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Solarities or Solarculture:
Bright or Bleak Energy Futures
and the E. L. Smith Solar Farm

This article explores the possibilities of the verb *to solarize* through a case study of the proposed E. L. Smith Solar Farm in Edmonton, Alberta. I study this solar farm proposal in local, provincial, and federal contexts, often at odds. On the one hand, oil-loyal¹ discourses foment negative political and media responses to people and enterprises deemed anti-oil; this was particularly the case with the infrastructure blockades by those demanding withdrawal of the Teck oil sands proposal of late 2019 and early 2020. On the other hand, Indigenous decolonization and reconciliation efforts intensify as people at the intersections of gender, race, class, and ability continue to demand equity and a voice at the table when it comes to proposed energy infrastructure and politics—whether the site of tension is another proposed oil sands mine, a pipeline to get (more) Canadian crude to tidewater, or a solar installation.

The E. L. Smith Solar Farm provides an interesting case study of the material and social realities undergirding solar fantasies, in part because it illustrates the distinction between solarcultures and solarities.² Each of these concepts is founded on material infrastructures of solar energy. Whereas solarcultures tend to reproduce

the structures of inequality that characterize the petrocultural regimes they otherwise purport to replace, solarities, by contrast, comprise an intersectional, equitable, and ethical response to those regimes. To solarize is to contest and subvert, rather than to reproduce, the material relations of petroculture. The risk (from a social justice perspective) is that solariculture can easily stand in for solarity, especially under environmental conditions in which rapid transition to renewable energy sources is a real imperative.

Land(ing) Solar Projects

Following the public hearings for the E. L. Smith Solar Farm presentation to Edmonton's city council in 2019, I conducted a set of research interviews as part of the *Deep Solarities* podcast series. The E. L. Smith Solar Farm is a solar energy infrastructure project proposed for installation at the E. L. Smith Water Treatment Plant site located on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton's River Valley, the largest urban greenspace in North America "at 22 times the size of New York City's Central Park" (Explore Edmonton n.d.). The project involves a ten-megawatt solar installation that, if approved, will contribute to the City of Edmonton's overall goal of producing 10 percent of its electricity locally from renewables and offer the daily benefit of lowering the plant's carbon footprint (EPCOR 2018).

The project initially appeared to check all the relevant boxes for a renewable energy project. In late 2018, as the proposal was being prepared for city council's consideration, it received an injection of funding: C\$10.7 million from a federal program for green infrastructure projects and another C\$1.9 million from Alberta Innovates. There had been significant efforts made to ensure that the project had the necessary social license. For example, the plan included an Indigenous herb garden, educational opportunities for postsecondary students, and public access initiatives (EPCOR 2018). Enoch Cree Nation, whose reserve lands border the municipality, had also signed on in support of the project. However, by the time the E. L. Smith proposal went to a public hearing before city council on June 17, 2019, the project had become increasingly contested by conservation groups, Enoch had withdrawn its support, and the proposal was referred back to city administration and EPCOR, the city's utility company.³

In Canada, in Alberta, and certainly in Edmonton, the battle lines for the future are being drawn around energy issues, with some rallying to extend oil extraction and build more pipelines, while others stand on the front lines of the climate justice movement demanding action that responds

not only to the Paris Agreement (2015) and the IPCC special report (2018), but also to the ninety-four recommendations made by the decade-long Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). Edmonton is the provincial capital located just south of the Alberta oil sands, the world's largest bitumen deposits. Despite being situated in the seemingly oil-loyal province of Alberta, Edmonton has relatively progressive energy and climate politics. Its nonpartisan city council has been increasingly taking action on climate for the past decade. In 2015, council approved the Community Energy Transition Strategy, a commitment to action on global climate targets. The strategy guides policy decisions and is mobilized to shift public attitudes towards climate and energy transition via the city's Change for Climate campaign.⁴ In 2018, Edmonton hosted the IPCC Cities and Climate Change Science Conference, where the mayors of close to thirty-four hundred North American municipalities signed on to the Edmonton Declaration, formalizing their commitments to take action toward achieving the Paris Agreement (City of Edmonton 2018). All of this to say that despite mainstream media news coverage of Canadian politics internationally, and Alberta provincial politics nationwide that paint Albertans as oil-loyal and against energy transition, many Canadians, Albertans, and certainly Edmontonians (74 percent according to the latest municipal polls) are concerned about climate change and want to take action (City of Edmonton 2019).

When the E. L. Smith Solar Farm proposal went to city council in June 2019, action on climate change was on both the formal agenda and Edmontonians' minds. As the proposal was making its way through the stages of approval in 2018–19, so was the *Climate Resilient Edmonton: Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan* (City of Edmonton 2015a), which outlines coming climate challenges to the municipality, making very clear the need to act urgently. Over the summer, city council debated the need to increase their commitments to addressing climate change by revising the Community Energy Transition Strategy (Johnston 2019). These debates on how, and how fast, to act on climate change culminated two months later on August 27, 2019, when Edmonton City Council voted ten to two to declare a climate emergency (Metz 2019). In so doing, Edmonton joined “over 1390 local governments in 27 countries [that] have declared a climate emergency and committed to action to drive down emissions at emergency speed” (The Climate Mobilization n.d.). The motion was put forward by the city's only Indigenous city councillor, Aaron Paquette; however, it is fair to say that it would not have been successful without the leadership and collaboration of local climate activist groups and the participation of diverse community members—“young

people to grandparents”—who showed up in large numbers to provide support (Issawi 2019). It is in this local context that the proposal for the E. L. Smith Solar Farm project was moving forward.

Mobilizing toward Solarities by Mobilizing against E. L. Smith Solar Farm

Despite initial enthusiasm, over the course of 2018–19, resistance to the E. L. Smith Solar Farm project began to build. Resistance came from long-time solar advocates and environmental organizations—such as the Sierra Club Canada, the North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society, and Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition—who did not want to see the land rezoned from Metropolitan Recreational to Direct Development Control Provision (a zoning category used for industrial development related to providing utility services) out of concern for setting a precedent that would lead to further industrial development in the River Valley (see also Richmond 2020). Their resistance to the solar project came from their commitment not only to protect the area for human recreational purposes, but also to ensure multispecies flourishing and fight against proposed disruptions to the ecosystems and the elimination of wildlife corridors. As one interviewee put it, many of these stakeholders have been advocates for energy transition, but not at the expense of biodiversity (Feroe 2020). Implicitly, despite sometimes divergent positions, these environmental organizations largely lean toward visions of solarities, rather than solar-cultural futures. This municipality, somewhat anomalous in provincial and federal contexts, has strong local political networks grounded in community leagues with commitments to labor and environment as well as specific local issues, one of which has always been protecting the River Valley that links communities within and beyond the municipality. Citizens, working at the community level and with a range of environmental organizations including the aforementioned, have stood guard for decades to protect the River Valley, specifically against the threat of industrial encroachment into the area.

As different stakeholders debated land use—and, ultimately, whose rights take precedence—a third-party contractor was hired to complete an environmental impact assessment as part of the rezoning process. This investigation built on an earlier report that identified Indigenous archaeological remains in the area, which suggested possible designation as an important heritage site (Alberta Culture and Tourism 2018; see also Sharphead 2020). Canada is a country made possible by colonization and the dispossession of lands, and this new solar farm is being proposed in lands cov-

ered by Treaty No. 6, an agreement signed in 1876 that covers an area of 121,000 square miles in the central regions of what are now the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Indigenous signatories and their descendants understand the treaty to be an agreement to share the land and resources, although the Crown operates largely as though this was a surrender agreement. *All energy projects, green or fossil, happen on, to, and with the land.* The area in question, although now part of the municipality, was historically part of the reserve lands of the Enoch Cree Nation, which borders the city; this First Nation was dispossessed of these lands through yet other “dubious surrender processes” in 1908 (Houle 2016). By the time of the June 2019 hearing, Enoch Cree Nation had withdrawn their approval for the project. At this hearing, several stakeholders spoke out about the issues outlined above, but most significantly, when the issue of Indigenous archaeological findings was raised, the public hearing was postponed by city council. In response, Jason Kenney, then the newly elected premier of Alberta, seemingly decided to make policy on Twitter. On June 19, he posted, “I agree with these Edmonton residents & the Enoch 1st Nation. The River Valley should be a ribbon of green, free of industrial projects. That’s why our govt is ending funding from this solar farm in the Valley & will help create the nearby Big Island Park” (Kenney 2019). With this tweet, Kenney aimed to undermine the development of the solar project while seeming to perform allyship. What complicates public understanding of Kenney’s United Conservative Party’s (UCP) hard-line energy politics are instances such as this, where a vision for solarities (equitable, decolonial, bidiverse decarbonized futures) plays into his ambition to reinvigorate Alberta’s petrocultural state. Political spin allowed for his ongoing refusal of energy transition to appear as support for environmental and Indigenous issues.

Performances of Petrocultural Allyship vs. Solarities

In addition to the context given so far, it is worth noting that the E. L. Smith Solar Farm was being prepared for presentation to city council within a global context of mass mobilizations demanding climate action in solidarity with both Greta Thunberg and the youth climate movements, as well as blockades going up across Canada in 2020 in support of the Wet’suwet’en Nation and the hereditary chiefs’ refusal to let the Coastal GasLink pipeline pass through their unceded territories in northern British Columbia. On the heels of having supported Enoch Cree First Nation against the E. L. Smith Solar Farm, the Alberta UCP government responded to the Wet’suwet’en by

reducing the conversation to lost revenues and jobs to set the stage for Bill 1 (Government of Alberta 2020).

As the Legislative Assembly of Alberta opened session on February 25, 2020, the first bill Kenney tabled was Bill 1, the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act. It went to second reading on February 26, and “imposes stiff new penalties on law breakers who purposefully block critical, essential infrastructure, such as railways, roadways, telecommunication lines, utilities, oil and gas production and refinery sites, pipelines, and related infrastructure” (Kenney 2020). Beyond the infrastructure Kenney named in media reports, the legislation defines essential infrastructure very broadly to include almost anything, and penalties range from “\$10,000 for a first offence, \$25,000 for a subsequent offence, and up to six months in jail” (Kenney 2020; see also Kelly and Nassar 2020). In the context of climate justice initiatives and protests in Canada and across North America, this has to be understood as a law that specifically targets Indigenous Peoples and environmental activists who are challenging business as usual by refusing new energy projects that respond to neither reconciliation nor climate change. More broadly, this law threatens the political agency of all Albertans or anyone exercising their democratic right to protest in Alberta.⁵ Kenney and all the members of the Legislative Assembly who voted with him, including some of the opposition, are making it dangerous for citizens to stand in support of the Wet’suwet’en, one another, and their political leaders demanding climate action, like Edmontonians did to support Councilor Paquette’s motion to declare a climate emergency. As citizens refuse oil-loyal politics and organize to demand change, the Alberta government is passing legislation to outlaw our capacity to stand together—to create solidarities and solarities.

Working in concert with the leader of the federal Conservative Party of Canada, Andrew Scheer, and his federal party counterparts, Kenney shaped public opinion by speaking to the media and the public about the illegality of blockades by Indigenous Peoples and supporters of Indigenous nation-to-nation relations. He followed up by then making it so: by writing it into law at the provincial level in Alberta and passing the Bill 1 legislation. This move, among others, by Kenney and his UCP, foments racist politics and reinforces the myth that oil (the rhetorical stand-in for all fossil energy sources) is a founding characteristic of the nation and the key to its future (see Jacobs et al. 2020).

In fact, *what is foundational* to the legal legitimization of the nation are the international treaties signed between the Crown and the many Indigenous nations, not to mention the illegitimate takeover of lands never ceded by

Indigenous nations. Oil-loyal political discourse constructs Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous land claims, and Indigenous political organizing as obstacles to resource extraction and thereby traitors to the nation-state, when in fact the nation only exists because of the peace and friendship treaties signed with these nations, which have now been run roughshod by representatives of the Crown and Canadian governments for over three hundred years.

In short, allyship for Kenney is a performance that he engages in only when allegiances serve his larger and consistent purpose: to defend and sustain petrocultural interests, beyond all reason, even when oil is trading at \$-37.63 a barrel and dropping (Chapa 2020). Kenney's relations with Indigenous land and conservation politics are entirely organized around exploitation; his commitment is to multinational fossil energy interests and ensuring their continued ability to extract profit from land. The other necessary exploitation, however, is that of Indigenous Peoples and their politics. Kenney aligns where it serves his purposes and he writes legislation to overrule Indigenous protest and non-Indigenous solidarity actions when it does not. Non-Indigenous peoples are also consistently exploited in the interest of aligning the public will with extracting profits from land, which is necessarily entangled with the exploitation of others: human and more-than-human. Likewise, the citizenry is being made increasingly reliant on a fossil-energy industry that is fast becoming globally obsolete as green tech improves and the urgency to respond to climate change escalates with pressure from across the political spectrum, especially youth movements. A democratic order undergirded by petrocultural renders all citizens precarious—the very opposite of what a future informed by solarities could mobilize.

Control of not only land and resources but also bodies has been achieved through ongoing colonization, or more specifically, petroculturalism that is also, fundamentally and inescapably, patriarchal, ableist, and cisheteronormative. This worldview produces the pillage of resources as well as the oppression of whole swaths of the global population; in Canada, it underlies the sociological phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.⁶ It is also expressed daily and continuously as misogyny and racism directed at undermining the disproportionate numbers of women, members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ communities, people of color, and Indigenous Peoples on the frontlines of the climate crisis, demanding justice. The misogynist dismissal of Greta Thunberg is one example (Wilson 2020), and the media's representation of Indigenous activist Chief Theresa Spence is another (see Wilson 2017). As the age of fossil-fuel exploitation ends, Albertans are left with the abandoned wells, the turned-over boreal forest, and the

ruins of an age gone by, while much of the wealth has left the province, following the networks of petrocultural infrastructure around the world.

To achieve solarities (bright solarities), rather than solarcultures (bleak solarities),⁷ new energy sources and systems need to be implemented in ways that are adequate to the situation at hand. Climate change is a symptom, not the cause, of our current planetary crisis. This means thinking and acting meaningfully as every new energy project is put *onto the land*. Whether, like at E. L. Smith, the project is solar or a new fossil infrastructure, our responses to climate change must be about more than decarbonizing the atmosphere. The real challenge is to address the bankrupt worldview and economic imperatives that push the planet to 2.5 times its limits. This starts by thinking big and thinking differently—thinking solarities—even with small local projects like E. L. Smith, because one thing COVID-19 has taught us, if globalization hadn't already, is that the planet is an interconnected ecosystem and what we do locally has ramifications beyond even what we seem capable of understanding or imagining. We need to transform our imaginaries of who we are in relationship to this planet and to what futures are possible. And we must avoid retreating to small-minded thinking grounded in scarcity mentalities that foment the violences of the current petrocultural age.

With politics dominated the world over by increasing numbers of governments flouting democracy and maintaining power through the silencing and dispossession of voices and bodies who dare to resist political economies, the need to solarize is pressing. Throughout February 2020, the Canadian media reported continuously on blockades, police brutality, and attacks on Indigenous Peoples, climate protesters, and those putting their bodies and lives on the front lines of the climate justice movement. On February 23, 2020, Teck Resources Limited withdrew its proposal for a massive project in the Northern Alberta oil sands. In a letter to Minister of Environment and Climate Change Jonathan Wilkinson announcing the withdrawal of the Frontier proposal, Teck CEO and president Don Lindsay wrote that Teck is committed to producing energy in ways that respond to climate change, and that “the promise of Canada’s potential will not be realized until governments can reach agreement around how climate policy considerations will be addressed in the context of future responsible energy sector development” (Lindsay 2020). In short, because the cost of carbon pricing has not yet been set, it makes for uncertain profit margins. Furthermore, when the externalities of fossil energy are no longer subsidized by oil-loyal governments, and when the detritus of industrial production is no longer borne by the human

and more-than-human communities and ecologies it disrupts free of charge, these companies will no longer extract the excessive profits of a foregone era, securing power, writ-large and understood as both energy/energy systems and as social relation.

At the announcement of the project being cancelled, Alberta premier Kenney deflected blame away from his provincial government's unwillingness to respond to federal political imperatives by setting a price on carbon, instead turning attention to Trudeau, claiming the project failed because of the federal government's inability to control protests across the country: "It is what happens when governments lack the courage to defend the interests of Canadians in the face of a militant minority," said Kenney (Rieger 2020). However, his reference to a "militant minority" is increasingly not the case. Millions of people the world over are demanding change, and here in Canada, there is significant support for the Wet'suwet'en cause.⁸ However, what he is really demanding is that Canadians refuse to respect the international treaties that are foundational to the creation of this country, in favor of legalizing what until now is really a myth of nation: that we are a people of oil, past, present, and future. In demanding this refusal and outlawing these solidarities, he also refuses just futures, demanding that the petrocultural legacies of injustice will continue to define the future.

Conclusion: Solarities Not Yet Foreclosed

Within this fraught social, economic, and political landscape, how might the E. L. Smith Solar Farm proposal become an example of alternatives to petrocultures? As of spring 2020, the E. L. Smith Solar Farm proposal has yet to come back to city council for a second hearing, and it is unclear how it will be resolved. In the interim, it provides an interesting case study for what it means to solarize, or not. In February 2020, an important stakeholder who had been vocal against the project at the hearing suggested things were "going better" (pers. comm.). What does *better* look like?

Energy justice is not a guaranteed outcome of energy transition. In Canada, Indigenous rights, human and more-than-human rights, resource development, energy transition, and climate action must all be reconciled and dealt with simultaneously. Take, for example, the Teck CEO's announcement of the purchase of a new solar project—the SunMine solar energy facility in Kimberley, British Columbia—that had many in the green energy sector celebrating (Teck 2020). A relatively small project, it seems more like a good PR move than a move from fossil investments to solar. However, it is

also a reminder that those concerned about energy and climate justice must agilely follow the battle for the energy future and where it is being fought. Despite Kenney's best efforts to the contrary, it seems, at least recently, that energy futures are shifting away from fossil infrastructure. However, simply shifting the site from which Teck extracts stakeholders' profit margins is not a win for justice. It harkens to a solar-cultural future and not anything like a deep commitment to solarities.

Edmonton could set a precedent for how new projects are handled, given that so many municipalities are now taking on a new role in energy leadership. Fossil energy projects are usually located far from urban sites, often in areas that fall under the jurisdiction of provincial and federal politics, which means that municipalities, like their citizens, are quite far removed from the power and politics that they benefit from. Now, as more and more renewable energy sources move closer to or even within city limits, the decision-making roles and responsibilities of municipalities are transformed. Edmonton, in this case, could look to the historical and ongoing practices of oppression by other levels of government and do things differently. It won't just be a matter of whether the E. L. Smith Solar Farm is pushed through on an Indigenous heritage site (as it was suggested might happen), but a matter of thinking through just and equitable options if it is not. Where, then, does the solar farm go? To answer this question demands that those who decide and those of us who give our approvals, whether actively or through complacency, need to think about our relationships to land and to a future defined by solarities.

When we solarize, energy becomes a commons: a shared entity that we draw from as needed and not more. Under solarities, communities will share access to land and resources, and ownership will not endow the right to exploit for personal interest; equitably distributed profits, the benefits (monetary or otherwise) from new projects on the land, will be shared by communities. Energy justice, in cases like E. L. Smith and in all approvals for energy projects, will become the metrics upon which we evaluate viability. In a future informed by solarities, profit will no longer be measured in terms of dollars gained or lost; the parameters of language will shift to terms like *community benefits* and/or *wellbeing economies*, among others, where the primary considerations will be whether everyone in our society has their needs provided for; where wellness will index a highly educated population generating locally specific and internationally applicable knowledge; where the health of communities and ecosystems will be a measure of success; and where health will refer to both physical and social well-being produced through good relations—Indigenous and non-Indigenous, human-to-human, as well as human and more-than-human.

Under solarities, our responsibilities as treaty people to one another and the lands on which we live will override the energy intensive desires that exceed need. In short, to make solarities possible, those with power—energy providers, but importantly policy makers, city councilors, government administrators, utility operators, engineers, architects, city planners, those working in oil and related industries, and the general citizenry demanding more from their leaders—must learn from climate youth activists and Indigenous peoples and communities how to forge solidarities, and how to step up and step aside when it's demanded. Ultimately, the transformations adequate to climate change require a shift away from the modes of being and doing that produced the crisis, which means learning from and with those individuals and communities demanding and defining climate justice. Intersectional knowledge and multidirectional learning will help us to solarize: to mitigate and adapt to climate change in ways that create more equitable and just futures for us all.

Notes

This article was written in early 2020; it went to press before any vote or decision was taken on E. L. Smith by Edmonton's city council.

- 1 *Oil-loyal* is a term I use to describe an identity politics that aligns oil with what it means to be Canadian and Albertan, and by proxy, insinuates it is treasonous to support climate or energy transition politics. This attitude has been fostered by multiple levels of government as well as corporate media and PR campaigns.
- 2 Solarities is a neologism: *solar* with *solidarity* to assert that all energy projects, green or not, need to be organized with social justice commitments at the forefront. By expanding multispecies relations to include not only new constellations of kinship but stellar constellations as kin, solarities demand from us humans a more expansive understanding of our situated lives, individually and collectively, and a shift in mindset toward new ways of being and doing that will inform new politics (Mirrorland Collective 2020). Solarcultures, on the other hand, colonize the sun and perpetuate the injustices of petrocultures, albeit fueled by less carbon-intensive energy sources.
- 3 The details of the motion to send the proposal back for more work is publicly accessible via the City of Edmonton's website: edmonton.ca/residential_neighbourhoods/neighbourhoods/rezoning-proposed-e-l-smith-water-plant-solar-farm.aspx.
- 4 This campaign and transition strategy can, at least in part, be credited to the work of the Alberta Climate Dialogues (2010–16) research team, led by University of Alberta professor Dr. David Kahane, which ran a series of deliberative democracy consultations on climate change that would give license to the Change for Climate Campaign run by the City of Edmonton, a communications strategy that aims to mobilize *Edmonton's Energy Transition Strategy* and the *Climate and Adaptation Strategy*. See City of Edmonton 2015b, 2017.
- 5 Alberta's Critical Infrastructure Defence Act extends the ambiguities set by Stephen Harper's federal government in 2015, when it passed Bill C-51, the Anti-Terrorism Act, which rewrote the definition of what constitutes a threat to national security to include a threat to the economy (Theodorakidis 2015).

- 6 For more on the connection between petrocolonialism and the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), see Simpson 2014.
- 7 The distinctions “bright” and “bleak” that are mobilized here and below are taken from discussions started in the After Oil 2: Solarities school held in May 2019 in Montreal, from which this volume emerges.
- 8 In mid-February 2020, Ipsos published poll results that said 39 percent of Canadians believe the protests are legitimate and justified, which is a significant percentage (Bricker 2020). Since that poll was conducted, there have been solidarity protests across the country.

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