed to sustain modern living standards.<sup>31</sup> In the Canadian context, Tina Loo and Meg Stanley show how high-modernist ideals of improvement during the postwar period shaped provincial and national politics. The assumption that state management, science, and technology would make life easier and better motivated the development of large hydroelectric mega-projects. They consider the uneven distribution of costs and benefits, as well as the environmental and social impacts of these

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth Cowan Schwartz, *More Work for Mother*; Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods*; Bettina Liverant, *Buying Happiness*; Magda Fahrni, "Counting the Costs of Living," 483–503; Marilyne Brisebois, "« La maman est l'économe de la maison », " 139–161.

<sup>31</sup> Needham, *Power Lines*, 7.

projects.<sup>32</sup> In *Moved by the State*, Loo uses case studies from across Canada to examine social development projects that impacted and displaced rural and marginalized communities, underscoring the costs of state-led modernization.<sup>33</sup> Brittany Luby's *Dammed* discussed how the same state-led Norman Dam development project transformed Anishinaabe lands, affecting traditional subsistence practices and leading to economic and food insecurity. *Dammed* offers an Indigenous perspective on these impacts, contrasting them with the benefits settlers enjoyed.<sup>34</sup> In Québec, Caroline Desbiens, Justine Gagnon, and Eric Kanapé wrote a series of articles on how Hydro-Québec infrastructure altered ancestral lands of the Pessamit community, particularly those affected by the Bersimis and Manicouagan-Outardes hydroelectric development projects. Their work is part of an ongoing collaborative project with the community as they negotiate the Petapan Treaty with the provincial government.<sup>35</sup>

Historians of domesticity and consumer culture have convincingly demonstrated how gender, class, and specific cultural contexts influenced household practices. They have paid less attention to the environmental consequences of these practices. Environmental historians and scholars drawing on insights from the field have documented the ecological and colonial impacts of hydro projects, but often without considering how the demand for “home comforts” was framed, gendered, and promoted in everyday life. By drawing on these different currents, I aim to bridge the historiographical gap by situating energy consumption at the intersection of energy and consumer history with an environmental history framework. This thesis highlights how

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<sup>32</sup> Loo and Stanley, "An Environmental History of Progress," 401.

<sup>33</sup> Tina Loo, *Moved by the State: Forced Relocation and Making a Good Life in Postwar Canada* (UBC Press, 2019), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Luby, *Dammed*.

<sup>35</sup> Gagnon et al., ““Where You Have to Bypass,”” 365; Justine Gagnon and Caroline Desbiens, “Mapping Memories in a Flooded Landscape: A Place of Reenactment Project,” *Emotion, Space and Society*, no. 27 (2018): 40.

postwar Québec's electrification was a project that simultaneously altered the minutiae of daily household labour and integrated northern rivers, such as the Betsiamites, into provincial power networks.

My archival research began with multiple trips to the Hydro-Québec archives at a substation in Hochelaga. The archives hold fonds from all the utilities expropriated during the nationalization process. Due to ongoing legal battles between Innu communities and Hydro-Québec, archival sources discussing the Bersimis projects are restricted. I consulted company newspapers from the MLHP and Hydro-Québec, dating back to the 1930s, for articles on the electrification of homes, the development of the Montreal electric system, and the Bersimis project. Company magazines and documents were useful for examining promotional campaigns targeting homemakers and for examining the central role the Commission hydroélectrique du Québec hoped to play in building a prosperous, modern Québec.

I also drew from Home Economics manuals at the Congrégation Notre-Dame (CND) archives. The CND was the principal publisher of domestic science and home economics textbooks from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the early 1960s. They sold manuals to schools throughout Montreal in both English and French, purchased by various organizations, notably the Action Catholique. The bulk of my research relied on materials from the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec in Montreal and their online collection. The most useful collections were those of the Ligue ouvrière catholique, Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique, and the Service de Préparation au Mariage, each affiliated with the Action Sociale Catholique movement. The movement, which originated in Belgium, is significant as it aimed to re-christianize the urban working class by engaging with the material realm. Religious leaders in the movement addressed the “social question” of growing material inequalities emerging in

urban and industrialized centers.<sup>36</sup> Magda Fahrni and Maryline Brisebois have examined these organizations as consumer activist groups and, as such, as part of a broader movement of citizens grappling with the rising cost of living in an increasingly market-dependent economy.<sup>37</sup>

I reviewed newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1960, to gain insight into how the Bersimis project was perceived by its proponents and opponents, and how it was received and discussed. *La Revue Moderne* and the Federation Saint-Jean-Baptiste journal *La Bonne Parole* were useful for examining the evolution of advertisements for appliances and for gaining insights into societal changes. Taken together, these sources reconstruct both sides of Québec's emerging energy culture, co-constituted by everyday practices through which women integrated electricity into family life and by infrastructural projects that extended Hydro-Québec's reach into the North Shore.

The chapters are organized thematically. I first examine the incentives that encouraged homemakers to adopt home comforts and trace how these practices contributed to the development of the Bersimis project. Focusing on these two points allows me to grapple with histories of household energy consumption and production. I examine the growth of the energy sector during the postwar period and how homemakers were incentivized to adopt "home comforts." From the interwar period to the late 1950s, modern domestic ideals, energy, and its potential to raise living standards were synonymous. This close-knit relationship evolved alongside the transition from a culture of thrift to a consumer culture governed by moral guidelines for how much to spend and on what. The adoption of home comforts was about being a good mother, securing the well-being of one's family and, by extension, the French-Canadian Catholic family. I examine the arguments presented to homemakers in home economics

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<sup>36</sup> Brisebois, "« La maman est l'économe de la maison»," 141.

<sup>37</sup> Fahrni, *Household Politics*, 119; Brisebois, "« La maman est l'économe de la maison»," 144.

textbooks published in Montreal, in *La Revue Moderne*, and in materials from women-led associations, and consider the tensions between tradition and progress.

The second chapter connects domestic demand to the Bersimis complex. I argue that the Bersimis development project helped sustain the living standards discussed in Chapter One. Just as electricity was central to ideals of domesticity and progress, the expropriation of the MLHP was integral to the province's development during Maurice Duplessis's Union National government. I consulted annual reports and employee magazines to understand how Hydro-Québec responded to increasing household electricity consumption. *Entre-Nous* allowed me to see how the crown corporation positioned itself as the driving force behind the province's progress and the evolution of the Bersimis project on the Betsiamites River. Both *Entre-Nous* and newspaper articles from the period provided a wealth of information about how the project developed and was received by the public. Finally, I discuss the outcomes and environmental costs, drawing on reports from Indian Affairs and testimonies from members of the Pessamit community. By contrasting domestic ideals, which prioritize comfort and convenience with hydroelectric development, the chapter demonstrates that Québec's nation-building and modernization demanded unprecedented quantities of resources. This comparison underscores the link between modern living standards, measured by home comforts, natural resource extraction and an expanding settler state. Increased energy production and the acceleration of extractive projects did not decline by the end of the period in question. The chapter concludes with the announcement of the Manicouagan-Outardes complex as an example of Hydro-Québec's continued impact.

By combining the study of household energy consumption with the politics of hydro development, this thesis broadens the analytical scope of Québec's energy history. It argues that nation-building in postwar Québec was enacted simultaneously in the electrified kitchens of Montreal and in the hydroelectric megaprojects of the North Shore. Within this system, women's domestic labour and consumer choices were framed as essential to the survival of the French-Canadian culture. Ideals of modern living and progress have had a lasting impact, laying an uneven foundation for Quebec's economic emancipation.<sup>38</sup> Incorporating household energy practices and connecting the Betsiamites River to the history of energy in Québec complicates the slogan "maître chez nous," which was cheered by Jean Lesage just a few years after the Bersimis-II was completed.

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<sup>38</sup> Dalie Giroux, *L'œil du maître : Figures de l'imaginaire colonial Québécois*. (Mémoire d'encrier, 2020), 5.

## Chapter 1

### Modern Domesticity

Since the 1980s, feminist historians such as Ruth Cowan Schwartz have legitimized women's experiences in the private sphere as an important historical subject, consequently, research on shifts in the meaning and practice of domestic labour and the private sphere expanded. It revealed how industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of waged work influenced social norms and continually redefined the boundaries of an idealized domestic life.<sup>1</sup> Their research has enabled a growing body of work to examine how energy shaped women's domestic labour and how homemakers were active participants in the development of Western energy cultures that have led to the current climate crisis. While their agency was constrained by gendered, class, and racial hierarchies, women's active engagement with diverse energy sources was instrumental in the energy transitions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The importance of homemakers' decision-making process was recognized and targeted by promoters, reformers, and educators who sought to adapt their labour to "the industrial context and the domestic technologies it had given rise to."<sup>3</sup> The adoption and spread of new technologies, from large hydroelectric projects to everyday appliances, was shaped by gendered hierarchies and the historical and cultural contexts in which they emerged. By examining how French-Canadian mothers were encouraged to rely on centralized services from the early 20th century through to the 1950s, we can shed light on how

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<sup>1</sup> Bettina Bradbury, "L'économie familiale et le travail dans une ville en voie d'industrialisation: Montréal dans les années 1870," in *Maitresses de maison, maitresses d'école : Femmes, famille et éducation dans l'histoire du Québec* (1983; Boréal Express), 289; Sandwell, "Changing the Plot," 29; Denise Baillargeon, *Making Do*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Vanessa Taylor, "Anthropocene Women: Energy, Agency, and the Home in Twentieth Century Britain," in *In a New Light: Histories of Women and Energy*, ed. Abigail Harrison Moore and Ruth W. Sandwell (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Baillargeon, *Making Do*, 12.

patterns of social and technical change were sold to Catholic families and, more broadly, on how Western, energy-intensive cultures and patterns developed.<sup>4</sup>

Although material changes in infrastructure were essential to this transformation, the chapter examines how various groups and actors redefined the meaning of electricity and its relationship to domestic labour. Promotional and educational campaigns targeted homemakers, encouraging them to use more energy and household technologies as markers of their rationality and willingness to adapt to modernity.<sup>5</sup> The introduction of household technologies represented more than technical improvements; their decisions to adopt and adapt to new equipment were ideologically charged with principles that outlined gendered divisions of labour. While historians have largely covered how technological innovations enabled provincial governments to push resource frontiers further North, the role of domestic ideals has not.<sup>6</sup> Yet, modern domesticity was a crucial node in these developments and symbolized the promise of progress and women's inclusion in a Western way of life. It was within this framework that women were not only encouraged to use electricity but to consume it abundantly with household appliances. The following pages examine how different groups contributed to redefining electricity as both a practical necessity and a moral obligation, tied to ideals of Catholic motherhood, proper household management, and modern living standards.

In this chapter, I will argue that Montreal households significantly increased their energy consumption after the war, in part because key actors had spent previous decades forging a

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<sup>4</sup> Sandwell, "Changing the Plot," 33.

<sup>5</sup> Vanessa Taylor and Heather Chappells, "What do Consumers in the Past Tell us about Future Energyscapes?" In, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, no. 2 (2019), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Bellavance, "Origines économiques et techniques de la nationalisation de l'électricité au Québec, 42; Claude Bellavance et al., "De la lutte antimonopoliste à la promotion de la grande entreprise," 558; Alain Metton, "L'électricité dans les ménages du Québec," *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 13, no. 30 (1969), 285; Sandwell, "Changing the Plot," 29.

strong link between domestic work and energy-intensive practices as symbols of progress. I show how leaders in the energy industry, education, and politics actively promoted this relationship through advertisements, educational texts, and public hearings from the early to mid-20th century. I begin by describing how the Canadian Electric Association and its members introduced energy-intensive domesticity to Montreal homemakers through coordinated marketing campaigns in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter analyzes how discourse centred on protecting the family incorporated these energy practices, which deepens understanding of the complex position women occupied as they navigated shifting household economics. It examines how 1950s aspirational living standards, seen through a Catholic moral framework, contributed to the normalization of energy-intensive behaviours in French-Canadian households.

### **Building Loads and Creating Demand**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Montreal had become Canada's leading industrial hub, and the expanding market economy gradually reshaped domestic life.<sup>7</sup> The process of industrialization and urbanization diminished household self-sufficiency, making families increasingly reliant on “store-bought” goods.<sup>8</sup> This transition sharpened gendered divisions of labour, solidifying the male breadwinner and “wife-mother-housewife” model.<sup>9</sup> Historian Ruth Sandwell argues that, due to this division of labour, women develop an intimate relationship with the energy sources necessary to perform their housework.<sup>10</sup> From the 1930s to the late 1950s, the average Montreal household increased its hydroelectric power consumption from less than 70 kWh per month to

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<sup>7</sup> Schwartz, *More Work for Mother*, 170; Baillargeon, *Making Do*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Liverant, *Buying Happiness*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Baillargeon, *Making Do*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Sandwell, “Changing the Plot,” 32.

more than 500 kWh per month.<sup>11</sup> Given the importance of fuel to women's domestic labour, examining how electricity and electric appliances were adapted and promoted for household use can help us better understand this transition.

After the First World War, the Montreal Light Heat and Power Co. found that its infrastructure was underutilized and sought to cultivate residential demand to improve load balance and profit margins.<sup>12</sup> In the early decades of the 20th century, a distinctive feature of hydroelectric power generation was that infrastructures were often built ahead of demand.<sup>13</sup> Once installed, shutting down a generating station or reducing production was inefficient, resulting in "lost" sales. As Sandwell highlights, hydro-electric power generation in Ontario was years ahead of "popular consumer understanding of how, or indeed why, to use electric energy."<sup>14</sup> In Montreal, the two main utilities, the MLHP and the Shawinigan Water and Power Co., faced this issue at the end of WWI, when industries involved in wartime production reduced their energy consumption. The MLHP, like many power companies across North America, began promoting household appliances to homemakers as symbols of modern homemaking, encouraging them to increase and diversify their electricity use.<sup>15</sup> As a sales representative from Westinghouse Canada put it, in the early years of the company, Westinghouse "originally went into the appliance business not just to build appliances, but to build loads."<sup>16</sup>

To increase domestic demand, power companies like the MLHP, promoted appliances to homemakers as tools that would improve and dignify their domestic labour. In the early 1920s,

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<sup>11</sup> Hatton-Proulx, "Creating Supply, Creating Demand," 13; Alain Metton, "L'électricité dans les ménages du Québec," 289.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 209; Ruth W. Sandwell, "Pedagogies of the Unimpressed," 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth W. Sandwell, "Pedagogies of the Unimpressed," 40; Clarence Hatton-Proulx, "Creating Supply, Creating Demand," 2.

<sup>14</sup> Sandwell, "Changing the Plot," 40.

<sup>15</sup> Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 211; Hatton-Proulx, "Travailleuses Anonymes," 53.

<sup>16</sup> K.J. Farthing, "This Is Our Company," n.d., Box 16 21-1993; 47, 1995, file 4, Westinghouse Canada Fonds.

the Canadian Electric Association, made up of the country's largest utilities, set out to "stimulate and extend the use of electricity for any purpose whatsoever, "through educational campaigns comprising lectures, literature, advertising, exhibitions and demonstrations."<sup>17</sup> As members of the CEA, managers from the energy industry in Quebec recruited their female staff, forming the Women's Committee, which met monthly for luncheons to learn and promote the benefits of electricity amongst peers. Speaking to the Committee, P. T. Davies, vice-president of Southern Power Co., explained that, "Knowledge concerning the use of electricity in the home was in the possession of women, in the electrical industry particularly, and that this knowledge should be imparted to others at every available opportunity so the drudgery of the home might be eliminated entirely from the life of the housewife."<sup>18</sup> The message that P.T. Davies was giving to the Women's Committee was that the services and technologies they sold were not simply products, they had moral and civic value.

Examining the diffusion of electricity in the first half of the century, historian Dorotea Gucciardo argues that the goal of these marketing strategies was not only to sell electric goods but to promote the idea of electricity as a lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> Between the two world wars, Canadian women were the targets of campaigns promoting the rational organization of domestic work. Inspired by Taylorist principles, they emphasized the value of productivity, efficiency, and the rationalization of time, effectively making domestic work akin to a profession. Additionally, the messages argued that the time saved enabled mothers to become more active citizens by allowing them to spend more time with their children.<sup>20</sup> In this way, electricity and the mechanization of

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<sup>17</sup> Canadian Electrical Association, *Constitution: Canadian Electrical Association*. 1923, 4 Gerstein collection, University of Toronto.

<sup>18</sup> Montreal Light, Heat & Power Consolidated, *Dual Service*. January 1927, 6. Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>19</sup> Gucciardo, "The Powered Generation," 135.

<sup>20</sup> Montreal Light, Heat & Power Consolidated, *Dual Service*. September 1929, 9. Archives Hydro-Québec.

housework were presented not merely as conveniences but as gateways, enabling them to engage more fully in public life as better mothers. The Montreal Women's Committee luncheon featured presentations on a range of topics that underscored how new equipment was not only practical but also symbolized a more productive, efficient home. Guest lecturers ranged from vice presidents to prominent women within the industry in both Canada and the US. For example, home economist Eloise Davidson came to Montréal in 1929 to discuss the importance of new technologies for women and their domestic labour. During the conference, Davidson compared the home to industry, arguing that housework required more labour than any other business. For this reason, women needed to learn how to make intelligent choices about how to allocate their time and the appliances in their homes.<sup>21</sup> In the US, Davidson was instrumental in building networks between home economics programs and utilities by developing university courses focused on household equipment. As historians have noted, women in the industry were not passive recipients of promotional messages. Many were active participants in promoting and educating other women about the desirability of modern domestic ideals.<sup>22</sup> They played a critical role as intermediaries between companies and clients, providing some women access to waged work as teachers and salespeople, and supporting product development. Members of the Women's Committee and home economics experts like Davidson taught their peers about the technical importance of new technologies and the empowering potential these products could have in women's lives.

Promotional campaigns did more than equate energy consumption with the emancipatory potential of modern homemaking. By associating different appliances with different tasks, campaigns promoted the idea that the more energy a woman consumed, the more authority and

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<sup>21</sup> Montreal Light, Heat & Power Consolidated, *Dual Service*. March 1929, 16. Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, "Anthropocene Women," 175; Goldstein, *Creating Consumers*, 220.

control she had. As one GE radio broadcast on CKAC made explicit: "A woman with a washboard is a generator of power, whereas a woman with an electric washing machine is a director of power... not until you use electricity for power will you be freed of the slavery of dishwashing, clothes washing, ironing, food mixing, etc..."<sup>23</sup> The comparison between those who used technology and those who did not conveyed the idea that eliminating manual labour dignified and civilized housework. More importantly, the message implied that the more energy a homemaker used, the more efficient and liberated she became. The promotional messages emphasized how electricity and appliances, services and goods offered by the MLHP, were the moral and technological refinement of domestic labour.<sup>24</sup>

Sales representatives and women in the industry associated women's domestic labour with their value as mothers and explicitly linked this value to the adoption of new technologies, to a willingness to embrace the modern technological era. Principles of efficiency and productivity, derived from domestic sciences, legitimized increased energy use and encouraged the purchase of new appliances. Modern domesticity became defined not only by the adoption of new technologies but also by increased energy consumption. Companies capitalized on growing concerns that industrialization and shifting changes in household dynamics were leading women away from their domestic responsibilities. As discussed in the following pages, reformers saw new technologies as solutions to these ongoing transformations. In contrast, educators expressed ambivalence regarding the introduction of new appliances, their costs, and the consumer culture they represented. Domestic labour, motherhood, and technological innovation became interconnected, not only shaping modern domestic ideals, but an emerging consumer culture.

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<sup>23</sup> Montreal Light, Heat & Power Consolidated, *Dual Service*. 1929, 3. Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>24</sup> Gucciardo, "Powering Up Canada," 175.

## Ideals of Modern Domesticity

Catholic educators and reformers sought to instill the idea that scientific household management could counter the detrimental effects of modern life. As historian Maryline Brisebois notes, the discipline of domestic science was developed to help women adapt to the urban industrial context.<sup>25</sup> The purpose was not to isolate women from technological change but to ensure that new tools and methods were used to refine their domestic roles. Women were expected to play a crucial role in managing societal changes as mothers, educators, and homemakers.<sup>26</sup> Prominent figures of the Catholic social reform movement, such as Sœur Marie Gérin-Lajoie, promoted these ideals. As she expressed in a conference titled “Le retour de la mère au foyer,” domestic science elevated women’s work and the living standards for their families. In her opinion,

« Car si les conditions modernes ont diminué par certains côtés les tâches domestiques, elles ont introduit au foyer tant de moyens nouveaux et scientifiques d’accomplir les moindres travaux, elles ont tant élevé le niveau de la vie et introduit d’exigences capables d’utiliser toutes nos ressources d’ingéniosité et d’instruction que la femme initiée y trouve ample matière à intérêt.»<sup>27</sup>

For Gérin-Lajoie, modern conditions had reduced women’s labour, with the introduction of technical developments which promised to keep mothers stimulated in their domestic roles. Domestic science called for a more educated, disciplined housekeeper, capable of ameliorating both the spiritual and technical dimensions of their home. As noted by historian Maryline Brisebois, these principles reflected Catholic feminist ideology, which offered women social authority not by challenging domestic roles but by institutionalizing them.<sup>28</sup> Domestic science

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<sup>25</sup> Maryline Brisebois, “L’enseignement ménager au Québec : Entre « mystique » féminine et professionnalisation, 1930-1960,” *Recherches Féministes* 30, no. 2 (2017), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Nicole Thivierge, “L’enseignement ménager-familial au Québec, 1880-1970” (Université Laval, 1981), 224.

<sup>27</sup> Marie Gérin-Lajoie, *Le retour de la mère au foyer*, éd. Secrétariat de l’É.S.P. l’École sociale populaire, (Montréal, 1932), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Brisebois, “L’enseignement ménager au Québec,” 25.

educated women on how to adapt their role and practices in a modernizing society while preserving their moral integrity and responsibilities as Catholic mothers.<sup>29</sup>

Through kinship ties, Marie Gérin-Lajoie was closely associated with the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, the leading French-Canadian social reform group in the early 20th century. The FNSJB and its anglophone counterpart, the Montreal Council of Women, were part of a broad association of influential women's groups that formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Organized to promote ideals grounded in gendered divisions of labour and based on concepts of the essential "natures" of women and men and the separate spheres rationale, women's reform associations sought to assist both urban and rural women in adapting to a world transformed by industrialization. According to Gérin-Lajoie and her peers, the rise of industrial capitalism and women's entry into waged work significantly transformed family dynamics by turning the home into an economically productive space in which daily needs increasingly depended on income to purchase marketed goods. Night classes, women's groups and school curricula were developed to help women acclimate to these new responsibilities. The FNSJB, for one, founded the Ecole Ménagère Provinciale (EMP), the first francophone domestic science school in Montréal.<sup>30</sup> However, the belief that technological developments could benefit the domestic sphere remained beyond the reach of the large working-class population.

During the interwar period, the everyday reality of households looked very different from the electric ideal promoted by reformers from the French-Canadian elite. In the 1920s, only half of Montreal households were connected to the MLHP, which used electricity mainly for lighting.<sup>31</sup> Until the mid-20th century, it was "muscle power, not electricity or gas, that provided

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<sup>29</sup> Hatton-Proulx, "Travailleuses anonymes et modernité énergétique," 60.

<sup>30</sup> Brisebois, "L'enseignement ménager au Québec," 22; Hatton-Proulx, "Travailleuses anonymes," 42-43.

<sup>31</sup> Hatton-Proulx, "Creating Supply, Creating Demand," 6.

the energy for most household tasks, from laundry to cleaning floors."<sup>32</sup> Well into the 20th century, households continued to rely on wood and coal to heat homes and cook and on ice to cool food in iceboxes.<sup>33</sup> The contrast between domestic ideals and the realities faced by the working-class majority underscores the challenges and aspirations that homemakers navigated.

The spread of new household technologies in interwar Québec was a cause for concern among Catholic educational circles. While private utilities celebrated electricity as a symbol of progress, Catholic domestic science educators emphasized the need to balance modern innovations with traditional values. Textbooks published by the Congrégation de Notre-Dame were less compromising with new technologies. Chapters discussing household technologies discussed that older methods and appliances had multiple functions. For example, the cast-iron stove was used for both cooking and heating and was where the family could gather and talk. The central role of the cast-iron stove helped nurture healthy family relationships. Textbooks argued that new ranges altered the ways homemakers interacted with food and cooking “les ménagers d’aujourd’hui sont si pressés, ils partent si souvent en course, ils achètent les choses toutes faites, ils n’ont même pas le temps d’être heureux, on dirait... Vive les vieux poêles amis, les feux à bois.”<sup>34</sup> The use of mechanical washers was depicted as a peaceful process, in contrast to the drudgery described in *The Dual Service*. Passages described how women's work involved other family members and the importance of mutual aid.

Domestic science textbooks expressed ambivalence toward the promises of modern homemaking, highlighting tensions between business interests and the Catholic Church's encouragement of detachment from material goods. Early editions linked domestic labour,

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<sup>32</sup> Sandwell, “Pedagogies of the Unimpressed: Re-Educating Ontario Women for the Modern Energy Regime, 1900-1940.” 49.

<sup>33</sup> Gucciardo, “The Powered Generation,” 170.

<sup>34</sup> *L'économie domestique à l'école élémentaire*, 1938, 50. Manuels scolaires, 570.550 (10). Archives CND.

motherhood, and material detachment to the survival of the French-Canadian family. New methods, consumer culture, and, at times, aspects of progress were potentially disruptive and tended to erode traditional social bonds. Historians note that during the interwar years, efficiency and ease were not convincing selling points if they came at the cost of family welfare.<sup>35</sup> In fact, new technologies did little to reduce workloads. Oral testimonies from Ontario homemakers also saw that new technologies were not accepted unquestioningly. In their accounts, they were initially hesitant to adopt unfamiliar energy sources and the changes in their daily routines that accompanied them.<sup>36</sup> The scenes described in the textbooks support Sandwell's argument that modern energy required both infrastructural development and changes in people's perceptions of appliances as luxuries, before they became commonplace.<sup>37</sup>

Books from the CND complicate the technological determinism portrayed in narratives of progress by urging students to be vigilant about the meaning and impact of new technologies, emphasizing that progress must serve the family and Catholic virtues rather than succumb to trends or live beyond their means. This ambivalence highlights that, in Québec, modern domestic life had not yet been shaped either by technological advancements or by values encouraged by the energy sector. On the contrary, progress did not require adapting to the interwar period's socioeconomic context, influenced by the rise of consumer culture that was widely regarded as potentially disruptive to the social fabric. However, the economic hardship experienced by working-class families during the Depression years exacerbated class tensions and notions of what constituted a fair and equitable standard of living. Across Canada, public discourse on who had the authority to dictate working people's access to basic goods intensified. Access to energy

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<sup>35</sup> Gucciardo, "The Powered Generation," 173; Hatton-Proulx, "Travailleuses anonymes," 59.

<sup>36</sup> Gucciardo, "The Powered Generation," 174.

<sup>37</sup> Sandwell, "Changing the Plot," 39

services and household technologies was part of ongoing negotiations over new norms and the basic requirements for the well-being of families and individuals in industrialized urban centers.

### **Electricity and Living Standards**

In *Buying Happiness*, historian Bettina Liverant discusses how, during the interwar years, politicians, observing Canada's growing industrial economy and increasing urbanization, recognized that Canadians' well-being was linked to their ability to purchase everyday goods.<sup>38</sup> Political debates over the roles that provincial and federal governments should assume to ensure Canadians' economic stability and adequate living standards culminated during the economic crisis of the 1930s.<sup>39</sup> At the national level, years of economic hardship and scandals involving politicians colluding with private interests prompted a parliamentary inquiry into the impact of large monopolies and their practices on the Canadian economy.<sup>40</sup> In Quebec, a small group of progressive professionals advocated that the provincial government establish a commission to investigate the energy trust. Heading the campaign were T.D. Bouchard, who would later become one of Hydro-Quebec's first commissioners, and Dr. Philippe Hamel rallied around the issue of the province's energy trusts. In their view, preferential treatment of large industry and the exploitation of small businesses and households had delayed the integration of the "first generation" of electric appliances, limiting individuals' and the province's ability to modernize.<sup>41</sup> The Commission Lapointe showed that for many, electricity was no longer a luxury but a public right. Politicians, reformers, and citizens believed that citizens needed access to affordable energy, and electricity as one of the building blocks of the future.

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<sup>38</sup> Liverant, *Buying Happiness*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Liverant, *Buying Happiness*, 109.

<sup>40</sup> Liverant, *Buying Happiness*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Bellavance et al., "De la lutte antimonopoliste à la promotion de la grande entreprise," 558.

In his presentation to the Commission, Dr. Hamel attributed the slow pace of electrification to dubious business practices employed by the province's private power companies. He argued that the state could no longer permit private interests to conflict with the public good. That the private interests of a consolidated few limited the population's access to the necessities of modern life, in a province "si riche en houille blanche, cela ne paraît plus justifiable aujourd'hui où les "standards" de vie rendent notre jeunesse, à bon droit, plus exigeante."<sup>42</sup> Dr. Hamel presented and outlined the CEA's hegemonic influence over the energy and manufacturing sectors in Canada and Québec, resulting in increasing inequity for urban working classes and farmers who could not afford the tariffs set by private utilities. He emphasized that electricity had become a necessity to which everyone should have access. Without it, households could not maintain basic living standards. This sentiment was reflected in a statement by Dr. Hamel: "Nous sommes au siècle de la prospérité par l'électricité."<sup>43</sup> In his view, and one shared by the majority of industrialized societies, economic progress was largely predicated on access to energy. The relationship between energy supply and domestic labour from the interwar period to the end of the 1950s evolved alongside a re-evaluation of social norms and the state's role in standardizing them.

It took a decade for the provincial government to act decisively against the private power monopolies. In 1936, the state established the Régie de l'électricité, which replaced the ineffective public services board and extended its regulatory authority to supervise the activities of private distributors. Shortly after, the MLHP and Beauharnois Power were expropriated, initiating the first phase of nationalization by establishing the Commission hydroélectrique de

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<sup>42</sup> Philippe Hamel, *Le trust de l'électricité [...] (1934)*, Collection BAnQ.

<sup>43</sup> Hamel, *Le trust de l'électricité [...]*, 102.

Québec, allowing the state to intervene directly in the electricity sector.<sup>44</sup> Public ownership of Montreal's network had the immediate effect of reducing tariffs for residential and commercial customers in Montreal. The state's direct intervention pressured private utilities across the province to invest in the residential and rural sectors, thereby enabling households to increase their electricity consumption.<sup>45</sup> The creation of Hydro-Québec dramatically disrupted the balance of power between the state and private distributors, accelerating infrastructure projects to distribute electricity to domestic customers. When private utilities held a monopoly over the market, 70% of hydropower revenue came from industrial customers. As a result of price regulation and state intervention, by the end of the 1950s, only 45% of revenues came from large industries. Reduced rates had encouraged households to adopt energy-intensive appliances, leading to an immediate and notable increase in household consumption. Hydroelectric power consumption went from 100 kWh per month in 1945 to more than 500 kWh by 1960.<sup>46</sup> For example, in 1941, 92.3% of Montreal households were heated with wood or coal, 80.6% used gas or electricity for cooking, and 25.1% had a mechanical refrigerator. By 1951, only 48% heated with wood or coal, 87.4% cooked with gas or electricity, and 61.1% had refrigerators.<sup>47</sup> A gradual shift in ideas about fairness and access to goods and services occurred from the mid-1930s through the postwar years. The Commission was emblematic of a new social contract in which access to power became a matter of social welfare.<sup>48</sup>

## Adopting Modern Comforts

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<sup>44</sup> Bellavance, "Origines économiques et techniques de la nationalisation de l'électricité au Québec," 39.

<sup>45</sup> Bellavance, *Shawinigan Water and Power, 1898-1963*, 140.

<sup>46</sup> Bellavance, "Origines économiques et techniques de la nationalisation de l'électricité au Québec," 43.

<sup>47</sup> Stéphanie O'Neil, "L'Argent ne fait pas le bonheur: les discours sur la société de consommation et les modes de vie à Montréal, 1945-1975," (These Université de Montréal, 2016), 94; Hatton-Proulx, "Creating Supply, Creating Demand," 13.

<sup>48</sup> Bellavance et al., "De la lutte antimonopoliste à la promotion de la grande entreprise," 557.

In the immediate postwar period and the early 1950s, women led consumer advocacy groups that helped redefine the baseline needs of the average household. During this time, electricity and modern appliances gradually stopped being seen as luxury items but as staples of a stable household. Women's militancy around consumer goods had evolved during the war, when the federal government established the Consumer Branch of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, which encouraged women to monitor the prices of staples and to support the implementation of household rationing measures for goods channelled into wartime production. Women's enrolment on the home front in price-watching campaigns fostered a sense of responsibility that endured after the war in organizations such as the Canadian Association of Consumers, created in 1947 from the WPTB consumer branch. In Montreal, the CAC had advocates within La Ligue ouvrière catholique féminine (LOCF), who publicly articulated demands on behalf of the French-Canadian working classes for improved welfare measures and a reasonable cost of living as wartime price controls were relaxed.<sup>49</sup> They hoped to educate existing and future homemakers on budgeting as a defence of their family's moral and material well-being. Brisebois examines in greater depth how the women's branch mobilized to educate future mothers, in part through home economics lessons on budgeting and spending.<sup>50</sup> The LOCF was part of the broader Action catholique movement, initiated during the interwar period by church authorities who sought to platform working-class demands for better living conditions by creating action-oriented militant groups.<sup>51</sup> Brisebois discussed how the women's branch emphasized the importance of budgeting in newspapers such as *Le Mouvement Ouvrier* and *Le Front Ouvrier*, and how this discussion evolved after the war. Driven by fears of inflation, budgeting became a priority, making

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<sup>49</sup> Fahrni, *Household Politics*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> Brisebois, "« La maman est l'économe de la maison », " 147.

<sup>51</sup> Fahrni, *Household Politics*, 108; Brisebois, "« La maman est l'économe de la maison », " 150.

homemakers responsible for the material and moral well-being of working-class families. The newspapers published articles by home economics experts like Éveline Leblanc, head of the École ménagère provinciale in the early 1950s, to legitimize women's responsibilities and duties.<sup>52</sup> Brisebois argues that although columns by experts such as Leblanc stressed the importance of savings, they also emphasized the importance of material well-being to maintain a united, healthy, and moral family. Courses offered by the Service de préparation au mariage, organized by the LOCF's youth branch, taught future couples sound financial management and their respective responsibilities across the different facets of the family budget. They instructed young women and men to budget for items such as appliances and furniture so that they could enter their union with necessities and avoid debt.<sup>53</sup> The emphasis on budgets was a response to the profound changes and economic hardship many felt as they found themselves in the urban, industrialized reality of postwar Montreal.<sup>54</sup>

Home Economics textbooks echoed the themes discussed in courses by the Action Catholic movement and the CAC, and stressed the importance of spending for the family's well-being. The books show that the Congrégation Notre-Dame sought to adapt domestic labour to the postwar context. While thrift and household production were still promoted for some goods, decisions about what to buy and how to spend became increasingly central to women's domestic labour. The home became a site where religious duty and modern standards of living converged. The acquisition of home comforts was not simply a desire for greater convenience and ease; modern appliances were no longer a luxury but a way for homemakers to signal their moral

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<sup>52</sup> Brisebois, "« La maman est l'économe de la maison »,» 151.

<sup>53</sup> "Pour un foyer de nos rêves," 1952, Résumés de cours, Fonds Service de préparation au mariage, diocèse Montreal, P116. Archives nationales à Montréal.

<sup>54</sup> Germaine Ruchaud, "Valeur civilisatrice du service de préparation au mariage," VI-VII. 1953, Résumés de cours, Fonds Service de préparation au mariage, diocèse Montreal, P116. Archives nationales à Montréal.

virtue as good household managers, Catholic mothers, and citizens. Domestic science textbooks from the postwar period illustrate how material comfort became women's moral responsibility. Although they generally expressed mixed feelings about consumer culture, domestic science educators encouraged the use of electricity and modern appliances as symbols of good housekeeping and responsible motherhood.

Courses emphasized that young girls had an obligation to budget and, at times, explicitly stated that their worth as mothers and citizens derived from their vigilance as consumers. The introduction to a chapter on household spending stressed the importance of budgets for “nos jeunes filles dans la défense et la protection de nos foyers canadiens.”<sup>55</sup> As the introductory passage indicates, it was essential for young girls to be vigilant and discerning amid the temptations of modern lifestyles. As one text stated, “l’individualisme, le communisme, le fascisme, le nazisme, le capitalisme mal compris et mal exercé sont ennemis de la maison et de la famille. Notre tâche urgente, impérieuse, c’est d’organiser, pour la maison chrétienne, la défensive et l’offensive. La famille doit accepter ce double rôle, rien que ce rôle et tout ce rôle.”<sup>56</sup> If they did not assume these responsibilities, the posterity of the Catholic family would be at risk. Women were constantly reminded to remain alert and avoid the temptation of conspicuous consumption, which could place the family at risk. Home economics texts cautioned students that advertising “crée la démangeaison d’acheter, de renouveler trop tôt certains articles, d’en mettre au rancart qui pourraient être encore de service.”<sup>57</sup> The preservation of the household was fought on both the defensive line, through resisting immoral modes of consumption, and on

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<sup>55</sup> *L'économie domestique à l'école normale à l'école primaire supérieure aux cours de lettres-sciences*. 1948, 1. Manuels scolaires, 570.550 (22). Archives CND.

<sup>56</sup> *L'économie domestique à l'école normale à l'école primaire supérieure aux cours de lettres-sciences*. 1948, 3. Manuels scolaires, 570.550 (22). Archives CND.

<sup>57</sup> *L'économie domestique l'école primaire supérieure*, 1954, 5. Manuels scolaires, 570.550. Archives CND.

the offensive, by maintaining the moral and religious organization of the patriarchal family structure. The complicated and often contradictory role women needed to uphold was expressed in one passage from a 1952 edition of *L'Économie Domestique*:

Un des malheurs de notre siècle, conséquence néfaste des guerres, ce sera d'avoir retiré la femme de son milieu normal en lui ouvrant presque toutes les carrières ; et la femme elle-même, par une étrange aberration, a cru courir à son émancipation en échappant aux besognes ménagères prétendues fastidieuses. Par contre, le progrès s'est ému de cet état de choses qui désagrège la société dans sa cellule initiale, la famille. Il s'est occupé d'une manière particulière d'améliorer le sort de la maîtresse de la maison; et, dans les inventions modernes, a pensé très souvent à elle.<sup>58</sup>

The passage characterizes concerns expressed in public discourse that the emancipatory gains women had achieved in the past decade would lead to the abandonment of their domestic roles. For one, in 1940, after years of militancy, women finally gained the right to vote in provincial elections.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the war had drawn many married women into the workforce, many of whom continued to work in wage-earning jobs after the war. Catholic circles saw mothers working for wages as destroying the working-class family and the cause of “unhappy marriages and smaller families.”<sup>60</sup> The fear that women were deserting their domestic duties had led members of the LOC to petition the government for legislation restricting women’s access to work and for family allowances to encourage mothers to return to their domestic work.<sup>61</sup> The textbook passage, however, suggests that there were appropriate ways to engage with consumer culture, notably through household technologies. These were appropriate means of liberation and of maintaining the proper habits of a Catholic mother and a member of the French-Canadian community. Historians looking at the evolution of consumer culture in Canada found that by the 1950s, there was a growing understanding that adequate motherhood was increasingly about

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<sup>58</sup> *L'économie domestique à l'école primaire supérieure*, 1952, 53. Manuels scolaires, 570.550 (22). Archives CND.

<sup>59</sup> Baillargeon, *A Brief History of Women in Quebec*, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Fahrni, *Household Politics*, 105

<sup>61</sup> Fahrni, *Household Politics*, 113.

what to buy, and the inability to buy, a marker of her inadequacies as manager of the household budget.

By 1960, the CND published a new edition, titled *L'enseignement ménager aux cours secondaires*, that included a chapter on electric appliances. The introductory paragraph to the chapter warned, "il serait gauche de bouder le progrès et de s'en tenir à des méthodes rudimentaires," followed by instructions on the care of a wide range of large and small electric appliances.<sup>62</sup> In the space of fifteen years, the use of electricity had gradually become part of homemakers' daily lives, demonstrating that the parallels between the evolution of energy consumption, evolving ideas about household labour, and consumer behaviour had become integrated. Textbooks reflect ongoing societal negotiations over the diffusion, adoption, and development of new technologies. As Liverant writes, "women's citizenship in the postwar liberal order was exercised primarily through consumption, purchasing, and deploying the commodities that signalled domestic adequacy and national prosperity."<sup>63</sup> By framing household technologies as morally sanctioned consumer goods, Catholic educators reimagined progress as the ability to use energy wisely and abundantly. In postwar Québec, modern domestic life relied not only on women's moral duties towards their families but also on the constant flow of hydroelectricity.

A steady, reliable flow of hydroelectricity had become a necessity for most Montreal households. Access to electricity and the adoption of electrical appliances were not only practical improvements but also carried social and moral weight. The responsible use of energy in the home and the ability to maintain a comfortable household were portrayed as indicators of economic progress and good citizenship. The moral obligations of homemakers in postwar

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<sup>62</sup> *L'enseignement ménager aux cours secondaires*, 1960, 172. Manuels Scolaires, 570.550 (29). Archives CND.

<sup>63</sup> Liverant, *Buying Happiness*, 157.

Quebec extended to embracing technological advancement, with hydroelectric power serving as the backbone of modern domestic life. In 1960, interim provincial premier Antonio Barrette illustrated the evolution of this integration in a speech:

La consommation d'énergie électrique per capita, dans les foyers et les fermes du Québec, par exemple, est passée de 164 kilowatts-heures en 1946 à 819 en 1953. Cet item de la consommation d'électricité, bien que relativement peu important dans le budget familial, constitue cependant un bon indice de la prospérité économique dans son ensemble. La possession d'appareils domestiques jadis considérés comme luxueux dans un foyer a augmenté, par rapport au nombre total d'habitations, en particulier en ce qui concerne les plus gros appareils comme les réfrigérateurs et les lessiveuses, appareils qui, il y a 15 ans, n'étaient pas à la portée des bourses de nombre de gens.<sup>64</sup>

Modern domesticity in Quebec was characterized not only by the adoption of new household technologies but also by the increasing normalization of energy consumption as a measure of progress, efficiency, and moral responsibility. The quote from Barrette illustrates the progression of domestic electricity consumption into a staple of everyday life. Electricity consumption for households and farms during the first phase of nationalization increased by 563%.<sup>65</sup> By the mid-1960s, per capita electricity consumption in Quebec was 1,730 kWh, higher than the average for Canadians and Americans.<sup>66</sup> The rapid growth in electricity consumption from 1945 until the end of the 1950s can be explained in part by material realities, such as the greater availability of cheap electricity and Hydro-Québec's expanding infrastructure on the North Shore. Equally important was the reconceptualization of women's domestic labour.

This chapter examined how the modern domestic ideal and the better living standards it promised encouraged the transition towards these energy-intensive practices, which contributed to the rapid increase in household electricity consumption. While it is important to differentiate degrees of agency between institutions and individuals, scholars have stressed that “for

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<sup>64</sup> “Quebec: les investissements ont atteint 24 000 000 000 \$,” *Le Devoir*, 25 janvier 1960, 4. Collections BAnQ,

<sup>65</sup> Bellavance et al., 565.

<sup>66</sup> Metton, “L'électricité dans les ménages du Québec.” 281.

electricity to take root in every home in the industrialized world required the active engagement of millions of users.”<sup>67</sup> From the interwar period to the late 1950s, homemakers were introduced to new technologies and sold the idea that greater energy and the mechanization of the home dignified their housework and signalled their worth as devoted Catholic mothers. Women’s decision to adopt new practices was informed and constrained by gender constructs, class and racial hierarchies. Nevertheless, as they adopted these home comforts, a transfer of wealth from rivers on Innus traditional lands was set in motion, bringing hydraulic power via 315 kV transmission lines from the Bersimis-I and Bersimis-II generating stations to the Bout-de-l’île substation in Montreal.

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<sup>67</sup> Taylor, “Anthropocene Women,” 173.

## Chapter 2

### Postwar Hydraulic Frontiers

In February of 1953, Mr. Ernest Gohier, head of industrial services at Hydro-Québec, announced that the Commission hydroélectrique de Québec would allocate a portion of the power generated from the Bersimis complex for its metropolitan clientele. This came as a surprise to journalist Paul Vigeant who wrote an article, published a few days after Gohier's statement, where he asked, "N'y a-t-il pas moyen d'alimenter la région métropolitaine en utilisant des sources d'énergie hydroélectrique beaucoup plus rapprochées?"<sup>1</sup> Why did Hydro-Québec build on the Betsiamites River, located some six hundred kilometres from Montréal? What were the justifications and rationale used by the Commission to legitimize this decision? How did the project shape future projects and the North Shore? I begin by situating the Bersimis I and II projects within the broader postwar effort to open Northern territories, such as Nouveau Québec and the North Shore, to resource development. The second section focuses on the Bersimis complex, underscoring the connection between hydraulic resources and extractive industries and illustrating how hydroelectric development became a new mode of territorial occupation.

The Bersimis was not the first project undertaken by the Duplessis government to encourage northern settlement and attract the mining industry. During his first term from 1936 to 1939, his administration developed the Rapides VII to supply power to the Noranda Mine in Nouveau-Québec,<sup>2</sup> encompassing what is now known as Abitibi-Temiscamingue, a relatively new territory annexed to the province by the Québec Boundary Extension Act of 1898.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Vigeant, "Montréal obtiendra-t-il son électricité de Bersimis plutôt que de Lachine?," *Le Devoir*, 17 février 1953 (Montréal), 1. Collections BAnQ.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lacasse, "Rapid VII at Work," *Entre-Nous*, 1944, Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Desbiens, *Power from the North*, 9.

August 1944, after four years in opposition, Duplessis was reelected and remained in power until his death in 1959. He passed away while visiting Schefferville, one of the largest resource towns that had proliferated during his tenure. It was during this period that Hydro-Québec overturned the hegemony of large private companies, namely the Shawinigan Water and Power Co. (SWP) and the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan), in the province's energy sector.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with the Bersimis complex in 1952, the Chibougamau power station in 1954 and the initial stages of the Manicouagan project in 1957, were the first in a long line of state-led projects that Hydro-Québec supervised. Hydro-Québec itself saw the development of the Betsiamites-Outardes-Manicouagan watershed as an inaugural period in the province's control over hydraulic resources in the North Shore.<sup>5</sup> Scholars who have delved into the province's energy history have tended to focus on the second phase of nationalization of Hydro-Québec and the Manic-Outardes megaproject as examples of state-led territorial planning. Yet, it was under Duplessis that Hydro-Québec was first instrumentalized to divert power from northern watersheds.<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship has examined the discursive tools employed by various administrations to legitimize the reconfiguration of northern landscapes, which have significantly compromised Indigenous traditional territories and sovereignty.<sup>7</sup> Settler and Indigenous works have pushed the analysis further, showing how settler states and private investors were the main beneficiaries of the wealth derived from the expropriation of traditional Indigenous lands and the monetization of nature.<sup>8</sup> This chapter builds on their work to examine the material ramifications of the call for

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<sup>4</sup> Claude Bellavance et al., "De la lutte antimonopoliste à la promotion de la grande entreprise, 565-566; David P. Massell, *Quebec Hydropolitics*, 169; Stéphane Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois*, 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Aménagement hydroélectrique Bersimis-1: inventaire du patrimoine bâti et technologique* (AECOM, 2015), 14. Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>6</sup> Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois*, 138.

<sup>7</sup> Giroux, *L'œil du maître*, 132; Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois*, 140; Desbiens, *Power from the North*, 206; Justine Gagnon et al., "'Where You Have to Bypass'," 376.

<sup>8</sup> Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest*; Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Zebedee Nungak and

progress, using the Bersimis project as a case study of changes made to the Betsiamites watershed.

This chapter, then, shifts the focus from domestic labour practices onto the site of energy production. It argues that the energy-intensive culture that developed in postwar Montreal up to the end of the 1950s was enabled and then drove the newly instituted Commission hydroélectrique de Québec to expand its infrastructure, flooding, polluting, and reorganizing the watershed located in Innu traditional land called Nitassinan. The environmental impacts resulted from a deliberate strategy by premier Maurice Duplessis and the Union Nationale (UN) government to promote northern resource development projects in Nouveau-Québec, the North Shore, and the Gaspé Peninsula. It was under Duplessis that the Commission was first instrumentalized to support northern colonization, regional development, and resource extraction.

### **“Pourquoi la Bersimis?”**

The employee magazine published by Hydro-Québec, *Entres-Nous*, printed a series of articles on various aspects of hydroelectric production in 1955. The series was intended to help employees visualize the connection between household electricity consumption and the sprawling interlocking system that allowed it. It began with detailed explanations of how to read a household meter, then moved through transmission lines to the source of energy production. Images of the works underway for the first generating station on the Betsiamites River and the upstream reservoir illustrated how households were connected to powerlines and how their

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*Tagak Curley, Wrestling with Colonialism on Steroids: Quebec Inuit Fight for Their Homeland, in Dossier Québec Series (Véhicule Press, 2017); Luby, Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory; Liboiron and Lepawsky, Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power, 167.*

clients were enmeshed in the "tentacles of the network." The text detailed the interconnectedness of the different aspects of the operations and how they were linked to consumers, "derrière le geste d'un abonné qui presse un interrupteur se trouve toute une série d'appareils, plus ou moins connus : générateurs, lignes de transport, transformateurs, interrupteurs, disjoncteurs, relais, sous-stations, etc. Tous ces appareils font partie intégrante d'un réseau électrique."<sup>9</sup>

Images and articles featured in the magazine celebrated the Commission's most important project to date. As discussed in the previous chapter, modern domesticity was defined not only by the adoption of electricity but also by outsourcing more labour-intensive work to centralized systems of energy distribution and production. Much like homemakers were encouraged to believe that managing their households would grant them freedom through control over their domestic surroundings, the visuals depicting continuous construction on the Betsiamites River signified a government exercising authority over its environment. Montreal homemakers were embedded within a broader network of resource extraction, in which spaces, territories, and landscapes were instrumentalized to support the daily activities and lifestyles they were encouraged to adopt.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the antitrust movement and the determination of individuals such as Dr. Hamel, Hydro-Québec was initially intended to make electricity more accessible to French Canadians. When Adélar Godbout introduced Bill 17 in 1944, Hydro-Québec fulfilled its promise to lower rates. In the first edition of *Entre-Nous*, published in June, editors R. Therrien and W. Turner highlighted the importance of the expropriation of Montréal Light, Heat and Power as emblematic of a new era that would prioritize public welfare over shareholder interests.

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<sup>9</sup> "La source de l'électricité", *Entre-Nous*. vol. 35, no. 1, janvier 1955, 6. Archive Hydro-Québec

<sup>10</sup> Hatton-Proulx, "Une histoire sociale et matérielle des transitions énergétiques urbaines," 43.

In the prologue to the first edition, the Commission promised to shift the previous policy of maximizing shareholder profits to one of "maximum benefits to consumers." The editors promised that the crown corporation remained committed to providing electricity at the lowest feasible rate while ensuring sound financial management. The front cover of the issue depicted a farmer watching power lines being installed along a rural road, symbolizing the Commission's goal to become a "hydro provinciale," that it was simply "une question de temps" before electricity would be accessible to all residents of the province.<sup>11</sup> The report reflected the agenda set by the Liberal administration, which had planned to prioritize rural areas underserved by private utilities. In August of the same year, Duplessis was reelected and assigned the rural electrification project to the Office de l'électrification rurale. The new administration believed that the Commission could serve the province better by focusing on regional development projects.<sup>12</sup> However, first, Hydro-Québec's metropolitan network needed to address strains on its service caused by increased demand, primarily from the residential sector.<sup>13</sup>

In the years immediately following the War, annual reports submitted by commissioners John McCammon and Raymond Latreille outlined that the company struggled to serve both new subscribers and the growing demand from existing clients. New household technologies, suburban expansion, population growth, and postwar desires for modern comfort required continual updates to increase the network's generating capacity and distribution. In 1945, the annual report submitted to the Commission's president noted that total energy consumption was only slightly below wartime peaks.<sup>14</sup> Each year, the commissioners reported that thousands of

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<sup>11</sup> *Entre-Nous*, juin 1944, p.1-2, Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>12</sup> Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois*, 141.

<sup>13</sup> John McCammon, "Rapport Annuel 1945," Commission hydroélectrique de Québec, mars 1946, 1. Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>14</sup> McCammon, "Rapport Annuel 1945." 1

additional subscribers and their individual consumption were increasing considerably. Household consumption in 1946 climbed from 861 kWh to 980 kWh, reaching an average of 1,200 kWh by 1948. Their report stated that “la demande d’électricité a été telle que la centrale Beauharnois a fonctionné toute l’année jusqu’à la limite de sa capacité de production.”<sup>15</sup> Hydro's client base was increasing at a "rythme toujours accéléré", noting the twenty thousand meters added to homes and commercial spaces that year.<sup>16</sup> Investments climbed from millions to tens of millions of dollars to make the Beauharnois plant more efficient, build new substations, and expand transmission corridors. By the early 1950s, the Beauharnois facility was at capacity. In 1953, McCammon submitted the first report stating that the potential power of the Betsiamites River would resolve future metropolitan energy demands.<sup>17</sup>

During a press conference in 1953, Mr. Gohier, head of industrial services at Hydro-Québec, informed the public that two-thirds of the 1,200,000 HP generated by the Bersimis-I would be allocated to Montreal. Journalist Paul Vigeant, covering the story for *Le Devoir*, was legitimately surprised.<sup>18</sup> When Premier Maurice Duplessis began discussing the possibility of exploiting hydroelectric power from the Betsiamites the year before, the purpose was to provide energy to the pulp and paper industry and to a future copper mine on the Gaspé Peninsula.<sup>19</sup> An article in *Entre-Nous* addressed growing concerns about the cost and rationale for connecting the Bersimis project to Montreal, a distance of approximately 600 km. Hydraulic resources around Montreal had once seemed almost inexhaustible. However, the Commission predicted that the ever-increasing demand from the metropolitan region and the "rapid progress in industry and a

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<sup>15</sup> John McCammon, “Rapport Annuel 1948,” Commission hydroélectrique de Québec, mars 1949, 1. Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>16</sup> McCammon, “Rapport Annuel 1950.”

<sup>17</sup> John McCammon, “Rapport Annuel 1953,” Commission hydroélectrique de Québec, avril 1954, Archives Hydro-Québec.

<sup>18</sup> Vigeant, “Montréal obtiendra-t-il son électricité de Bersimis plutôt que de Lachine ?” 4.

<sup>19</sup> “Projet immense de 100,000,000\$,” *Le Droit*, October 25, 1952, 1. Collections BAnQ.

development of new mines in the northern section of the province" would decrease in the coming years. The project allowed the crown corporation to meet its obligations towards its clientele in Montreal and "be of immense benefit to the province in general."<sup>20</sup> The article reassured readers that the file on the Bersimis River had been available for some time, citing studies requested by McCammon while working for the Public Service Bureau during the War.<sup>21</sup> Detailed studies proved its development not only technically feasible but cost-effective, ideally situated to meet its promises to the metropole and the "réveil industriel" encouraged by the Union Nationale.

The decision to build the Bersimis complex in what appeared to some as a remote corner of the province stemmed from the larger political context of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Betsiamites watershed was a coveted area that had drawn considerable interest during the Second World War from the aluminum giant Alcan and the Shawinigan Water and Power Co., the largest hydroelectric power producer in Québec.<sup>22</sup> Innu families had lived in the area from time immemorial, but in the mid-19th century, settlements crept closer to the Saguenay River, along with logging, hunting and mining, slowly ate away at their ancestral lands. The Bersimis federal reserve was established in 1856, at the mouth of the Betsiamites along the Saint Lawrence River.<sup>23</sup> When the war began, Alcan controlled the major hydraulic resources below the Betsiamites that fed into Lac-St-Jean.<sup>24</sup> Alcan's hegemony in the Saguenay sparked a major controversy between the premiers Godbout and Duplessis, which played a decisive role in the watershed's future.

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<sup>20</sup> "Bersimis!," *Entre-Nous*, 1954, Archives d'Hydro-Québec.

<sup>21</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropolitics*, 150.

<sup>22</sup> Bellavance, *Shawinigan Water and Power*, 178; Massell, *Quebec Hydropolitics*, 144-145.

<sup>23</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropolitics*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropolitics*, 53-54.

Under the federal Wartime Measures Act, sweeping powers were granted to the energy board, limiting provincial jurisdiction over hydraulic resources. In the early years of the War, Premier Godbout approved a project granting Alcan the right to develop areas above the Lac Saint-Jean to fulfill federal government wartime armament contracts. Shortly after, Godbout considered another company project that would affect the Betsiamites watershed. Duplessis condemned the cumulation of concessions as theft, robbing the province of its wealth and its self-determination.<sup>25</sup> McCammon, working for the Public Service Board, and Raymond Latreille, the chief of Hydraulic Services at the time, shared the view that this would compromise any future provincial projects in the Betsiamites-Outardes-Manicouagan watersheds. Pressure from within his administration led Godbout to deny Alcan the concessions it sought.<sup>26</sup> These events, in part, shaped Duplessis's re-election campaign centred on provincial autonomy and the reassertion of provincial jurisdiction, including over waterways.<sup>27</sup> Speaking at an election rally in Lac-Saint-Jean, Duplessis made this stance central to his appeal for votes : “Nous ne voulons ni de tutelle ni de curatelle, qu’elles viennent d’Ottawa ou de l’étranger. Il faut sauver l’avenir de nos enfants et de nos petits-enfants c’est pourquoi l’Union Nationale se bat pour l’autonomie de notre province.”<sup>28</sup> When Alcan renewed its interest in developing parts of the watershed in 1946, Duplessis refused. Shortly after, the Shawinigan Water and Power Co. submitted a project proposal to develop the Bersimis, at which point the government announced that any future concessions were reserved to Hydro-Québec.<sup>29</sup> Although the Commission needed the Bersimis for its clients in the metropolitan area, Duplessis saw the project as an opportunity to develop the

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<sup>25</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropoliticc*, 154.

<sup>26</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropoliticc*, 145-145.

<sup>27</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropoliticc*, 141.

<sup>28</sup> “La race canadienne-française n’a pas besoin de la tutelle fédérale”, *Le Devoir*, 9 octobre 1943, 4. Collections BAnQ.

<sup>29</sup> Bellavance, *Shawinigan Water and Power*, 175-176.

mining industry in the Gaspé region. For Duplessis, Hydro needed to support his plans to expand the province's resource frontiers.<sup>30</sup>

Maurice Duplessis and the Union Nationale returned to power in August 1944. During this period, his administration promoted and facilitated regional resource development for logging and mining by mobilizing hydroelectric power to encourage private-sector investment.<sup>31</sup> In 1945, Duplessis introduced and passed several bills that enabled his administration to push the hydraulic and resource frontiers further north in the Nouveau-Québec, the North Shore, and the Gaspé Peninsula. The introduction of Bill 45 placed Hydro-Québec under the direct control of the provincial government. Other bills adopted in 1946 aimed to “faciliter et encourager le développement minier dans le territoire du Nouveau-Québec.” The Union Nationale promised to develop “le patrimoine provincial” and ensure that “la forêt, l’électricité et les richesses minières profitent d’abord aux consommateurs, aux ouvriers et aux industries québécoises.”<sup>32</sup> On the occasion of “la grande journée du réveil industriel” in 1944, Duplessis spoke to business leaders at the chamber of commerce in Trois-Rivières. He argued that the end of the War would enable his government to act as an ally to private interests and the public. It was therefore in everyone's interests that “l’industrie s’organise non pas pour exploiter la population, mais pour mettre en valeur les ressources de notre province.”<sup>33</sup> As historian Stéphane Savard points out, the UN administration instrumentalized resource development. The Bersimis complex was the first in a

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<sup>30</sup> Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l’État québécois*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l’État québécois*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> Stéphane Savard, “Introduction historique,” 22e législature, 1re session, Assemblée nationale (19 janvier 1949 au 10 mars 1949), n.d.

<sup>33</sup> “La réforme de notre système de fiscalité est à l’étude. Un comité en a commencé l’étude, dit M. Duplessis,” *Le Nouvelliste*, 22 juin 1944, Collections BAnQ.

long line of subsequent hydro development projects that established Hydro-Québec on the North Shore.

Discussing the impact of infrastructures on Indigenous traditional lands, scholars argue that state-led development projects were not merely economic levers but techniques of settler spatial control. The Bersimis project was explicitly discussed in these terms, as both a symbolic and a physical extension of state power into northern territories. It enabled the state to establish a physical and political presence in a region that had remained largely outside the provincial state's direct authority. When the province chose to grant concessions to Hydro-Québec in the Betsiamites-Outardes-Manicouagan watershed, its ability to impose itself and profit from regional resource frontiers made the Commission a symbol of national self-sufficiency by asserting provincial jurisdiction and interest in an area coveted by private interests. By facilitating the entry of mining, pulp, and the Crown corporation into unceded Indigenous territories, the provincial government redefined the North Shore. They imposed new spatial logics on Innu territories, converting rivers into power sources, ancestral lands into reservoirs, and forests into pulp or industrial corridors. Through leases and legislation, the state enabled public and private companies, such as Hydro-Québec and Gaspé Copper, to monetize and transfer wealth from North to South. Although Duplessis emphasized the collective good, he and his administration facilitated the occupation and transformation of Indigenous space for private interests and the provincial coffers. Hydro-Québec saw itself as a conquering force powering the modernization of all sectors of the province's economy. In 1957, *Entre-Nous* published an article on the progress made with the Bersimis II and the initial stages of the Manicouagan project:

"Hydro-Québec, while pushing outward the frontiers of the province, is making itself ready to continue to satisfy the ever-increasing demand of power-hungry Montreal."<sup>34</sup>

As settler and Indigenous scholars have argued, postwar economic growth disproportionately impacted Indigenous communities across North America by transferring wealth from regions peripheral to the settler power centers, such as Montreal.<sup>35</sup> Max Liboiron's work on settler-colonial capitalism and pollution argues that settler governance monetizes the biophysical environment by organizing nature according to capitalist logics.<sup>36</sup> While state-led hydroelectric projects did not initiate colonial dynamics in the North Shore, they represented a new form of settler encroachment.<sup>37</sup> Métis scholar Glen Coulthard calls attention to the language of recognition that has been used since the publication of the 1969 white papers on "Indian Policy" to mask the ongoing, structural expropriation of Indigenous land that shapes the relationship of domination of colonial-capitalist expansion and power that maintains Canada's colonial authority.<sup>38</sup> What is particular about the first phase of nationalization is how hydraulic frontiers were marketed as a civilizing force. Through this lens, rivers, lakes, and the Betsiamites River become a unit of energy potential rather than a cultural and ecological lifeline sustaining healthy ecosystems and the lives depending on them.

### **The Meaning and Making of Hydroelectric Frontiers**

In *Power from the North*, Caroline Desbiens examined the continuity of symbolic representations used by government representatives and literature to legitimize French-Canadian and, later,

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<sup>34</sup> "En survolant le Nord," *Entre-Nous*, 1956, 18. Archives d'Hydro-Québec.

<sup>35</sup> Luby, *Dammed*, 41; Needham, *Power Lines*, 56-57; Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Gagnon et al., "'Where You Have to Bypass'," 375.

<sup>38</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*, 6.

Québécois claims to the land. A sense of territorial belonging was fostered through the resettlement project initiated in the 1930s and subsequent hydroelectric development projects, justifying state-led encroachment into the North.<sup>39</sup> During the first phase of nationalization, the Commission and the UN presented Hydro-Québec as a means to enable accelerated northern industrialization and the colonization of regional resource frontiers, such as the North Shore.<sup>40</sup> It symbolized a modernizing economy adapting to the post-war context, one that depended on ever-increasing energy consumption. The Bersimis was a modern vehicle for Québec's continued colonial project, representing the province's autonomy and emancipation well before the Manic-5.<sup>41</sup> In 1954, the *Revue Moderne* published an article by Alphonse Proulx on the multiple projects underway in the North Shore. In his account, it was only recently that people in Québec had turned their attention to this "terre de Caïn," referring to the name Jacques Cartier had given the vast coast along the Saint Lawrence, noting that "il n'y a pas tellement longtemps, on croyait avoir tout dit de la Côte-Nord quand on en faisait un coin de terre aride et inculte, hors d'atteinte de toute civilisation et voué à un éternel isolement. C'était tout ce que l'on pensait de cette immense région."<sup>42</sup>

Proulx discussed the pivotal role of Hydro-Québec in continuing the colonial project initiated by Cartier, thereby enabling the French-Canadian community to overcome the barriers that prohibited settlement in the region. The modest growth of Forestville, the Anglo Canadian Pulp and Paper Mills company town, was the perfect example. Initially a small logging community centred on a sawmill built at the turn of the 20th century, the town had fewer than

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<sup>39</sup> Desbiens, *Power from the North: Territory*, 91-92.

<sup>40</sup> Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois*, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Caroline Desbiens, "Appreciating Difference? A View from Indigenous Rivers," *Canadian Geographer* 63, no. 4 (2019), 542.

<sup>42</sup> Alphonse Proulx, "Terre de Caïn ou terre promise ?" *La Revue Moderne*, October 1954, 9. Collections BAnQ.

150 houses in 1947. With the announcement of the Bersimis project, the town's administration hired thousands of workers to clear hundreds of square miles of forest to begin the construction of the complex. The Anglo had cut over one hundred and forty thousand cords of wood in the past years and could continue doing this “pour au moins 90 ans sans danger d'épuisement.”<sup>43</sup> Hydro-Québec revitalized the company town by awarding new logging contracts and constructing a dock, an airport, and a college to support incoming residents.

Working conditions at the Bersimis construction site had caused a drawn-out scandal in the first months of 1954. Pierre Laporte wrote a series of five articles in *Le Devoir* titled “Que se passe-t-il à la Bersimis?” in January 1954, portraying a very different image. Sources had told him that the living conditions in Labrieville were deplorable, as were the salaries. An anonymous source had told Laporte that the work site “c'est un véritable camp de concentration.”<sup>44</sup> According to sources, during the first months, workers were piled into old shacks rented from the Anglo Pulp Co. They had no spare sets of sheets and no means to clean them after the one electric washer had given out after a few weeks. It had taken months for any fruits or vegetables to be served, and the food that made its way to camp was scraps from management. Workweeks averaged 60 hours with low pay and no unemployment insurance. There were no phone lines, and news from the outside took three to four days to arrive. According to the source, one worker was informed of his wife's death some days after the funeral. They were completely shut off from the outside world. Former engineers denounced poor planning, the absence of plans or documentation, and alluded to potential corruption.<sup>45</sup> Considerable delays had forced ten

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<sup>43</sup> Proulx, “Terre de Caïn ou terre promise ?” 50.

<sup>44</sup> Pierre Laporte, “Que se passe-t-il à la Bersimis ? -V,” *Le Devoir* (Montréal), 29 janvier 1954, 1. Collections BAnQ.

<sup>45</sup> Pierre Laporte, “Que se passe-t-il à la rivière Bersimis ? -II,” *Le Devoir* (Montréal), 26 janvier 1954, 1. Collections BAnQ.

employees to work at night with spotlights, “à des températures siberiennes,” and a malfunction had resulted in their deaths.<sup>46</sup> Liberal deputy Mr. Lafrance brought up the articles during a parliamentary session in February, but was cut off by Duplessis, who called them gossip, “des commérages,” and referred to *Le Devoir* as a tabloid. Their exchange precipitated Lafrance's expulsion from parliament and a fifteen-day suspension from the chamber.

The press had reverted to emphasizing the project's size and its symbolism for Québec, much like the accounts found in *Entre-Nous* and *La Revue Moderne*. Technology, infrastructure, and resources were tangible evidence of the strength of the French-Canadian colonial project.

Alphonse Proulx's article, published a few months after the allegations of mismanagement, stressed the size of the area being transformed and the volume of materials being brought in to build “une des entreprises les plus audacieuse jamais tentées au pays pour l'utilisation des ressources hydrauliques.”<sup>47</sup> Between 1953 and 1959, Chief Engineer René Dupuis oversaw the construction of a planned town, two reservoirs, three generating stations, and hundreds of miles of high-voltage transmission lines, both underwater and above ground. The dams, transmission lines, and the burgeoning of Hydro's own company town, Labrieville, functioned to extend state power, materially and symbolically inscribing its authority onto an "isolated" territory. As one former Hydro-Québec administrator-turned-historian put it, “la Bersimis marque une étape importante dans l'histoire encore jeune des grandes constructions techniques de la province. C'est un véritable défi que les ingénieurs relèvent en créant cette œuvre, il n'existait nulle part au monde de centrales comme celles qu'on voulait construire.”<sup>48</sup> The mismanagement of the early

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<sup>46</sup> Pierre Laporte, “Que se passe-t-il à la Bersimis ? -IV,” *Le Devoir* (Montréal), 28 janvier 1954, 1. Collections BAnQ.

<sup>47</sup> Proulx, “Terre de Caïn ou terre promise ?” 9.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Landry, “Le projet d'aménagement hydroélectrique de la rivière Bersimis, 1952-1956” (Mémoire, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2009), 26.

construction phase, it seemed, could be justified by the project's scale. The Bersimis project had multiple logistical barriers, beginning with the supply of human and material resources to the construction site, 160 kilometres from Forestville.<sup>49</sup>

In 1953, Hydro-Québec extended 80 kilometres of road leading out of the logging town, allowing a disused generator from Montréal to power the initial stages of the Bersimis Complex. Urban planners then laid out the street grid for Labrieville to house the workers and their families.<sup>50</sup> The town was named in honour of Mgr Labrie, bishop of the Gulf of the Saint Lawrence. At the height of the project, two thousand people lived in the town. *Entre-nous* described Labrieville as a "ville modèle," an ideal of western modernity that could accommodate two thousand individuals working and living on site. There was a school with eight classrooms, a church with 400 seats, a hospital, stores, and recreational activities like bowling and pool to accommodate residents living amid the boreal "wilderness."<sup>51</sup> Photos of Labrieville, with straight roads and square buildings next to the Betsiamites and surrounded by forests, showed how removed the town was from its environment. In addition to providing a watershed that was particularly well suited to the needs of power generation, the composition of the soils of the Bersimis River made it easy to find of the materials, such as clay and to allow the construction of a tunnel with a diameter of nine meters through twelve km of solid rock. By adding two dams to the two spillways of Lac Cassé, the water was raised to about 400 meters above sea level, creating a reservoir connecting the lake to the Pipmuacan, with a drop of 263 meters, which remains one of the highest of any reservoir built in Québec to this day.<sup>52</sup> From a symbolic

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<sup>49</sup> Landry, "Le projet d'aménagement hydroélectrique de la rivière Bersimis," 68.

<sup>50</sup> Landry, "Le projet d'aménagement hydroélectrique de la rivière Bersimis," 50.

<sup>51</sup> "Bersimis!" *Entre-Nous*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Landry, "Le projet d'aménagement hydroélectrique de la rivière Bersimis," 72.

perspective, the town and its hydro-electric complex had pushed the province's frontiers. It was not simply about production but about domesticating nature. Urban planners, engineers, and religious authorities made the area intelligible and governable for Hydro-Québec.

Michel Roy of *Le Devoir* visited the complex in its final stages in 1959. The article encapsulated the sense of awe and the ethos of hydroelectric development during this turning point for Hydro-Québec. Roy had trekked to Labrieville to look at what they had accomplished. He enumerated the important strides the crown company had made. It had trained French-speaking engineers, who now made up of 92% of the personnel. The project was among the six largest hydroelectric projects in the world and the first to install a 300,000-volt line over hundreds of kilometres. Roy interviewed a “jeune administrateur,” comparing him to an army officer returning from the Second World War. The work he had supervised for Bersimis was not only a technical challenge but a conquest over the natural world. The language evokes the military discipline needed to domesticate and impose order on an untamed landscape. Reflecting on the young administrator's experience, Roy was taken aback by the strength and ability of Man to tame the northern landscape:

Il a vécu cette expérience qui consiste à domestiquer la nature. Ce soir, il sait bien que les eaux tumultueuses de la rivière, l'acier des machines permanentes, le béton des barrages obéissent scrupuleusement aux desseins arithmétiques de l'homme. Ce soir, il sait tout cela et nous écoute. Mais les soirs d'automne n'ont pas toujours été si doux à Labrieville. Par son assurance tranquille, il ressemble à ces officiers d'infanterie qui accueillaient en 1945 les correspondants de guerre sur le champ de bataille.<sup>53</sup>

While celebrated as milestones in economic modernization, the ability of French-Canadian engineering to control its territory, these projects fundamentally transformed the landscape and

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<sup>53</sup> Michel Roy, “Les grands aménagements de la Bersimis,” *Le Devoir* (Montréal), 26 octobre 1959, 7. Collections BAnQ.

disrupted ecosystems that had sustained Innu communities for generations. It reflected a worldview in which rivers were no longer sacred or relational but seen as resources to be harnessed, measured, and brought under control by modern men with technical expertise.

Demand from all sectors of Hydro-Québec's clientele, along with a modern vision of a high-energy-consuming society, acted as an "alchemical" force that transformed a watershed threaded with Innu trap lines into a hydroelectric resource.<sup>54</sup> The Bersimis complex was the first in a long line of subsequent hydro development projects that established the state, via the crown corporation, in the North Shore. Once the Bersimis project was completed, plans for their upcoming Manicouagan project were already underway. The expansion of hydroelectric projects in Québec significantly transformed Indigenous territories and ways of life. The infrastructures required flooding forests and traplines, excavating enormous volumes of earth and rock, and the growth of resource towns like Labrieville and Forestville. Hundreds of miles of high-voltage transmission lines were strung across ancestral territories to connect the power plants to industrial centers in Gaspé, Québec City, and Montreal. The Commission's annual reports celebrated the economic promise of these developments and the extent to which they could "serve" its subscribers in Montreal and the province. Ideological and financial motivations defined the relationship built with the area; rivers could generate energy and sustain modern lifestyles organized by material gains. As one journalist put it, "quel montréalais aurait attaché la moindre importance à la rivière Bersimis ?" The North Shore was not part of the cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Desbiens, "Appreciating Difference? A View from Indigenous Rivers," 545.

repertoire until it could help advance the modern society that they wished to build, and it was only then that « aujourd'hui, Montréal doit beaucoup à cette rivière.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Hydroelectric Landscapes**

The territorial transformation of Innu communities cannot be understood without accounting for the layers of colonial policies that shaped settler-Indigenous relationships on the North Shore. The imposition of the Indian Act, which placed Indigenous lands under federal guardianship, began with the Royal Proclamation Act, institutionalizing a system of legal and political dependency.<sup>56</sup> The Québec Boundary Extension Acts of 1898 and 1912 expanded provincial jurisdiction North and west over the Eeyou Istchee/James Bay area and defined the Labrador border, which remained disputed until 1957.<sup>57</sup> The Robinson Bill and Bill 20 were passed to allow Duplessis's UN administration to extend provincial jurisdiction over lands and natural resources, further marginalizing Indigenous land use and stewardship practices. Max Liboiron stresses that "colonialism is first, and foremost, about Land."<sup>58</sup> They stress that settler-colonial relationships to land may be influenced by well-intentioned goals, such as affordable electricity, French-Canadian self-determination, and renewable energy development. Nevertheless, under a capitalist system, land is predominantly regarded as a resource for generating value for and sustaining the settler state. The result for surrounding communities is deterritorialization and separation from their respective territories and their contexts of origin. The unequal exchanges were defined by provincial jurisdiction and legal mandates that bound Hydro-Québec to extract value from the Betsiamites for provincial economic growth and settler consumer societies.

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<sup>55</sup> Jacques Trépanier, "Une petite rivière jadis inconnue fait maintenant rayonner le progrès à travers la province," *La Patrie* (Montréal), 3 avril 1960, 17. Collections BAnQ.

<sup>56</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropolitics*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Desbiens, *Power from the North*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 15.

Hydro-Québec was meant, if not legally bound, to help the state sustain itself, not to help Indigenous communities or to maintain the ecological equilibrium of the land and rivers, which did not serve its primary interest.

Settler and Indigenous scholars have elaborated on the differences between settlers' and Indigenous peoples' relationships to land.<sup>59</sup> Ways of understanding one's place within given spaces are affected by cultures that influence and are influenced by our environments. David Massell, in partnership with the Pessamit community, used maps drawn by the community of family hunting grounds from the early 1950s.<sup>60</sup> Innu communities living along the Betsiamites watershed relied heavily on a mixed subsistence economy rooted in trapping and fishing. The progression of natural resource development projects significantly altered the community's ability to rely on the land to sustain itself.

The accounts corroborate government records documenting habitat decline. While the fur trade had long been a cornerstone of the region's economy, government records reveal that by 1950, declining fur catches and falling prices were undermining its viability, leading to increased reliance on relief payments.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, salmon fishing on the Bersimis River continued to provide meaningful income, especially for Elders who no longer could rely on hunting. In 1951 and 1952, the community netted and sold thousands of pounds of salmon, providing considerable revenue for the community, according to reports prepared for Indian Affairs.<sup>62</sup> These activities formed an integrated economic base closely tied to land and water. According to

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<sup>59</sup> Gagnon et al., "Where You Have to Bypass'," 363; Massell, *Quebec Hydropoliticc*, 30; Savard, *Hydro-Québec et l'État québécois*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Massell, *Quebec Hydropoliticc*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> Edmond Cloutier, *Report of Indian Affairs Branch, 1951*, Fiscal Year, Indian Affairs Annual Reports, 1864 to 1990 (Federal/national, 1951), 13. Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>62</sup> Edmond Cloutier, *Report of Indian Affairs Branch, 1952*, Fiscal Year, Indian Affairs Annual Reports, 1864 to 1990 (Federal/national, 1952), 11-12. Library and Archives Canada.

reports, as the timber industry expanded, logging became an important source of income.<sup>63</sup>

Beginning in 1954, federal documents stopped referring to fishing as a source of income.<sup>64</sup>

Reports from the federal government's Indian Affairs Branch document a reorientation of Indigenous peoples away from trapping and fishing toward resource development employment. Given the growing importance of resource development projects on their land and the destruction of habitats that sustained Innu livelihoods, access to contracts for projects such as the Bersimis became essential. In 1960, Chief Jean-Marie Hervieu from the Pessamit community visited Senator Lionel Choquette at his offices to relay the impacts of hydroelectric projects on the community. Hervieu discussed how flooding caused by the dams erected had affected hunting and fishing territories, that the community needed better intermediaries for the fur trade, and that Indian affairs needed to pressure industries to employ more indigenous labourers on their projects.<sup>65</sup>

In more recent accounts, the arrival of hydroelectric infrastructure marked a second wave of territorial dispossession. The construction of dams, transmission lines, and massive reservoirs deeply disrupted traditional land use. Productive habitats were submerged, wildlife populations declined, fish became contaminated with mercury, and shorelines ideal for spawning were destroyed. These ecological impacts directly contributed to the erosion of Innu's economic and cultural practices and way of life. In November 1999, the Commission sur l'usage de l'eau au Québec held a hearing on the Betsiamites reserve. Remy Kurtness presented a memoir by the Mamuitun band council comprising the Mashteuiatsh, Essipit, and Betsiamites (today Pessamit)

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<sup>63</sup> Edmond Cloutier, *Report of Indian Affairs Branch, 1954*, Fiscal Year, Indian Affairs Annual Reports, 1864 to 1990 (Federal/national, 1954) 10-11. Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>64</sup> Edmond Cloutier, *Rport of Indian Affairs Branch, 1955*, Fiscal Year, Indian Affairs Annual Reports, 1864 to 1990 (Federal/national, 1955), Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>65</sup> Gérard Morin, "Le chef Montagnais Hervieu rend hommage aux missionnaires Oblats," *Le Droit* (Ottawa), October 20, 1960, 9. Collections de BAnQ.

Innu communities. Speaking on behalf of the communities he represented, Kurtness described the historical significance of water, rivers, and lakes for himself and his ancestors, who had lived along waterways for thousands of years and described how colonial encroachment had impacted each community:

Nos aînés ont d'abord vu leurs rivières et leurs lacs servir pour le flottage et le transport du bois, puis est venu le harnachement des rivières pour fins de production hydroélectrique. La construction des centrales et des barrages, des lignes de transport d'électricité et des grands réservoirs a profondément perturbé notre utilisation du territoire: disparition de la faune et des habitats fauniques les plus productifs, érosion des berges, mercure dans la chair du poisson, modification des couverts de glace, difficulté de transport, etc., ont contribué à l'abandon forcé de l'économie et du mode de vie traditionnel Innu.<sup>66</sup>

Among the critiques Kurtness raised, one concerned the fundamental difference between the settler and Innu's understandings of water. While the Québec Civil Code maintains that water belongs to no one, he stressed that Indigenous knowledge systems are grounded in the belief that water belongs to everyone and is a shared responsibility. Kurtness argues that the province's position creates a legal vacuum in which no one feels accountable for protecting water.<sup>67</sup> Since Hydro-Québec's first project on the Betsiamites River in the 1950s, and subsequent projects on the Manicouagan and Outardes rivers, their land has been considerably altered, causing irreparable damage to ancestral sites and to aquatic and terrestrial life, including salmon and caribou populations, which have dwindled.<sup>68</sup> Hydro-Québec maintains that “none of its hydropower projects have required forced resettlement of local communities.”<sup>69</sup> Hydro-Québec, understood settlement as a place of residence, not of belonging. Pessamit members have

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<sup>66</sup> *Commission sur la gestion de l'eau au Québec* (2000), 20.

<sup>67</sup> *Commission sur la gestion de l'eau au Québec*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Commission sur la gestion de l'eau au Québec*, 31.

<sup>69</sup> WSP, *Québec Hydropower Generation and the Environment*, December (Hydro-Québec, 2020), VI.VI.

highlighted the importance of treating attachment to place as a measure of dispossession, as they continue to negotiate with the province for the recognition of their land rights.<sup>70</sup>

One of the most well-documented effects has been the increase in methylmercury (MeHg) in fish following flooding of landscapes.<sup>71</sup> As plant matter decomposes underwater, inorganic mercury can transform into methylmercury, a toxic compound that accumulates up the food chain. MeHg levels peak during the first decade after reservoir creation, posing significant health risks to communities relying on fish for sustenance.<sup>72</sup> In 2020, a review of the environmental impacts and mitigation measures published by Hydro-Québec maintained that there have been no record cases of methylmercury poisoning.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, studies like those of Desbiens have shown that Indigenous communities face disproportionate exposure to toxins. Testimonies from residents reveal that these environmental changes have not only affected health but also their emotional and cultural relationships with the water.<sup>74</sup> Before environmental assessments were mandated in the 1970s for resource development projects, considerations for maintaining healthy ecosystems were not incorporated into the construction process.<sup>75</sup>

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from reservoirs are also significant contributors to global warming. Research shows that flooded ecosystems alter carbon cycles and emit methane of global significance.<sup>76</sup> Reports by Hydro-Québec on GHG emissions from reservoirs have

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<sup>70</sup> Gagnon and Desbiens, “Mapping Memories in a Flooded Landscape,” 40; Gagnon et al., 363.

<sup>71</sup> Caroline Desbiens, “‘Water All around, You Cannot Even Drink’: The Scaling of Water in James Bay/Eeyou Istchee,” *Area* 39, no. 3 (2007), 264; Robert J. Moriarity et al., “Using a Geographic Information System to Assess Local Scale Methylmercury Exposure from Fish in Nine Communities of the Eeyou Istchee Territory (James Bay, Quebec, Canada),” *Environmental Research* 191, no. 110147 (2020), 12.

<sup>72</sup> François Bilodeau et al., “Intensity and Duration of Effects of Impoundment on Mercury Levels in Fishes of Hydroelectric Reservoirs in Northern Québec (Canada),” *Inland Waters* 7, no. 4 (2017), 493.

<sup>73</sup> WSP, *Québec Hydropower Generation and the Environment*, VI.

<sup>74</sup> Desbiens, “‘Water All around, You Cannot Even Drink,’” 263.

<sup>75</sup> Stéphane Savard, “Concilier l’exploitation hydroélectrique et la protection du territoire: le cas de la Direction de l’Environnement d’Hydro-Québec, 1970-1980,” in *Pouvoir et territoire au Québec depuis 1850*, ed. Harold Bérubé et al. (Septentrion, 2017), 87.

<sup>76</sup> Yves T. Prairie et al., “A New Modelling Framework to Assess Biogenic GHG Emissions from Reservoirs: The G-Res Tool,” *Environmental Modelling and Software* 143 (2021), 596.

focused on projects from the last decades and in Eeyou Istchee, where methane emissions from new reservoirs are negligible.<sup>77</sup> The climate in which reservoirs are found affects the rate of biomass decomposition, with colder temperatures resulting in slower decomposition and lower GHG emissions. The Reports concluded that methane was not an issue.<sup>78</sup> However, because the Bersimis is in a more temperate region, the results may differ considerably. Additionally, independent sources indicate that, in the early decades of a new operation, reservoirs emit GHGs that contribute to rising temperatures. Labelling hydroelectric power as clean energy minimizes the carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and toxic contamination that these projects produce, as well as their impact on local communities.

To this day, Hydro-Québec is a point of pride in the province, underscoring the stark contrast between settler narratives of development and the lived realities of Innu communities. The Northern Territories were viewed and used for Québec's economic development, benefiting capital interests, the state, and settler populations south along the Saint-Laurent. The energy-intensive economy and the living standards that emerged in the post-war period reflect layers of power exercised over different groups. By examining the production and consumption of hydropower, a broader understanding of the effects of intensive energy-consuming cultures on local communities emerges. With this framework, the periodization of the first and second phases of nationalization becomes less relevant than the environmental and social repercussions they entail. Critics point out that centring the narrative of Québécois liberation and economic emancipation associated with the second phase of nationalization often reproduces the very hierarchies and colonial dynamics it aimed to challenge.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> WSP, *Québec Hydropower Generation and the Environment*, 16.

<sup>78</sup> WSP, *Québec Hydropower Generation and the Environment*, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Giroux, *L'œil du maître*, 168.

The modern comforts adopted by a growing number of Hydro subscribers were part of a broader system that sustained itself through the appropriation of lands monetized according to market logic. The process did not begin during the period under study. The transfer of wealth through resource extraction from Indigenous lands has been intrinsic to settler-colonial power since the fur trade. Today, 83% of the power generated by Hydro-Québec comes from facilities on Eeyou Istchee traditional lands in the James Bay and Nitassinan of the North Shore.<sup>80</sup> Rivers in the Nitassinan account for one-third of Hydro-Québec's installed power capacity. In the fall of 2024, news that many Hydro-Québec clients from Innu, Cree, and Mi'kmaq communities were not paying their bills made the headlines. Together, it was estimated that over \$ 240 million was owed. The individuals interviewed from different communities all cited the colonial legacies of Hydro-Québec, abuses of power, and the environmental impacts of hydroelectric development on their communities and territories as reasons for their protest. The largest share of unpaid bills came from Innu and Cree communities, which have been particularly affected by the crown corporation. One interviewee reiterated the rationale some community members have for refusing to pay their hydro bills: "C'est comme si je te prêtais mes jouets, mais que tu me faisais payer pour que je te les prête."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Camille Fréchette, "Développement hydroélectrique québécois : quelle place pour le consentement préalable, libre et éclairé chez les Cris et les Innus ?," *Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec*, 49, no. 2 (2019), 56.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Gerbet, "Autochtones et Hydro-Québec : le grand malaise des factures impayées," *Radio-Canada*, September 24, 2024.

## Conclusion

I have argued that a broader understanding of Québec's energy history requires moving beyond conventional narratives. It is essential to consider not only the technical and economic aspects but also the correlations among household energy consumption, the expropriation and exploitation of Indigenous lands, and the environmental consequences of hydroelectric development projects. The Bersimis project was central to Duplessis's "conquête du Nord," a project that remains deeply embedded in the province's colonial present. Although Québec's relationship with the land has evolved through various dynamics and historical contexts, the process has consistently involved asserting ownership over territory, consolidating settler political control, and privileging the dominant culture.

Unpaid electricity bills are only part of the most recent waves of protest against Hydro. In December 2022, Montreal hosted the United Nations Biodiversity Conference, where the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework was adopted. The GBF included concrete plans to reverse or halt biodiversity loss, restore ecosystems, and protect Indigenous rights. Representatives from the Ekuanitshit Innu community and the Minganie Municipality, which make up the Muteshekau-Shipu Alliance, were present, hoping to pressure the Quebec government to halt a potential Hydro-Québec project on the Muteshekau Shipu River. In 2021, the Alliance issued a joint declaration granting the river legal personhood, which was never officially recognized by the government of premier Francois Legault.<sup>1</sup> The river is located next to Hydro's last mega-project, initiated in 2010 on the North Shore at La Romaine. Section eight of the declaration expressly states that one of the most significant threats to the river and the

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<sup>1</sup> "Actualités - Alliance Muteshekau Shipu," accessed August 20, 2025.

ecosystems it sustains, as well as its importance to the community of Ekuanitshit, is hydro development projects.<sup>2</sup> As explored in chapter two, colonial power is most explicit in the ways the biophysical environment is restructured and monetized according to market value, centring and reinforcing the dominant culture.<sup>3</sup> This pattern is evident in the case of the Bersimis project and the subsequent mega-projects in the Nitassinan/North Shore and Eeyou istchee/James Bay, where the dramatic alterations and degradation of landscapes on traditional Innu territories primarily benefited Montreal Hydro subscribers.

The growth of electricity consumption was driven in part by an agenda outlined in the early 1920s by the Canadian Electric Association and implemented by its members, including Montreal Light Heat and Power. As noted by historian Ruth Sandwell, initially, new energy regimes distributed by large, centralized services were often seeking to build a clientele rather than satisfying a need. Private utilities deployed large-scale public relations campaigns encouraging individuals, primarily homemakers, to learn and adopt the skills needed to integrate the use of electricity and gas supplied by centralized services. The diffusion of electricity from a centralized system required educating the public about the value of the services utilities sold and the household technologies they promoted. Textbooks on domestic science illustrate how the meaning of household labour gradually integrated practices which reorganized daily work around new technologies. Women were sold the idea that appliances empowered them to become more efficient and better mothers, simultaneously making them solely responsible for meeting and maintaining rising standards of comfort. Historians have underscored how the modern domestic ideal benefited the energy industry far more than it alleviated women's work. As the sales

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<sup>2</sup> *Reconnaissance de la personnalité juridique et des droits de la rivière Magpie – Mutehekau Shipu: Hearing before the Conseil de la MRC de Minganie* (2021), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Max Liboiron, *Polution is Colonialism*, 10.

representative from Westinghouse put it, the company had entered the market of appliances “not just to build appliances, but to build loads.”<sup>4</sup> By the 1950s, a noticeable shift occurred, with demand outpacing supply, flipping the dynamic of the hydropower market.

Hydroelectric development projects on the Betsiamites River were driven by pressure on Hydro-Québec’s installed capacity and by ideals and aspirations about modern living and the province's economic future.<sup>5</sup> The 1950s were a period of tension between a dominant culture within the province that, on the surface, seemed to cling to traditional values and a shift influenced by American consumer culture. Educators, homemakers, and home economists developed new skills and slowly integrated electricity and household technologies into their daily routines. The Commission’s annual reports show that the relative affluence of the postwar years, combined with the lower rates that followed the expropriation of the Montreal Light, Heat and Power, enabled this integration. It was a pivotal moment for Hydro-Québec, as an increasing share of the metropolitan population could afford to purchase a few household appliances. What and how to consume underwent a notable shift in the postwar period. Canadian and Québécois political objectives aimed to improve living standards, including greater access to household technologies and electricity. These changes created a new economic paradigm that shaped how the state integrated northern territories rich in natural resources, transforming them into aluminum, iron, and, importantly, hydropower. While living standards increased, hydroelectric infrastructures profoundly altered traditional Indigenous territories, turning them into resources to be extracted, benefiting investors, the state, and, to varying degrees, settler populations.

In early 20th-century Montreal, marketing strategies consciously linked the idea of energy-intensive domesticity to women’s dignity and value as mothers. By the 1950s, educators

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<sup>4</sup> K.J. Farthing, “This Is Our Company,” n.d., Box 16 21-1993; 47, 1995, file 4, Westinghouse Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Bellavance, “Les origines économiques et techniques de la nationalisation de l’électricité au Québec,” 48.

began blending Catholic cultural values with emerging consumer culture, positioning electricity and modern appliances within the fabric of everyday life and elevating household technologies as benchmarks of progress and comfort. This transition is intertwined with the first phase of nationalization during the post-WWII era, a golden age of cheap energy in Québec. Hydropower was central to development projects initiated by Duplessis's Union Nationale to accelerate northern resource extraction. As historians of energy have shown, throughout the twentieth century, economic elites sought to facilitate the transport and consumption of energy, aiming to ensure a specific vision of living standards and material comfort for the population.<sup>6</sup> I examined the relationship between household electricity use and Hydro-Québec's first phase of nationalization, to historicize the relationship between natural resource extraction and modern standards of living, in part defined by the acquisition of goods. Andrew Needham's framework provided a template for examining the emergence of a hydroelectric culture, allowing energy systems to be understood not just as technical or economic resources, but as complex interactions between politicians and decision-makers on the one hand and everyday practices such as cleaning, cooking, and laundering on the other.

Historiography rarely bridges women's domestic work and energy systems, more often treating these as peripheral. Hydro-Québec continues to take center stage, celebrated as a cultural symbol of Québécois resistance to foreign capital monopolies and of Québécois self-determination. However, this focus erases the colonial relationship perpetuated by expropriating Indigenous communities from their lands across northern territories. It has also limited broader critique of how energy production and consumption have been fundamental to mass consumer culture, which was normalized and made accessible to a wider range of the population in the

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<sup>6</sup> Clarence Hatton-Proulx, « Sous vos pas, un parfait agencement » : la transformation du paysage énergétique urbain de Montréal, 1890-1950, *Flux* 121, no. 3 (2020), 6.

post-war period. This transition not only shaped the expectations placed upon women but also contributed to the widespread adoption of consumer patterns throughout the province, further embedding these practices within Québec's social and economic fabric. It is important to consider how gendered, economic, and racial hierarchies constrained decisions made by homemakers. As historian Vanessa Taylor stresses, it is nevertheless important to consider how women contributed to and benefited from the systems in which they are rooted. The lack of critical analysis of women's roles as they negotiate and adopt energy-intensive household technologies limits our ability to address the complex interaction between norms and their shaping of the material world.

The push to build mega-projects and generate unprecedented amounts of energy is embedded in the "great acceleration" of human activity since 1945. J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke coined this term to underscore the rapid urbanization, population growth, resource extraction, energy use, and technological development in Western societies during this period. Accordingly, hydroelectricity can not be considered outside the current environmental crisis or as a straightforward remedy for it. They have argued that postwar economic growth marked a fundamental shift in which increased energy consumption became foundational to mass consumption, infrastructural expansion, and new norms of everyday life, which drive the climate crisis.<sup>7</sup> While discussions of the current climate crisis have drawn attention to the production and consumption of fossil fuels, hydroelectricity has largely escaped serious critique. As discussed in Chapter Two, hydropower is not without environmental and social impacts. Mercury contamination and carbon emissions from large dams, deforestation, and the commodities enabled by electricity production and distribution attest to this. Hydroelectric development

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<sup>7</sup> J. R. McNeil and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, 208.

projects in Québec were fundamental to the expansion of postwar mass consumption and played a significant role in perpetuating colonial relationships and dynamics.

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