Decolonial and Feminist Solarities

Indigenous peoples are among those who are most adversely affected by fossil fuel extraction practices, such as fracking, that poison nearby waters, land, and living beings. This form of exploitative colonization will continue for as long as fossil fuels are being burned. Oil is not sustainable, neither as a finite resource nor as an industry, a product, a cultural institution, or a social obsession. Fossil fuels are so relied upon that it is difficult to imagine a future world that is not made possible by carbon-made energies. Rethinking energy usage through a newly formulated relationality with the sun is a needed step toward building better, more sustainable futures for Earth. Solarity might provide answers to only one aspect of how energy production and consumption are reformulated. However, it is a partial solution to the multifaceted problems of petroculture and global capitalism. Indigenous voices must be centered in discussions about the futures of territories with which they have lived in relation since time immemorial, including determining how the lands and waters are being used for energy production. Decolonization must be a large part of the speculative scope of futures after oil.

The promise of solar to address the problem of climate change and to mediate fundamentally transformed social and political relationships and organizational forms is most evident in situated practices of solarity on the ground in diverse locations. Potawatomi scholar and activist Kyle Whyte observes that Indigenous people
“confront climate change having already passed through environmental and climate crises arising from the impacts of colonialism.”

Whyte quotes Heather Davis and Métis scholar Zoe Todd, who write that the environmental crisis some have named the Anthropocene is “really the arrival of the reverberations of that seismic shock-wave into the nations who introduced colonial, capitalist processes across the globe in the first half-millennium in the first place.”

It is therefore not surprising that some Indigenous communities are leading the way in terms of developing sustainable, renewable energy infrastructures on their territories, as part of their efforts to transition away from costly, unreliable, emission-intensive, diesel-generated electricity.

Crucially, these initiatives are not just about saving money and saving the planet. They are also intrinsic to an assertion of material sufficiency and political self-determination by these communities, in the context of ongoing struggles for decolonization and in light of histories in which energy and other infrastructures have been deployed as instruments of dispossession and deprivation by settler-colonial states and industries.

Melina Laboucan-Massimo, a member of the Lubicon Cree First Nation and a scholar-activist who led the Piitapan Solar Project in Little Buffalo, Alberta, puts it directly: “We are tired of being economic hostages in our own homeland. We’re not looking for a clean energy grid that’s owned by big corporations like Suncor or Enbridge but by communities that

In 2015, Sacred Earth Solar (formerly Lubicon Solar) launched the Piitapan Solar Project, a 20.8-kilowatt renewable energy installation in Little Buffalo that powers the community health center.* The eighty-panel solar project has created more green jobs and reduced the community’s reliance on fossil fuels. The Lubicon Lake Band is a Cree-speaking community whose reserve lands are centered on the village of Little Buffalo, Alberta. This northern community, about a five-hour drive from Edmonton, is the home of Melina Laboucan-Massimo, the founder of Sacred Earth Solar. Sacred Earth Solar not only helps install solar panels in Indigenous communities of Turtle Island but also trains members of the communities in installation and maintenance. Members of the community describe the pride and sense of self-reliance they experience from having the solar project in their town. Located in Alberta, home to the ecologically devastating oil sands, the success of this project is a testament to the possibilities of solar for bringing about social, ecological, and energy justice even in the petrocultural capital of Canada.

* https://sacredearth.solar/piitapan.

actually own their power.”⁵ Many of these projects entail sophisticated modes of governance, political organization, and relationships with land, place, and nonhuman others that far exceed anything of which Western, liberal democracy has so far been capable.⁶ Clearly “we” have much to learn from those who are actively Indigenizing solarity.

We could say much the same of other categories of people historically marginalized by regimes of carbon energy and their enabling infrastructures and who are now developing solarities that hold open the possibility of more responsible and egalitarian forms of social organization. For example, Shane Brennan tells the story of

Soulardarity, a community organization led by African American residents in Highland Park, Michigan, where, in 2011, the local utility company removed the town’s streetlights in response to declining revenues. In response, Soulardarity activists worked to “install solar-powered lights that are collectively paid for, owned, and controlled by local residents in the model of a sustainable lighting cooperative.” Brennan describes the result as an example of “visionary infrastructure . . . a form of material and social practice in which the collaborative work of building critical infrastructures is inseparable from the imaginary work of collectively envisioning the future with and through those infrastructures.” Visionary infrastructures like the Highland Park solar streetlights convene communities, and “once a community has been convened, a visionary infrastructure then helps this community imagine and create alternatives to the existing system.”

Similarly, Dagmar Lorenz-Mayer reminds us that “feminist solar imaginaries” have been in circulation since at least the 1970s, when feminists working at the intersection of antinuclear, peace, and environmental activism “articulated ideas of socio-environmental justice through the envisioning of commons-oriented practices where systems of ‘renewable energy . . . belong to the people and their communities, not to the giant corporations which invariably turn knowledge into weaponry.’” This does not mean that solar is a panacea for women—Lorenz-Mayer’s study of the exclusion of Roma women workers at a Czech PV installation indicates otherwise—but it does point to the possibility of, and urgent need for, alternative solarities informed by “feminist imaginations of community, participation and care” that generate “an ethos of

querying and imagining community-run solar power, as well as a responsive non-interventionist attentiveness to forms of life, incorporating yet indifferent to humans, that expands the contours and possibility of an ethos of care and communging.”

Such projects and imaginings might be marginal to the extractive, racist, and masculinist solarities that global capitalism has in store for most us, but they remain central to the possibility that things could go otherwise. Sketching a “feminist counterapocalypse” that unsettles finalist thinking and its moralizing, depoliticizing tendencies, Joanna Zylinska seeks to “engender a more anchored, embodied, and localized sense of response to, and responsibility for, the milieu we earthlings call home. ‘The end of man’ pronounced as part of the current apocalyptic discourse can therefore be seen as both a promise and an ethical opening rather than solely as an existential threat.”

Stepping into this opening involves aesthetic practices that explore “better ways of sensing the Anthropocene . . . to produce a more engaging and meaningful encounter beyond the shock and awe effect of the postindustrial sublime.” These aesthetics—potentially the aesthetics of a feminist solarity—“embrace precarity as a political horizon against which the dream of infinite linear progress is presented as expired,” while refusing to relinquish the “drive for justice” that will be required to make solarity livable.

There is a reason that some of the most promising glimpses of solarities today come from Indigenous communities who continue to most acutely experience the unevenly distributed consequences of a fossil economy propelled in many regions by settler-colonial infrastructures. Solarity offers a potentiality of decolonial justice against the stratification inherent in the production and consumption of fossil fuels. Projects like Laboucan-Massimo’s Piitapan Solar Project do more than address energy deficits at the level of tech-

nology—a process that risks reproducing the same stratification found in the fossil economy. Instead, these projects are a practice of worldbuilding and futurecasting in resistance to the present energy regime. The fossil economy was imposed from above by a dominant class who recognized in fossil fuels the potentiality to deepen inequities and concentrate wealth. Solarity seems to hold the promise of upending such concentrations. If solarities are to be just rather than unjust, they must be generated from below rather than from above; solar energy must be as dispersed as the sun’s rays, refusing the kinds of concentration that petrocapitalism has engendered.

Light and heat come freely to Earth. They are the basis for planetary life. The conversion of the sun’s rays into chemical energy is the initial food source, the basis for the trophic cascade that weaves together complex chains of abundance and interconnection that characterize healthy ecosystems. Left to itself, the sun models an economy based on abundance, on gifting, on interconnection, on multispecies flourishing. This is an economy of cycles, diurnal and seasonal. It is a dynamic economy of constant circulation, constant redistribution of life force and energy: upwellings of ocean currents, the jet stream flowing thousands of miles, birds on their winged migrations connecting the Arctic with Africa. Yes, there is scarcity (hunger when the caribou do not come; parched soils in seasons without rain). Yes, there is competition (light-seeking saplings below the forest canopy; algal blooms blanketing waterways, obscuring access to oxygen and sky). But at its core, the solar economy is one of abundance and renewal, of plenty.

Indigenous lifeways of Turtle Island and beyond acknowledge and honor the gifting that generates this abundance, whether through the Thanksgiving Address of Haudenosaunee peoples—which expresses gratitude for and acknowledges our interdependence with the beings and energies that make up Earth—or through the potlatch system by which Northwest Coast peoples redistribute wealth, regenerating social relations. Indigenous economies, taking their cue from creation stories where the energy of life is given freely, share abundance to produce more abundance. The bounty
Reimagining energy systems around the energy of the sun calls on thinkers, makers, and feelers to imagine and practice solarities that are intentionally and explicitly feminist and, perhaps more important, to demonstrate how feminist solarities can offer the much-needed tools, both conceptual and material, to interrupt the given, reengineer infrastructures, speculate on the possible, and, ultimately, reimagine collectivities characterized by unthought sol(id)arities.

Feminist solarities suggest four main lines of inquiry: speculation, interruption, infrastructure, and solidarity. Drawing from both historical and emerging theories and practices of feminist thought, we seek to investigate the relations between feminism and energy transition as they are situated within today’s particular ecological and social crises.

Our speculations led to the creation of a collective conceptual persona called the Mirrorland Collective, a name drawn from Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer’s explorations of feminist technoecological dis/articulations and her call to question what it means to become “response-able” in relations with solar power.” Prompted by this question, the newly formed Mirrorland Collective authored and sonically recorded a manifesto titled “A Big Pile of Glitch: A Manifesto for Feminist Solarity.”

Our experiments taught us that reorienting energy in relation to feminist sol(id)arities involves developing speculative modes of working and thinking together, modes that necessitate unthought recalibrations and coordinations to one another, to nonhuman forces and intensities, to the cosmos, and, specifically, to the sun, that stellar ball of lightning burning in the sky.

* Lorenz-Meyer, “Becoming Responsible.”
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Indigenous communities embarking on clean energy projects. Solar energy becomes a site not just for cultivating energy independence—an important goal in communities where the costs of diesel (to health as well as finances) can be crippling—but for supporting Indigenous governance and cultural renewal. Solarity offers the possibility of energies that are less extractivist, that can circulate through noncapitalist relations, and that can fundamentally challenge the principles of scarcity and competition foundational to capitalist economics. In this way, solarity seems to posit a fundamental challenge to capitalism.

This is a possibility, not a given. As we noted earlier, our energy mix could shift toward a solarity that does not disrupt the status quo: large solar farms, linked to the existing energy grid, owned by major corporations that have gained near-monopoly status through employing economies of scale; PV manufacturing that turns a blind eye to unethical sourcing of rare earth minerals from areas where working conditions are dangerous, wages are appallingly low, and competition for control of mining fuels armed conflict; a “rentier” economic model, in which the surplus generated by abundance is not distributed to cultivate widespread, interconnected flourishing but channeled to further the accumulation of a small elite, who grow their power by charging fees for access to the resources they have captured. Solarity is rife with such contradictory possibilities.

As renewable energy tech shows increasing promise of fueling a life after oil, envisioning a future beyond extraction remains a difficult task. Centuries of extractive logics have conditioned an extractivist line of sight that sees in what we might call “progress” (or even simply a “good life”) a necessarily extractive foundation. Extraction, in other words, appears as a nonnegotiable precondition to what comprises many visions of a good life, postcarbon or not. Current PV infrastructure, for instance, requires lithium and other rare earth minerals in its construction. And wind turbines are primarily constructed from steel, a material whose extractive legacy played a crucial role in cementing the industrial age. Embedded in the materials many hope will fuel transition, extractivism as an
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impulse and, indeed, ideology premised on nonreciprocal relations with the human and nonhuman world continues to haunt visions of postextractive futures. Yet, a core dimension of the promise of solarity rests precisely on its activation of ways of being and seeing beyond the extractive, a vision from scarcity to abundance that reckons with extractivism in the first instance. Conventional wisdom tells us that we shouldn’t let perfect be the enemy of good. In a future conditioned primarily by principles of solarity, particular extractive relations may remain as material residues from our extractivist past and present, but so, too, will emerge new and previously subdued possibilities for relations of reciprocity.

Yet, even all “small solarities” might not be inherently “good” or wholly “bright,” and here it is important to resist the impulse to romanticize instances of small-scale, community solar energy as being somehow pure and untainted. Whatever use solar panels are put to, it is important to trace the means by which they are produced and the relations of extraction, pollution, and dispossession that are required in the course of their production. The extraction of lithium, rare earth metals, and other materials required for the creation of solar panels often takes place in precarious and hazardous laboring conditions that necessitate large-scale displacement of Indigenous and poor people. In this case, the self-determination of one small-scale solar community might be intertwined with the continued dispossession and oppression of another. In this case, we need to ask, is there a possibility of ethical extraction and mining? Utopian, anticapitalist solarities would require the creation of new, ethical processes of mining and resource extraction.

Brooklyn-based environmental justice organization Uprose is poised to become New York State’s first solar co-op. Working with multiple partners and cutting through the city’s red tape have been challenging, but Uprose has persisted because the establishment of a solar cooperative would not only bring concrete economic benefits to the predominantly working-class, immigrant community in Sunset Park but also be a tangible example of community self-determination and empowerment. As Uprose executive director
and longtime climate justice activist Elizabeth Yeampierre put it, “the idea for community-owned solar comes out of efforts from the climate justice community to operationalize just transitions. To basically make it possible for our communities to start moving off the grid and to start creating utilities or mechanisms that will help them thrive in the face of climate change.”

Sunset Park Solar is a momentous victory for renewable energy: fewer than 1 percent of New Yorkers’ homes are powered by solar, and modern renewables provide less than 5 percent of power in New York State, despite Governor Cuomo’s much-ballyhooed initiative to “Reform the Energy Vision.”

Yet, while seeking to breathe life into lofty ideas about just transition, Uprose’s community solar project is unfolding in a predominantly Latinx community that knows very well the links between resource extraction and contemporary empire. As Yeampierre argues, the solar co-op project is about more than just knowing how to install solar, or even understanding just transition. It is, she states, about “moving away from extraction to a different kind of life.” Yeampierre, who is originally from Puerto Rico, is well aware of the links between energy and colonialism, particularly following the systematic attack on public power that took place before and after Hurricane Maria devastated the island. For activists like Yeampierre, just transition cannot involve simply switching from fossil fuels to renewables while maintaining the social hierarchies constructed by fossil capitalism. Just transition also involves challenging the current extractive economy, which reaches far beyond fossil fuels alone. If solarity is to be sustainable, it must also be decolonial and anticapitalist.

16. Pérez-Medina and Yeampierre, “People’s Power.”