Solarities
Barney, Darin, Vemuri, Ayesha

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Solarity as Solidarity

Solar materialisms remind us that what matters is not just our fuel sources but the relations we build and maintain with and through them. Could these be relations of solidarity? Will they be? This will be the story of solarity, just as it has been the story of petroculture, the story of all materials. Better yet: stories, plural. There is not one story of our relations with and through materials but many. In her account of Inuit relations to minerals in the Arctic, Emilie Cameron recounts how copper was “storied” in relation to other creatures: “By故事ing the copper as deer, the Dene made connections between the piece of metal in their hands and a diverse network of relations that enabled them to hunt, eat and imagine their world. Their co-existence with copper enrolled a particular network of things.”1 Similarly, Métis thinker Zoe Todd writes of nonweaponized kinship relations with carbon and fossil beings, such as oil. Todd writes, “It is not this material drawn from deep in the earth that is violent. It is the machinations of human political-ideological entanglements that deem it appropriate to carry this oil through pipelines running along vital waterways, that make this oily progeny a weapon against fish, humans, water and more-

than-human worlds.” 2 The stories of oil are more complicated than critiques that universalize petroculture might lead us to believe, just as the stories of solarity are not reducible to the sun’s potential as a fuel source.

To exist relationally in new ways is to take up new understandings of ourselves and our worlds, but in so doing, we will also build new knowledges experientially and observationally, experimenting with new ways of being and doing. Also, we must reorient whose knowledges we value, what knowledges we value, and what we value more generally. We must enable the retrieval of those knowledges that have been systematically laid to waste by hetero-normative-patriarchal-petro-colonial capitalism; we must aid in the recuperation of the ways of living, being, and knowing that have been violently lost through the genocidal practices of extractivism. And, when questions remain unanswered, we must collectively build new knowledges adequate to the challenges we face on this changing planet. This is to solarize: to positively disrupt and erupt dominant (hierarchical, exclusionary, and oppressive) systems and understand the world anew, in solidarity with the many and diverse beings with whom we share it.

The possibilities of solarity are sensed in real, material, and embodied ways beyond the primacy of the hypothetical and visual that industrial capitalists often ascribe to energy concerns. Bodies and beings are a key part of the infrastructures of solarity, as important as the inanimate materials set in motion within energy assemblages. Here we might consider coral reef restoration as a solar energy concern in which solarity feels like connective, embodied relations. Connectivity, and therefore solarity, can be sensed by tropical coral beings as they grow in shallow waters, their algal symbionts thriving in the filtered sunlight, providing the energy needed to exude coral exoskeletons that accrete around human-made metal frames in ex-

how solarity feels | E X P A N S I V E | ungentrified | NIHILISTIC | utopian | unplanned | skeptical | speculative | like failure | illusive | vivid | disconnected | hyperconnected | intuitive | like constructive rebellion | nomadic | like a parallel universe | subtle | like the space between the time of reality and the time of ephemerality | like anarchy | like being in space, above time | like resonance | translucent | ethereal | like the experience of new beginning | poetic | instinctual | expressive | like truth | as a blank map behaves | ubiquitous | conscious | fluid | like the act of creating | like New Babylon | like the opposite of the SPECTACLE | the consideration/implication of total planetary ecological system boundaries | like grief | poetic | like an assemblage | like foraging | like pure multiplicity | variable | in flux | textured | internal | in tune | exposed | free | individual | collective | spiritual | smooth | perpetual | iterative | like a continual state of becoming

The growth of coral bodies is a manifestation of multiple connections across scale, linking the global to the local, the animate to the inanimate, as well as the accumulated capital of commercial enterprises to the funding streams of university research and the economic aspirations of coastal communities. The embodied connections of solarity are thus intimately tied to questions of solidarity.

Solidarity is a complicated notion, and equity, as a possibility of solarity, is not a given in our neoliberal and neocolonial world. Just as coral beings are suffocating and dissolving in ever-warming and -acidifying seas, an increasingly catastrophic embodied condition of the production cycles of global capitalism, so, too, are coastal communities disassociating as their social and ecological systems succumb to the pressures of unprecedented change. We must not ignore the fact that there are toxic forms of solarity that spread death and destruction through connected assemblages.

The conditions that support equitable, sustainable, material forms of solarity as solidarity are, at first glance, difficult to distinguish from the toxic formations. In fact, we must seriously consid-
er that in some instances, the forms of solarity that bring life and death are inherently and ironically entangled. Can coral survive the next fifty years of global warming without complex collaborations between the engines of capital, science, and local, communal life? Can the communities that depend on coral for their well-being do anything but adapt to the loss or reengineering of their socioecological worlds?

It is crucial to understand that the possibilities of solarity are not inevitable, even as they are complex and entangled. Solarities can be directed and shaped. Solarity is contingent and malleable. This is the promise and the pitfall of solarity and its innumerable connections. The key is to interpret and explore these solar connections in ways that enable the equitable, sustainable, and solidifying forms of solarity we want to perpetuate into the future. As reef builders—both coral and human—know, harnessing the energy of the sun requires careful attunement to shifting conditions and the coordination of many moving parts across vast scales. On the human end of the continuum, this coordination can be conducted by those who would manipulate coral assemblages for profitable exploitation or, more recently, for corporate public relations that attempt to mask continued unmitigated carbon pollution and marine resource extraction. But these schemes cannot hide the embodied evidence of the many local instances of global coral death. We must minimize the possibilities for toxicity and maximize the possibility of solidarity within embodied solar assemblages. This deceptively simple observation is as crucial for the future of coral as it is for all our planet’s energy systems.

Solarity is so much more than energy—or at least, energy imagined narrowly as power, as electricity, as fuel for consumption by (some) humans. Solarity invites a much more capacious understanding of energy. After all, Earth beings are solarian. Life on this planet would not be possible without the sun, excluding some of our bacterial cousins who prefer to get their energy elsewhere. Solarity considered this way displaces the human as the primary beneficiary or consumer of the sun, drawing attention to the wondrous
relationships that surround us and sustain us. As Natasha Myers puts it, it draws us to “the photosynthetic ones—those green beings we have come to know as cyanobacterial, algae, and plants.”³ The sun’s generosity is not for us alone, and indeed, it is indifferent to whom it touches. But these green beings, those “sun worshippers and worldly conjurers,” reveal another mode of engaging the sun—through nothing short of alchemy, they transform the world into a home for the rest of us.

Perhaps, then, it is time to learn from these plants and other photosynthesizing beings, to listen to the other beings with whom we share this world, for these are possibly our most generous cousins. Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes that “plants tell their stories not by what they say, but by what they do.”⁴ We are only just beginning to uncover the many magics of all that plants do, at least in Western science, even as it seems like many of their secrets will be lost forever. Plants are world creators in all senses and across scales. They weave an endless symphony from sunlight, water, and air, alchemically communing with one another and with insects, birds, and other animals that live with and among them. As Eduardo Kohn offers, forests think and act all the time.⁵ They endlessly ask and answer the question of how to relate to both the sun and Earth in all their complexity, how to nurture and grow without depleting the source from which they draw, how to multiply the gift of life for beings other than themselves. So, we must choose which path to follow, which teachers from whom to learn.

Solarity invites us to learn from other beings who commune with the sun, to unearth those teachings from those who have learned to watch the trees being in the world, and who model their own

⁵. Kohn, How Forests Think.
behaviors and moral codes after these magnificent ancient beings. It invites us to learn from forest dwellers, who have been listening to and learning from the trees, and to follow their leadership in living more generously with the other beings with whom we share this world. In short, it invites humility and compassion, the values of solidarity. It demands that we take seriously that energy is not merely fuel for endless human consumption and growth but a gift that makes life possible.