Solarities

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Solar Temporalities

It takes about eight minutes for the energy of the sun to reach Earth. That light and heat have history, speed, and trajectory confirms that solarity is a temporal condition. In the European experience, the arc of solarity’s past, present, and future is a familiar one: the past is the era of fossil fuels; the present is a time of urgency and transition; and the future is the time of deliverance and rebirth. This makes it easy to fall into the timeline, but what if the temporalities of solarity actually step out of line? Here we are reminded that solar energy is the primary, fundamental source of energy before fossil fuels both historically and metabolically. Without prior photosynthesis, there would be no carbon to combust. Solarity is both the “before” and the “after” of fossil fuels.

The reality of climate change confronts us with the fact that the era of fossil capitalism, in which carbon dioxide accumulates in step with profits, is not now and may never be behind us, never simply buried. It is more like a zombie that refuses to die or a ghost that will forever haunt us.

As a source of “clean” renewable energy, solar articulates easily with the urgency attached to the present climate crisis. Climate change generates a global, nonnegotiable imperative to hasten development and implementation of near-zero-emission energy infrastructures at an industrial scale. Environmentalists have a name for this imperative: we call it “energy transition,” and we, too, think it cannot wait. It is not surprising that environmental
advocacy around energy transition, including to solar, is animated by a sense of urgency.

However, urgency also serves strategies for energy transition that entrench, intensify, and depoliticize environmental and other injustices. The environmental crisis capitalists who stand poised to profit from solarity are fluent in the language of urgency. Indigenous, colonized, racialized, and impoverished communities have lived, for decades and centuries, with ongoing environmental emergencies produced by the economies and ways of life whose survival is now presented to them as a global imperative. These are structural conditions that have never commanded global attention in the way climate change does, and the particularity of the experiences arising from them is erased by the totalizing urgency of the climate crisis. This is why the transition to solarity must be approached not merely as an urgent question of global energy transition but as a matter of global environmental justice that has been a long time coming.

The absence of diurnal time across the circumpolar world, for instance, asks specific questions of the sun as an energy source. If solarity is premised on a relational constitution between human practices and particular forms of energy mediation, then it follows that the largely Inuit, Inupiak, Sámi, and other Indigenous communities who have long resided in place across the Arctic experience the sun as a starkly seasonal transit, and one not diurnally tied to energy abundance. Seasonal changes, and the light conditions that accompany them, often sweep over lands, waters, and ices in accelerated rhythms, with an energy-giving sun making way for the more energy-static moon. In Iqaluit in April, dusk settles in like a slow-fading color gradient, tinting the city’s buildings a purply blue then quickly flicking to black. These are places where stark distinctions between dark and light become part of the “lived ordinary.” If, according to Lauren Berlant, infrastructure can be thought of as the “living mediation of what organizes life,” that is, the “lifeworld of structure,” then diurnal time is intimately bound up in this vital

process of mediation and the potential interventions in characterizing southern-oriented energy infrastructures it can make. Energy deficits across the circumpolar world, and communities’ reliance on diesel-powered forms of electricity to heat homes, operate under a decidedly ambiguous midnight sun—a signal that Bataille made out as an “extreme incandescence”\(^2\) and an emblematic part of the planet’s cyclical accumulation and expenditure of solar energy.

Yet what do diesel storage tanks, ubiquitous mushroom-like volumes that dot the outskirts of communities across the circumpolar world, figure under the energy-absent winter night sky? Indeed, the lived ordinary of residents is bound to an understanding of solarity that finds this incandescence in summer tundra and taiga, in the mosquitos and old, dry mosses of summer hunting camps. This, too, is energy without the possibility of infrastructural mediation. Historically, and it seems for our warming present, southern projections of the circumpolar world’s solar imaginaries are such that the slowly drawn out and then swift transit between light and dark forecloses a merely infrastructural conception of solar energy. Solarity can only assume the unlimited potential of the sun as an energy source under the climate conditions of diurnal time. Being in place across the inhabited Arctic, in both light and dark, is a reminder that incandescence and energy are not always bound together as infrastructure.

Solarity’s futures are similarly complex. As Rhys Williams writes, “solar is so resonant of a ‘fresh start’ that it slides into ideas of a ‘clean slate.’ Solar futures are attractive in part because they offer the chance to forget what came before, to absolve us of our own environmentally-damaging history, or at least to shield ourselves from it.”\(^3\) For many of us, solarity’s promise of amnesia—the prospect of forgetting the past and proceeding as if it never happened—

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My contribution to After Oil School 2: Solarity was as a co-instructor for the “Imagining Indigenous Solarities” workshop given alongside Waylon Wilson and as a representative of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures (IIF). Cofounded by Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati, AbTeC is an Aboriginally determined research-creation network whose goal is to ensure Indigenous presence in the web pages, online environments, video games, and virtual worlds that compose cyberspace. AbTeC manages IIF, a partnership of universities and community organizations dedicated to developing multiple visions of Indigenous peoples tomorrow in order to better understand where we need to go today. Through its four main components—workshops, residencies, symposia, and archive—IIF encourages and enables artists, academics, youths, and elders to imagine how we and our communities will look in the future.

In the “Imagining Indigenous Solarities: 7th Generation Character Design” workshop, Waylon and I invited participants to imagine a future informed by solarity and the Indigenous future imaginary discourse. Questions like “what might our descendants be like seven generations from now?” and “what about the world they live in or how society might function?” guided our group of eleven participants through the discussion portion of the workshop on the first day. On the second day, we moved into the workshop’s hands-on portion and gave participants the opportunity to imagine and design characters from their futures as a method of critically analyzing our society today. By imagining the future, we are able to better understand our individual and collective responsibilities to our descendants, thereby providing us with a base for enacting real change in the here and now.

Our group discussions began after offering a territorial acknowledgment and then posing the question of what a territorial acknowledgment actually is. Many of us agreed that these formal acknowledgments are as much an affirmation of continued Indigenous presence within a certain location as they are a method for everyone to position her own relationship to that location personally. We found that this helped us all to build up a sense of responsibility to place that we could continue to grow moving forward. Spaces meant for intellectualizing and theory crafting in academia do not encourage scholars to bring their positionalities into their research. In this case, we asked workshop participants to think about their futures and creatively speculate how their imagined descendants exist in a world after oil.

The character sketches that were created as part of this workshop were part of worlds with diverse futures. I imagined a world in which my descendant lives where humans have formalized their relationality
to the sun by becoming biologically bonded to solar energy. These “solar-cyborgs” carry their own miniature suns within them and are in turn deeply tied to solar cycles—cultivating gardens in spring and summer, while resting in fall and winter. All of the contributions were unique and offered alternative perspectives on a world after oil. Some considered the sun to play a large part in the worlds of their descendants, while others focused their attention on other forms of energy production, restructuring of society, and kinship. Positioning how oil personally impacts us presently, as both Indigenous and Settler peoples, is a vital first step in realizing a world that we want for our collective descendants.

* https://abtec.org/.
† https://indigenousfutures.net/.

might be even more attractive than its promise of limitless energy. Interestingly, this is precisely the move to innocence by well-meaning environmentalists that many Indigenous and decolonial thinkers and activists refuse, even and especially under the urgent pressure of colonial and settler-colonial capitalism’s climate emergency. It is not just that clean-slate solar (i.e., “let’s make a fresh start and work together to save the planet with solar energy!”) erases the experience of, and responsibility for, historical and ongoing environmental injustice committed against Indigenous and colonized populations, lands, waters, and species. It’s that a future in which the past is forgotten is inimical to the temporal orientations many colonized and Indigenous peoples bring to their environmental relations. When Kyle Whyte describes “a spiralling temporality in which it makes sense to consider ourselves as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life,” Whyte refers to a sense of time in which the past is always already present in the future. In Whyte’s account, spiraling time “may be lived through narratives of cyclicality, reversal, dream-like scenarios, simultaneity, counter-factualty, irregular rhythms, ironic un-cyclical, slipstream, parodies of linear pragmatism, eternality,

among many others.”5 This speaks to a solarity that is something other, something more, than the fantasy of deliverance, something like the ongoing work of energy responsibility.

For those not accustomed to spiraling time, the work of energy responsibility might include recovering past ways of being and relating to the world and to each other. In a famous essay, the British historian E. P. Thompson argued that the transition to an industrial society restructured the outer habits and inner lives of common folk in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. Industrial capitalism produced more time-disciplined workers (though not without resistance), separated labor from leisure, and commodified time itself. Speculating in the twentieth century about an automated future of greater leisure, Thompson reflected, “Men might have to re-learn some of the arts of living lost in the industrial revolution: how to fill the interstices of their days with enriched, more leisurely, personal and social relations; how to break down once more the barriers between work and life.”6 “Values,” wrote Thompson, “stand to be lost as well as gained” over the course of time.7 Some of them are worth recovering.

Turning to the pasts of different societies and cultures could inform solarity in a variety of ways. We might “relearn” more restorative, leisurely orientations toward time; alternative ways of relating to others; what the poet Gary Snyder called “the inherent aptness of communal life”;8 the sound of wind, water, and birds before combustion engines; closer relations to the land and water; the skills and arts of attention lost to automation; natural abundance living with the sun. What might we relearn, for instance, from the agro-ecological success of early farming communities in New

7. Thompson, 94.
England? Or from the notions of property of Indigenous societies in North America? Or from the legacy of biodiversity cultivated by India’s women farmers?

This is not a nostalgic call to recreate the past. It is far too flawed for that, and those who invoke it in the service of violence and oppression must be resisted. Moreover, the legacies of modernity cannot simply be erased, and some of its achievements we will want to retain. In a solar future, we will be able to produce forms and amounts of energy and technologies unimaginable in the past. We will carry the memory of injustices that ought not to be forgotten. Relearning from the solarities of the past with an eye to the future will generate new forms of living and relating that are at the same time grounded and open to change.

According to the best climate predictions available, what we do—or fail to do—within the next decade will have monumental effects for the future of life on planet Earth. Yet, in facing what is perhaps the single greatest challenge our species has known, our responses as individuals and collectives are marked by temporalities of procrastination and denial that could very well prove cataclysmic on a scale not experienced in historical memory. These are most pronounced in the Global North, where visions of prosperity, freedom, and progress have been shaped for the past two centuries by the very fossil fuels from which we now must orchestrate a calculated, collective exodus. As the carbon clock edges closer to devastating and irrevocable levels of global warming, those nations that have benefited most from the age of hydrocarbons find themselves beset by reactionary tendencies that can only appear, for anyone who has apprehended the scope and urgency of the current need for energy transition, as pathological forms of distraction and disavowal. As we witness the uncanny return of such twentieth-century bugbears as the threat of nuclear war, white supremacy, xenophobia, populist nationalism, renewed assaults on women’s reproductive rights, and the continued upward appropriation of all remaining forms of social wealth, we must ques-
tion whether such spectacles, alarming as they are, do not actually provide performative, therapeutic distractions from the colossal, collective task of building a new, just, and sustainable world.

This tendency points toward a crucial fact of our current predicament: although we possess ample technological capabilities for enacting the necessary energy transition, we lack narrative technologies for imaging and conceptualizing such a shift. It is the humanities rather than the hard sciences that occupies a privileged position to address this gap in our cultural, political, and historical sensibility. The response to global warming can only issue from beyond the horizons that fossil fuels have rendered hazy and suffocating and will require the efforts of historians, cultural analysts, sociologists, poets, and artists as much as engineers and scientists. It will require new lexicons, narratives, and languages and a new name for the collective potential for transformation offered by the current junction. Solarity is one such name, pregnant with uncertainty, novelty, and possibility.