The Promise of Solarity

The turn toward the sun, toward embracing solarity, is replete with desire and hope. Hope for a future that grasps the sun’s abundance without the need for mediation. Hope for a future when “civilization’s” reliance on the buried sunlight of fossil fuels is overcome. Hope for a more egalitarian and just future for human and nonhuman relations. Hope that we will overcome the devastating spiral of planetary destruction, death, and extinction that appears on the horizon. Hope that we can continue living as we do in the overdeveloped West by turning toward solar fuel. Hopes that cascade and multiply and are awash with both harmonies and dissonances. Though many share the vision of a just solar future, delving deeper into specific solar desires reveals that there is not, and cannot be, one Solarity; rather, there is a proliferation of plural solarities that manifest a spectrum of desires.

Solarities are orientations to the energy of the sun. These orientations exceed human relations to the sun’s rays to also include relationships with lands, minerals, waters, animals, and people, relationships that are mediated by and materialized in infrastructure. What will the infrastructures of these solarities be? What will they be made of, and what will they make of us? One of the desires attending solar energy is that, in its universal availability and infinite supply, it does not require the sorts of mediation necessary for energy to become fuel. Yet this is imaginary: an orientation
that approaches the sun as a source of unlimited energy, capable of saving the planet by replacing fossil fuels, necessarily implies infrastructural mediation with specific material implications.

When we discuss solarity, it often seems to imply solar energy tout court. But we would rather orient ourselves to solarity as naming a way of collective being that is consonant with the generous outpour of energy from the sun. Solarity uncovers a collective desire to share and distribute energy as a way of regulating the social order. But today, this desire cannot be disentangled from an impetus to overturn the prevailing energy order and its coextensive injustices. Petroculture is premediating the way solarity unfolds. The utopian aspirations of solarity will be informed by global oil’s history of social and environmental exploitation. In other words, while solarity might supplant the petrocultural regime, it is also at risk of succumbing to its slow violence and necropolitics.¹ What seems certain is that the transition to solarity will be messy, incomplete, and unevenly distributed.

For some, solar names the promise of clean energy; it is also the promise of infinite energy. This is due to the sheer amount of energy produced by the sun. And to add to the good news, there’s no need to worry about “peak solar” in the way that some have fretted about “peak oil”: we can count ourselves safe for the next five billion years, until the sun begins to transition into a red giant. When we commonly speak about “energy,” what we are really referring to is fuel: matter that can be made to release energy. Every form of fuel we currently use demands the production of physical infrastructures to create energy (from fireplaces to nuclear power stations); in the process, as fuel becomes energy, it always leaves a physical trace. With solar power, we believe we have found a way to cut fuel out of the picture of energy production. The dream of solar is that we can access energy as energy: energy without mediation, energy without mediation with specific material implications.

the need for fuel and so without leaving any trace of its use. This is the dream of infinite energy without needing to worry about its impact, either as extraction or as emission.

Thus does solar power present itself as the solution, but already, we have a problem. Who is this “we” that “commonly speaks about energy” in this way? The pretense of the first person plural is exposed the moment energy enters the picture. Some relate to energy in this way; many others do not, or would not if they were not forced to by those who do. Some (mostly men, mostly white, mostly Anglo/Euro/Christian descendant, mostly rich, mostly on land that is not their own) accumulate and enjoy the benefits of fuel and the energy it generates, whereas others (mostly women, mostly racialized, mostly from “Other” traditions, mostly poor, mostly Indigenous and dispossessed) have themselves historically and contemporarily been treated as fuel, a source of energy to be extracted, expended, and exhausted for the sake of someone else’s good life. Those who inhabit what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls the “extractive zone” (of which there are many) have a very different relationship to energy than “we” do. It might be true that we have all always been solar, in the sense that people everywhere have lived by harvesting the energy of the sun in one way or another, but it would be a mistake to believe that this means we have all been or will be solar in the same way or in the ways we would choose. There has been and will be no solarity, only solarities, and the diverse characters of these solarities will be determined by the relations, not the source, of their energy.

Solar thus contains a double promise: energy without fuel and an infinite amount of energy. In her essay on the discourse of “zero”—“zero carbon, zero waste, zero landfill, zero emissions, (net) zero energy”—in the context of large-scale solar projects in India,

Nandita Badami writes, “Zero performs effective material and ideological work precisely because it simultaneously indexes both nothingness and infinitude.” Solarity as a net zero condition reproduces the fantasy of using energy without environmental consequences. No fuel means no spent fuel rods to bury, no carbon dioxide to manage, no flooded valleys from hydro projects to ameliorate, no torn-apart and poisoned land to recondition. In the drama called “sustainability,” solar plays the part of the hero who appears in the nick of time to save us from ourselves. Solar stands over the dead body of fossil fuels, sword raised to the sun, leading us forward into a future in which energy is energy and fuel is left for history books.
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This version of solar as an energy source immediately available, infinite in supply and negligible in cost, settles upon the sun as but the latest frontier of an extractive enterprise whose names have been slavery, colonialism, industrial capitalism, imperialism. Among its many potentials, solarity could be the new name for this enterprise. But this seems counterintuitive. How can one possess the sun and own what is infinite? We do well to recall that the histories and present of extractive enterprise have always and everywhere involved projecting the possibility of property, with its attendant relations, upon people, places, and things previously conceived as common and infinite. This reminds us that, in many places, the projection of commonness that precedes appropriation has itself been an act of dispossession and part of the ongoing legacy of the colonial, including settler and neocolonial—formations in which many of us live.

What happens to property in a world awash in energy? Moreover, what happens to a world awash in yet another type of energy that has been forcibly converted into property? One possibility is that solarity might be continuous with the capitalist, masculinist, racist, colonialist, and imperialist extractive enterprises that have defined the fossil fuel era globally. Still, the energy promised by solar can’t help but lead us to speculate about how else people might live once they have access to infinite, clean energy. The possibilities of lives transformed by ready access to solar energy have been expressed with particular hope and force in relation to geographies historically consigned to energy poverty by the colonialisms and imperialisms of the Anglo-Euro-American Global North. Could solarity mate-

rialize different ways of being in relation to one another and to the plurality of nonhuman others with whom our fates are entangled?6

Answers to this question will depend heavily on whether and how people approach the promise of solar power as either infinite or not. Until very recently, the upper and middle classes of the wealthy capitalist countries have always used energy as if it were infinite, worrying little about the repercussions of the fuels they’ve used or the uses to which their fuels are put. Peak oil temporarily gave those of us in this situation pause, but it is global warming that has caused us to reflect on the processes and practices by which we transform the energy of the sun into fuels we can use, and that has caused us to think more seriously about the implications of using these fuels as if they were infinite. What will solarity mean if a primary use of the sun as fuel is to power air conditioners that make it possible (for some) to withstand the sun’s relentless heat? The desire for infinite and limitless energy seems, in many ways, too deeply intertwined with capitalist obsessions with limitless growth that have ignored the needs of the many in favor of serving the greed of the few. Can the desire for infinite energy be disentangled from these extractive and oppressive histories of unfettered growth? Or does a more solidarity-oriented solarity require a new vocabulary of imagination and desire that prioritizes subsistence and satiation over the ever-receding horizon of infinitude?

Ursula Le Guin has written that the “utopian imagination is trapped . . . in a one-way future consisting only of growth.”7


Ecomodernist accounts of energy transition live in the ruins of such an imaginary, even as the misery and violence required by endless “growth” become increasingly undeniable—solar panels on green pastures, Reagan’s shining city in the background, shimmering blue with their reflection. What unites such fantastical narratives of technology and growth and the more fatalist responses to ecological disaster that seek to “administer” the catastrophe is their investment in scarcity as the definitive ecological problem. In the ruins of growth, scarcity is either overcome by technology or contained by force, borders, and cruelty.

Perhaps solarity requires of us another imaginary, one shared by many cultures—not of growth but of abundance. Abundance is what literally moves with a wave, $ab + undare$, of undulation. Hence it is nothing like the overcoming of limits, the stockpiling of surplus
siphoned to increase production, but on the contrary requires an embracing of earthly metabolisms, even of degrowth. The ethos of abundance exists all around us, in insisting that there is always more room at the table, in practices of obligatory sharing, expenditure, and the commons. Through it, one may hope to vacate the very desire for accumulation that drives economic expansion. Yet abundance might also be the name of a political strategy for embracing collective limits, of warding off growth sometimes through equitable redistribution, other times through glorious expenditure. An abundant energy transition would untether our visions of the good life from narratives of growth and private accumulation and mobilize behind equitable sharing of energy as a collective good.

In *The Accursed Share*, Georges Bataille⁸ proposes a theory of the economy that begins with the sun and the energy that it produces. “Solar energy,” Bataille writes, “is the source of life’s exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving.”⁹ This originary dispensation is key to what Bataille describes as a general economy. The general economy is constituted by expenditure and squandering, because the energy of the sun is always in excess, impossible to contain and control. By contrast, the human economy is constituted as a restricted one that operates as if there were a scarcity of energy and other resources and so is organized around the control and management of them. As Amanda Boetzkes¹⁰ writes, “capitalism’s failure to acknowledge our innate solarity, and its fundamental prohibition of expenditure, results in the extreme pressure to accumulate energy without waste (in the form of profit) and a collective

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⁹ Bataille, 1:28.
drive toward planetary destruction.” Here solarity serves as the countermodel for social relations based on generous expenditure rather than hoarding. Bataille’s solarity is a fundamentally redistributive condition—to cite the example Bataille offers: “a transfer of American wealth to India without reciprocation.” Thus, Bataille observes, “changing from the perspective of restrictive economy to those of a general economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking—and of ethics.”

Something like the Copernican “reversal of thinking” attributed by Bataille to solarity has animated many designs for large-scale social transformations based on the specific materiality of the sun. Boetzkkes describes the vision of a decentralized, ecological community advanced by Murray Bookchin’s postscarcity anarchism as predicated on a belief in solar power as “an inexhaustible source of energy, freely and equally available.” David Schwartzman has long insisted that we are approaching the possibility of “solar communism,” which Schwartzman describes as “a global civilization realizing Marx’s aphoristic definition of communism for the twenty-first century: ‘from each according to her ability, to each according to her needs,’ referring to both humans and ecosystems.” Here the advent of solar solves two big problems at once, positioning human beings in a better relation to nature and to one another. In Schwartzman’s view of things, solar does away with the rationale for and support of the military–industrial complex; the (virtually) free energy of solar also does away with scarcity and with economic value as we currently understand it.

Similarly, Hermann Scheer, once a German parliamentarian and architect of that country’s famed Energiewende (energy transition), declared, “Making the ground-breaking transition to an economy

based on solar energy will do more to safeguard our common future than any other economic development since the Industrial Revolution.” For Scheer, this was because the particular material properties of solar energy and its infrastructures promised to “re-establish the links between the development of the economy as whole and environmental cycles, stable regional business structures, cultures and democratic institutions,” a possibility the fossil fuel economy has all but obliterated. As Dominic Boyer observes, in this respect, Scheer seeks “a revolutionary leap forward into a new form of sociality, one that is energy intensive and technologically enabled but resolutely local, sustainable and diverse.”

When we think about solar, we need to be alert to its ideological function, which is yet again to erase social relations, interspecies relations, material relations, and finitude from the picture of energy use. As Badami observes, the laudable goal of reaching zero through solar and other renewable infrastructures can leave uninterrogated the paradigms of technological and economic growth reproduced by such plans. Badami writes, “The ideological and material work that the zero seems, ultimately, to perform is to maintain the fiction that we can have our cake and eat it too. It lets us constantly consume, and then calibrate—in order to ‘lighten the footprint’—and allows us the comfort of not having to reimagine the potential limitlessness of consumption.”

Writing about the accelerating arrival of photovoltaic technologies to regions of energy poverty in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, Jamie Cross points out that the benefits of off-grid solar electrification for the energy impoverished exist alongside the opportunities for capital intensification that these same projects offer to the already enriched. As Cross puts it, “for many management

17. Badami, “Counting on Zero.”
and business executives in off-grid solar companies, selling solar power to people living in chronic energy poverty presents itself as an ethical-economic utopia: the opportunity to express care for others and the environment at the same time as fulfilling a fiduciary duty of care to investors and shareholders.\(^{18}\) To say that solar promises infinite, clean energy might well be to say that it allows us to continue to think of energy in the same way that many of us always have, even as the dream of energy sufficiency provides an alibi for erasing the political, ethical, and economic relationships that subtend how energy becomes power.

We can detect this bright depiction of “solar power” in the popular image bank of solarity. A quick internet search for “solar power,” for example, presents standard images of large-scale farms and arrays tending toward an aesthetics of gleaming futurity and industrial-scale possibility. The future is bright and upscaled in such visions. Cross’s warning, however, of the reality of “green dystopias” has powerful representative examples in some solar imaginaries that, although not downplaying the potential power of the sun as a formidable force in our energy futures, suggest a possible dystopian turn in solarity, if the kinds of relations we outline herein are not successfully realized. Perhaps the most resonant recent example is the shocking opening sequence of Denis Villeneuve’s \textit{Blade Runner 2049}, involving a flyover of a future California where a monochrome and smoggy landscape stocked with solar panels fills the screen to project a darkly ecological mood of entropy, violence, and decay. The solar horizon here is not a sunny one, and we are immediately asked to confront our expectations of solarculture’s set associations. The promise of solarity, then, is always ambivalent.

\(^{18}\) Cross, “Solar Good,” 2.
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