

# Interrogation of the Selectivity and Electrokinetics of CO<sub>2</sub> Reduction by AgSn Films in the Presence of Protic Organic [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> Cations as judged by Impedance Spectroscopy and Distribution of Relaxation Times Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The use of renewable electricity to synthesize high energy and high value chemicals via reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> is an attractive strategy for renewable energy storage. Improving our understanding of how heterogeneous CO<sub>2</sub> reduction electrocatalysts function is important to designing efficient systems for conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> into commodity chemicals such as CO and HCO<sub>2</sub>H. Both Ag- and Sn-based materials have been previously considered as CO<sub>2</sub> reduction catalysts and offer distinct CO<sub>2</sub>RR selectivities. In this work, we have considered electrodeposited composite film electrodes prepared from electroplating baths with varying ratios of Ag<sup>+</sup> and Sn<sup>2+</sup> triflates to understand how the performance of such composite materials varies as a function of composition. XPS analysis confirms that for each composite film electrodes, Ag existed in the metallic (Ag<sup>0</sup>) state, while the Sn was mainly oxidized (Sn<sup>2+/4+</sup>). The AgSn composite film electrodes studied herein are therefore best considered as AgSnO<sub>x</sub> cathodes with varying ratios of Ag<sup>0</sup>:Sn<sup>2+/4+</sup>. These systems were assessed as CO<sub>2</sub>RR electrocatalysts and were found to promote the 2e<sup>-</sup>/2H<sup>+</sup> reductions to deliver CO and HCOOH with fast kinetics and high efficiencies from electrolyte solutions containing the protic organic cation [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> (*i.e.*, protonated 1,8-diazabicyclo[5.4.0]undec-7-ene). While Sn-rich composite films showed poor selectivities for CO versus HCO<sub>2</sub>H, a significant increase in CO versus HCO<sub>2</sub>H selectivity (up to 99%) is achieved for composite film electrodes in which the Ag content ranged from 25 - 75%. By tuning the ratio of Ag<sup>0</sup> to SnO<sub>x</sub> we prepared composite film cathode materials that support quantitative current efficiencies for generation of CO with geometric current densities approaching 30 mA/cm<sup>2</sup> at applied overpotentials that are less than 750 mV were realized. Additionally, electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) coupled with analysis of the distribution of relaxation times (DRT) was used to better understand factors important to the composites' activity under CO<sub>2</sub>RR conditions. Probing the dynamics with DRT analysis revealed that multiple processes relating to both adsorption and diffusion-controlled events are important to the activity of the electrocatalysts considered in this work. The collection of electroanalytical investigations suggest that synergistic interactions between Ag and SnO<sub>x</sub> give rise to rough films that support enhanced CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics and that mixing of Ag with SnO<sub>x</sub> enhances the efficacy of adsorption and stabilization of reduced CO<sub>2</sub> intermediates and [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> cations to facilitate CO evolution at the cathode/electrolyte interface.

**KEYWORDS:** CO<sub>2</sub> Reduction, Electrocatalyst, Composite, Metal Oxide, Protic Ionic Liquid, Carbon Monoxide, Formic Acid

## INTRODUCTION

Over last several decades, a number of strategies for mitigation of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations have been proposed, as the development of green energy sources is one of the most pressing needs to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.<sup>1</sup> However, most renewable energy sources such solar and wind are intermittent and thus are not always available in sufficient quantities during periods when energy demand is highest. Accordingly, there is a great need for reliable methods to convert, store, and transport renewable energy resources such that they are available when and where they are needed. One promising strategy to store renewable energy is in the form of chemical bonds by using renewable electricity to drive the formation of chemical fuels.<sup>2</sup> An advantages of this approach is that it can be coupled to CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration and reduction to electrosynthesize commodity chemicals and fuel precursors. If the energy used for such transformations is generated from renewable sources, the electrochemical conversion can become a versatile method for solar energy storage.<sup>2</sup>

The electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction reaction (CO<sub>2</sub>RR) has received major attention as a means to sustainably drive commodity chemical synthesis and for renewable energy storage. For instance, high-volume commodity chemical and fuel precursors such as carbon monoxide and formic acid can be obtained as final products from readily available inputs including electricity from a renewable sources, water and CO<sub>2</sub>, since the electrolyte can be fully recycled with proper electrolyzer design.<sup>3,4</sup> Despite the advantages associated with CO<sub>2</sub>RR, several key thermodynamic and kinetic challenges still remain for such strategies to impact the energy landscape. Such challenges include managing the parasitic hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) that can significantly reduce the selectivity for CO<sub>2</sub>RR under many electrolysis conditions,<sup>5,6</sup> and the relatively large overpotential required to form high energy intermediates at electrode surfaces, which compromises the energy efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub>RR schemes.<sup>6,7</sup> The overall reaction kinetics are also intimately impacted by the energetics of CO<sub>2</sub>RR intermediates for each distinct

electrocatalyst system.<sup>3,8</sup> Thus, there still exists a need for the development of efficient catalytic systems for CO<sub>2</sub>RR.

It is generally well established that all strategies to improve electrocatalytic activity should consider three main objectives, which are 1) enhancement of current density (*i.e.*, CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics) at low overpotential ( $\eta$ ) to deliver a single energy dense and/or value added product; 2) inhibition of competing reactions such as HER or other electrolyte decomposition pathways to ensure high Faradaic efficiency (FE) for the CO<sub>2</sub>RR product of interest; and 3) the electrocatalytic system should also exhibit long-term stability in both activity and selectivity. There are several methods through which these goals can be achieved, including electrode surface modification which can be used to tune the cathode's surface properties and expose sites that may preferentially stabilize specific intermediates.<sup>9</sup> Besides controlling the nature of electrode surfaces, one can also envision tuning the nature and type of proton sources for the specific proton coupled electron transfer (PCET) reactions required to deliver a specific CO<sub>2</sub>RR product. To this end, ionic liquids and protic organic cations represent classes of electrolyte additives that can help achieve such goals based on their unique physico-chemical properties, including their negligible vapor pressures, wide electrochemical windows, and relatively high electrical conductivity, which are all advantageous for electrochemical applications.<sup>10,11</sup> Furthermore, the molecular structures of ionic liquid and protic organic cations can be tuned to increase the absorption/solubility of CO<sub>2</sub> in electrolyte solutions,<sup>12</sup> which is also beneficial for CO<sub>2</sub>RR applications.

Over the past several years, our lab has developed strategies for using imidazolium ([Im]<sup>+</sup>) based cations to promote CO<sub>2</sub>RR in non-aqueous electrolyte solutions in combination with relatively inexpensive post-transition metal-based thin film cathodes.<sup>13,14,15</sup> We have demonstrated that the addition of millimolar concentrations of [Im]<sup>+</sup> promoters facilitates CO<sub>2</sub> reduction to CO at low overpotential, with selectivity exceeding FE<sub>CO</sub> = 85%. By comparing the activity of monometallic thin films to their alloyed counterparts under similar electrochemical

conditions, we have demonstrated that the  $[\text{Im}]^+$  promoter appears to account for the high CO selectivity and functions in conjunction with the cathode material to determine the  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  onset potential and the electrode kinetics.<sup>15</sup>

Similar to controlling the pH of aqueous electrolyte solutions, use of protic organic cations or ionic liquids that are more acidic than  $[\text{Im}]^+$  derivatives represent an intriguing class of ionic salts for electrochemical applications.<sup>16,17</sup> It has been established that the electrolyte composition can strongly influence the outcome and characteristics of electrochemical reactions such as  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction, and provide a means to tune the energetics of  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  reaction pathways and products distributions.<sup>12,16,18,19,20</sup> Therefore, besides the ability to stabilize reduced  $\text{CO}_2$  intermediates and provide a lower energy pathway for  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction, different types of protic organic cations can promote electrosynthesis of more reduced  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  products especially those whose formation is predicted to be pH dependent.<sup>12,21,22</sup> Unlike purely aqueous electrolytes, organic electrolytes containing designer organic cations can feature tunable proton availabilities while simultaneously suppressing the unwanted HER pathway. For instance, in our laboratory, we have demonstrated that in the presence of millimolar levels of a protic organic cation generated by protonation of 1,8-diazabicyclo[5.4.0]undec-7-ene ( $[\text{DBU-H}]^+$  – structure shown in the Supporting Information), bismuth cathodes can rapidly convert  $\text{CO}_2$  to formic acid with  $\text{FE}_{\text{FA}} \sim 80\%$ . The formic acid generating electrocatalysis observed for the  $\text{Bi}/[\text{DBU-H}]^+$  system is in stark contrast to the CO evolution  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  pathways that dominate for  $\text{Bi}/[\text{Im}]^+$ , demonstrating that bismuth cathodes display catalytic plasticity, in which the outcome of  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  can be tuned through variation of the protic organic electrolyte cations that are used.<sup>23</sup>  $[\text{DBU-H}]^+$  has also been used as a protic organic cation to promote the electrochemical reduction of NO to  $\text{NH}_3$  by an iron porphyrin catalyst.<sup>24</sup>

Amongst the transition metals, silver is one of the most promising  $\text{CO}_2$  reduction electrocatalysts due to its relatively low overpotential and high selectivity for CO evolution.<sup>25</sup> A number of researchers have demonstrated that Ag promotes CO evolution in both aqueous and non-aqueous systems with varying electrokinetics that are largely influenced by the surface

morphology and nature of electrolyte adsorption at the electrode-electrolyte interface.<sup>25,26,27</sup> It has also been shown that oxide derived nanostructured Ag materials exhibit excellent ability to convert CO<sub>2</sub> to CO with selectivities exceeding 80%.

Of all the post-transition metals, Sn based electrocatalysts are also some of the most intriguing CO<sub>2</sub> reduction electrocatalysts due to the unique surface electrochemistry of Sn that is brought on by the existence of multiple oxidation states as well as the existence of surface metal hydroxides.<sup>28</sup> In 1994 Hori et. al. demonstrated that tin electrodes could reduce CO<sub>2</sub> to formate albeit at high overpotentials and with just modest current densities.<sup>29,5</sup> Since then, numerous studies employing Sn cathodes for CO<sub>2</sub> activation<sup>28</sup> have demonstrated that the ratio of CO to HCOOH production is highly dependent on the pH of the electrolyte solution. It has been suggested that formation of distinct protonated CO<sub>2</sub> reduction intermediates which have different stabilization energies on the Sn electrodes and can ultimately go on to deliver CO or HCOOH are sensitive to the specific pH of the electrolyte.<sup>30,31</sup>

For both Ag and Sn cathodes, it has been demonstrated that the metallic and metal oxide components on the Ag and Sn surfaces contribute to the product selectivities and activities displayed by these systems, with increased levels of oxides serving to facilitate the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> to formate<sup>32, 33,34,35, 34,36</sup> Similar correlations have also been made for mixed AgSn cathode materials. For instance, Jiao and coworkers developed a core shell Ag<sub>3</sub>Sn/SnO<sub>x</sub> nanoparticle catalyst exhibiting up to 80% selectivity for HCOOH at -0.9 V vs. RHE,<sup>37</sup> which was proposed to originate from the material's lattice expansion due to oxygen vacancies on SnO<sub>x</sub> that promote favorable binding of HCOOH selective intermediates. However, a thicker SnO<sub>x</sub> shell negatively impacted these materials' electrical conductivity necessitating the use of relatively thin SnO<sub>x</sub> shells for electrocatalytically competent nanoparticles.<sup>37,38</sup> Notably, it has also been proposed that the presence of SnO<sub>x</sub> species promotes stabilization of surface bound CO<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup> which is an intermediate that undergoes sequential PCET processes to generate CO and HCOOH.<sup>39</sup>

The influence of cathodes comprised of Sn and its oxides in promoting CO<sub>2</sub>RR has also been probed with both in-situ Raman and ATR-IR spectroscopies which have demonstrated that decreased selectivities in HCOOH production can be correlated to the reduction of SnO<sub>x</sub> to metallic Sn.<sup>40,41</sup> Further, a combination of quasi in situ XPS and operando XANES measurements showed that the electrodeposition of SnO<sub>x</sub> on O<sub>2</sub>-plasma treated Ag surfaces leads to increased stability of catalysts with suppressed HER activities and which generate CO and HCOOH from CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>42</sup> These catalysts also exhibited increased surface roughness and hence low overpotential for CO and HCOOH evolution. While the CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity of Ag and Sn cathodes, as well as Ag materials coated with a layer of SnO<sub>x</sub> has been considered, the variable electrocatalytic activity afforded by composite electrocatalysts containing well defined ratios of Ag and Sn has not been thoroughly evaluated. Accordingly, such systems represent an intriguing platform to probe and evaluate potential synergistic interactions between the AgSn cathode composition along with interactions with complex electrolyte components such as protic ionic liquids.

To this end, we have considered how the [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> protic organic cation influences the outcome of CO<sub>2</sub>RR at electrodeposited AgSn films of varying Ag/Sn composition. These systems were chosen because monometallic cathodes comprised of either Ag or Sn display completely disparate selectivities for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and have been shown to form stable intermetallic compounds at room temperature that span the full range of Ag/Sn ratios. By noting how selectivity and kinetics of CO<sub>2</sub>RR vary as a function of the Ag/Sn ratio, we have sought to understand how the AgSn composition influences the outcome of CO<sub>2</sub>RR. In addition, by combining voltammetry and electrochemical impedance spectroscopy, we also have sought to evaluate how the AgSn cathode surface composition, and the cathodes' interactions with the [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> containing electrolyte, influence the distinct 2e<sup>-</sup>/2H<sup>+</sup> CO<sub>2</sub>RR pathways to deliver either CO or HCOOH.

## **EXPERIMENTAL SECTION**

### **Materials and Reagents**

The protic organic cation [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub> was prepared using a previously published procedure and is detailed in the Supporting Information.<sup>23</sup> Acetonitrile (MeCN, 99.9%) was purchased from Fisher Chemicals. Silver trifluoromethanesulfonate (Ag(OTf), 99.999%) and Tin trifluoromethanesulfonate Sn(OTf)<sub>2</sub>, 99.99% were purchased from Matrix Scientific and TCI America, respectively. Tetrabutylammonium hexafluorophosphate ([TBA]PF<sub>6</sub>, 98%) was purchased from TCI America and recrystallized from boiling ethanol prior to use. Purity was confirmed by <sup>1</sup>H and <sup>13</sup>C NMR, as well as by in house CHN analysis. Carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>, Ultra High Purity) was purchased from Keen Compressed Gas Company.

## Electrochemical Methods

Voltammetry experiments were performed using a traditional three-electrode configuration and a CH Instruments CHI760D bipotentiostat. All electrochemical experiments except controlled potential electrolysis (CPE) experiments were performed in a one compartment cell using a leak-less Ag/AgCl (1.0 M KCl, CH Instruments) reference electrode calibrated with Cc/Cc<sup>+</sup> (Cc = cobaltocene) as an internal standard to account for the possibility of reference drift. The counter electrode was a piece of platinum mesh (Sigma-Aldrich). CPE experiments were performed in a two-compartment cell in which the cathode and anode compartments were separated by a proton permeable nafion membrane (Nafion 212, Fuel Cell Earth).

## Electrodeposition of Ag, Sn and AgSn Thin Films

The Ag, Sn and AgSn composite thin films were electrodeposited on nickel disk electrode (0.072 cm<sup>2</sup>, BASI). The nickel electrodes were polished with slurry of 0.3 and 0.05 μm alumina powder in Millipore water and rinsed sequentially with water and MeCN. The electrodeposition bath consisted of 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> in MeCN containing varying amounts of the corresponding Ag(I) and Sn(II) triflate salts under N<sub>2</sub> saturated. The electrode substrates were not pre-conditioned before use, and galvanostatic electrodeposition was performed at 2.6 mA/cm for 10

minutes in a quiescent solution. The total concentration of metal triflates in the solution was maintained at 20 mM. The thin film electrodes that were obtained were then rinsed extensively with MeCN and dried under a stream of N<sub>2</sub> before use.

### **Linear Sweep Voltammetry**

Linear sweep voltammograms were recorded in a one-compartment cell with three-electrode configuration in CO<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN that had first been de-aerated by N<sub>2</sub> bubbling for 20 minutes. The electrolyte solutions contained 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> as well as 100 mM of [DBU–H]PF<sub>6</sub>. A constant stream of CO<sub>2</sub> was maintained above the solution during all voltammetry experiments. Before electrochemical characterization of CO<sub>2</sub>RR, the thin-film electrodes were preconditioned in a separate electrolyte solution by sweeping the potential from –1V to –1.35V vs. Ag/AgCl for at least 10 cycles. For all electrodes, the measured current was normalized by the geometric surface area. Automatic IR compensation was applied for all voltammetry measurements.

### **Controlled Potential Electrolysis**

Controlled potential electrolysis (CPE) experiments were performed in a gas-tight, two-compartment cell separated by a Nafion membrane (NRE-212, Fuel Cell Earth). Similar to voltammetry experiments, the electrolyte solution consisted of 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM of [DBU–H]PF<sub>6</sub> in MeCN. The catholyte solution was saturated with CO<sub>2</sub> for at least 20 minutes and a steady flow of CO<sub>2</sub> was maintained over the headspace at 5 sccm throughout the course of each experiment. Both compartments of the electrolysis cell were continuously stirred at 700 RPM. The cathode headspace outlet was connected directly to the sampling loop of a gas chromatography system (SRI-8610C) equipped with a HayeSep D column and a packed Molecular Sieves 13X column. The volatile products were analyzed periodically, and solution



products were analyzed by NMR after a 2 hr experiment and quantified with reference to 1 mM dichloromethane standard in the sample NMR tube.

### **Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy**

The electrode roughness was estimated using electrochemical impedance spectroscopy in quiescent N<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN solutions containing 100 mM KPF<sub>6</sub> in the frequency range of 10000 – 100 Hz at  $E = -0.225$  V vs. Ag/AgCl for the AgSnOx composites or  $E = -0.775$  V vs. Ag/AgCl for the Ag-only film, which are close (within ~20 mV) to the open circuit potentials recorded under similar electrolyte conditions. Since KPF<sub>6</sub> is a weakly coordinating salt and soluble in MeCN it is unlikely to induce charge transfer reactions that may convolute the measurement of the double layer capacitance as is common with ammonium salts such as [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub>.<sup>43</sup> The electrode roughness was estimated from the double layer capacitance using a modified Randles circuit adapted from the literature.<sup>44,45</sup>

EIS data collected under CO<sub>2</sub>RR conditions in the presence of [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub>, were measured using similar electrolyte compositions as those employed for the voltammetry experiments in the potentiostatic mode in the frequency range of 10 kHz – 10 Hz. The Distribution of Relaxation Times (DRT) were calculated using DRTTOOLS, which is freely available software that is implemented in MATLAB code.<sup>46</sup> For computation of DRT spectra, an inverse quadratic function was chosen for radial basis function discretization, both real and imaginary parts of the impedance spectroscopy data were used; the regularization parameter, lambda was set to 10<sup>-4</sup>. All inductive data were ignored. All EIS data points below 10 Hz and/or exhibiting Warburg diffusion like behavior on the Nyquist plots were removed as suggested in the literature implementation of the DRT technique. The first order derivative was used as the penalties for the regularized regression and for shape control, the coefficient for the full width at half maximum (FWHM) was set to 0.5. The gaussian functions for the DRT spectra were fitted with Origin 2019

Software (OriginLab Corp.). Before DRT calculation, the EIS data were checked for linearity using well established Kramers-Kronig relationships implemented in the software Lin-KK Tool.<sup>47,48,49</sup>

### **Surface Characterization Using X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy**

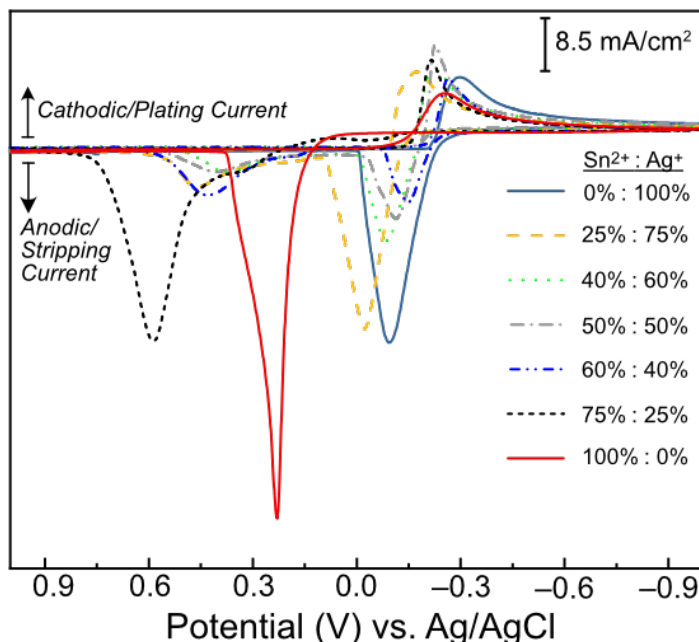
All XPS analysis was conducted using a Thermo Scientific K-alpha instrument using an Al-K $\alpha$  Xray source with a flood gun. For high resolution XPS, 10 scans were averaged with a spot size of 400  $\mu\text{m}$ , pass energy of 50 eV, dwell time of 50 ms and a step size of 0.1 eV. A Shirley type background was subtracted from all XPS spectra and the binding energy for all XPS spectra were corrected for shift with reference to the C 1s binding energy set to 284.8 eV.<sup>50</sup>

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Electrodeposition of Ag-Sn Oxides on Nickel Substrates**

Inspection of the Ag-Sn phase diagram shows the room temperature stability of several intermetallic compounds suggesting that electrodeposition of several heterogenous Ag-Sn films is feasible,<sup>51, 52</sup> however, it can be challenging to find electrolyte compositions suitable to electrodeposit films across a wide composition that all feature a homogeneous surface composition. A challenge to electrodeposition of AgSn-containing intermetallics is the need to reduce  $\text{Sn}^{4+}$  to  $\text{Sn}^0$ , which is difficult because  $\text{Ag}^+$  is immediately reduced to  $\text{Ag}^0$  at much more positive potentials. Furthermore, electrodeposition of AgSn-containing phases must be performed under an inert atmosphere (e.g.,  $\text{N}_2$ ) since  $\text{O}_2$  promotes the solution phase galvanic reaction whereby  $\text{Ag}^+$  is reduced by  $\text{Sn}^{2+}$  to form Ag metal nanoparticles with cogeneration of  $\text{Sn}^{4+}$  ions. This reaction is evidenced by the formation of a reddish-brown solution accompanied by the precipitation of small black particles in oxygen rich electrolytes containing  $\text{Ag}^+$  and  $\text{Sn}^{2+}$ .

Based on the above, we galvanostatically electrodeposited several AgSn-containing phases from electroplating baths containing varying ratios of  $\text{Ag}(\text{OTf})$  and  $\text{Sn}(\text{OTf})_2$  on nickel substrates at a constant current density of  $j = 2.6 \text{ mA/cm}^2$  for 10 minutes. Figure 1 shows the cyclic voltammograms (CVs) obtained using a nickel disk working electrode in electrolyte



**Figure 1.** Representative cyclic voltammograms recorded at 100 mV/s in MeCN containing 0.1 M [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and varying ratios of Ag(OTf) and Sn(OTf)<sub>2</sub>. The total concentration of Ag<sup>+</sup> + Sn<sup>2+</sup> in the solution was maintained at 20 mM. Peak potentials for a given bath composition were found to vary in any given experiment by ~5 mV. Current densities associated with plating and stripping waves varied by less than 5% per run.

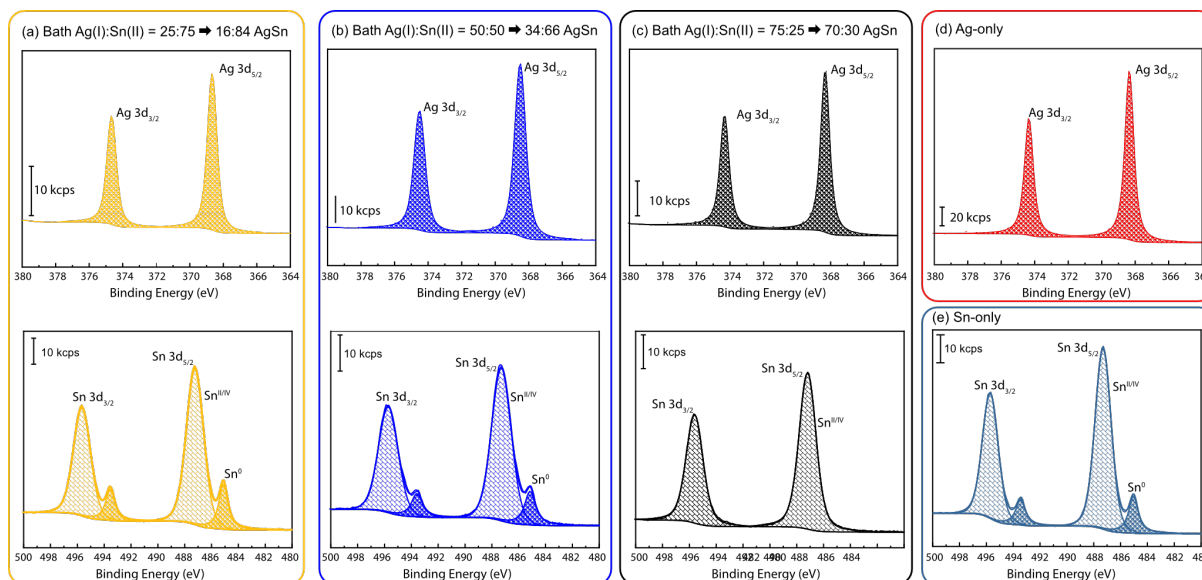
solutions containing varying ratios of Ag<sup>+</sup> and Sn<sup>2+</sup> triflate salts in MeCN with 0.1 M [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> as supporting electrolyte. The total concentration of Ag<sup>+</sup> + Sn<sup>2+</sup> in the solution was maintained at 20 mM, with specific ratios of Ag/Sn as shown in Figure 1. The total ionic strength was kept constant for each solution in order to limit its influence on the observed current density. Waves for AgSn co-deposition and stripping vary as a function of the electrolyte composition. The voltammograms indicate that as the relative amount of Ag<sup>+</sup> increases from 25–75%, the peak plating potential remained constant at approximately –0.2 V vs. Ag/AgCl. However, within this same regime, the peak stripping potentials differ significantly and shift more positively with increasing amounts of Ag<sup>+</sup> ions in solution. The scans that sweep to positive potentials also exhibit two peak waves that can be attributed to the presence of multiple species on the films formed during the reductive scans.

Interestingly, the Ag<sup>+</sup> and Sn<sup>2+</sup> reduction peaks begin to merge in the presence of Sn<sup>2+</sup> ions, which may indicate a homogenous reaction between Ag<sup>+</sup> and Sn<sup>2+</sup> that results in the

deposition of a single species. With increasing  $\text{Ag}^+$  concentration, the peak current of the anodic waves also changes significantly. The current density of the first peak decreases from approximately  $-12.9 \text{ mA/cm}^2$  to  $-8.6 \text{ mA/cm}^2$  whereas the current density of the second anodic peak increases from  $-4.3 \text{ mA/cm}^2$  up to  $-30 \text{ mA/cm}^2$ . It is noteworthy that the observed peak positions for the stripping potentials are significantly different from those recorded from electrolytes containing either only  $\text{Ag}(\text{OTf})$  or only  $\text{Sn}(\text{OTf})_2$ . The appearance of additional peaks between those of the pure metal films is a characteristic feature observed for electrooxidation of metastable intermetallic crystal phases.<sup>53</sup>

### Surface Characterization

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements were carried out to determine the surface composition of each of the AgSn composite film electrodes. Figures 2 and S1 show representative high resolution XPS spectra in the Ag and Sn region of the Ag-Sn composites and the films that contain either only Ag or Sn. All XPS spectra were calibrated to the C 1s peak set to 284.8 eV.<sup>50</sup> The high resolution Sn 3d region shows multiple peaks that were fitted to three



**Figure 2.** Representative high-resolution XPS spectra showing the Ag and Sn regions for various as electrodeposited AgSn composite films, as well as monometallic Ag- and Sn-based films. Representative spectra are shown for thin film electrodes prepared from electrodeposition baths with the following ratios of Ag(I) and Sn(II) triflate salts: (a) 25:75; (b) 50:50; (c) 25:75; (d) 100:0; and (e) 0:100. The total concentration of metal triflate salts in all electrodeposition baths was 20 mM.

components corresponding to  $\text{Sn}^0$ , and oxidized  $\text{Sn}^{2+} + \text{Sn}^{4+}$  species. The surface composition of each electrodeposited film was determined independently using a similar peak deconvolution

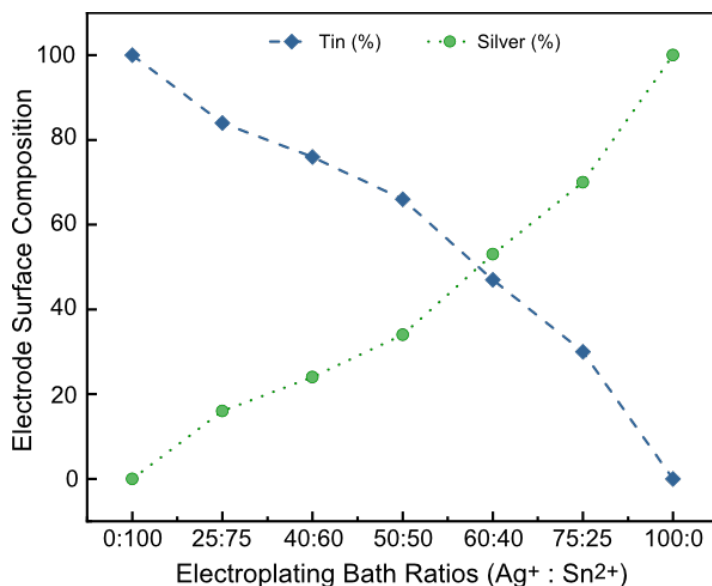
**Table 1:** The surface Ag/Sn atomic ratio determined by XPS analysis in comparison to the electrodeposition bath composition.

Electroplating Bath Ratios ( $\text{Ag}^+:\text{Sn}^{2+}$ )	Electrode Surface Composition of Tin and Silver <sup>a</sup>	
	Tin (%)	Silver (%)
(0:100)	100	0
(25:75)	84	16
(40:60)	76	24
(50:50)	66	34
(60:40)	47	53
(75:25)	30	70
(100:0)	0	100

<sup>a</sup>Atomic ratios are accurate to within  $\pm 2\%$  based on XPS analyses shown in Figure 2.

procedure, whereby the high-resolution Sn 3d XPS region was fit with two components corresponding to  $\text{Sn}^0$ , and oxidized  $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$ .<sup>50</sup>

Based on the XPS data shown in Figures 2 and S1, we were able to determine the ratio of all surface Ag species versus all surface Sn species on the film electrodes, as a function of the electroplating bath composition. These data are compiled in Table 1 and in Figures 3 and S2. The



**Figure 3.** Representative levels of Ag and Sn on the surface of the electrodeposited film electrodes as a function of the ratio of  $\text{Ag}^+$  and  $\text{Sn}^{2+}$  in the electroplating bath

data indicate that the relative ratios of electrodeposited Ag versus Sn is sensitive to the composition of the electroplating bath, but that the amount of surface Sn species is generally slightly higher than what might be expected based on the ratio of  $\text{Ag}^+:\text{Sn}^{2+}$  in solution during plating. The lower surface silver content could be due to the competing solution phase galvanic reduction of  $\text{Ag}^+$  to insoluble  $\text{Ag}^0$  by the  $\text{Sn}^{2+}$  cations, as discussed above. This background galvanic process may be expected to attenuate the amount of  $\text{Ag}^+$  available for deposition at the electrode surface. Such an effect would be compounded by electrodeposition under quiescent conditions. We note, that it is also possible that monolayers of Ag are initially electrodeposited on the nickel substrate which then become buried beneath the bulk  $\text{AgSnO}_x$  composite film that is ultimately plated. Such a process could also result in the lower-than-expected Ag surface concentration that we observe for the composite films.

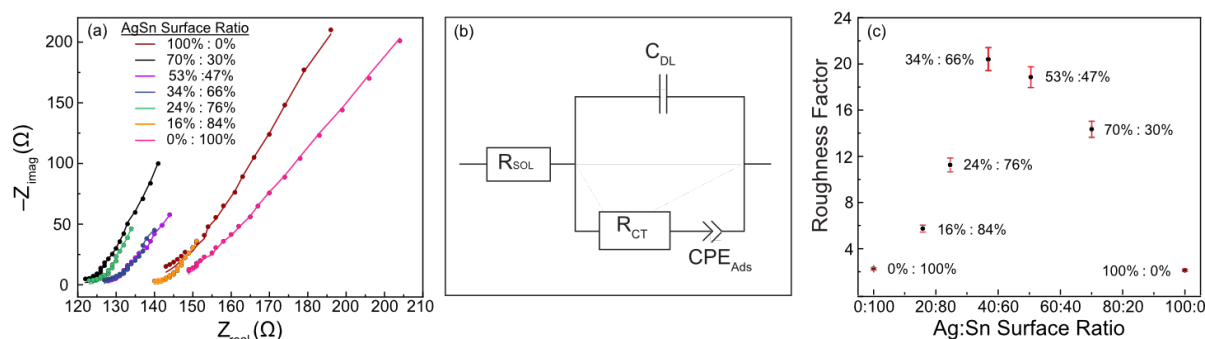
While for each of the films, silver exists exclusively in the metallic state ( $\text{Ag}^0$ ), all of the AgSn composites and the Sn-only film show a preponderance of surface  $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  (as opposed to metallic  $\text{Sn}^0$ ). The average percentages of metallic versus oxidized Sn species are presented in Table 2 indicating that all of the Sn containing films contain surface  $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  species. Overall, the metallic  $\text{Sn}^0$  is a minor component of all tin-containing films. Oxidized  $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  is the dominant surface oxidation state for all the tin-containing films and hovers around 85-90%. Accordingly, the surface composition of the electrodeposited materials are best described as  $\text{AgSnO}_x$  composite films.

**Table 2:** Relative percentages of metallic  $\text{Sn}^0$  versus oxidized  $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  at the surface of the electrodeposited films considered in this study.

Electroplating Bath Ratios ( $\text{Ag}^+:\text{Sn}^{2+}$ )	$\text{Sn}^0$	$\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$
(0:100)	10%	90%
(25:75)	13%	87%
(40:60)	11%	89%
(50:50)	16%	84%
(60:40)	13%	87%
(75:25)	0%	100%
(100:0)	—	—

## Relative Surface Roughness

The relative electrochemical surface area (ECSA) for each AgSnO<sub>x</sub> electrode can be estimated from the electrochemical double layer capacitance of the electrode-electrolyte interface in a non-adsorbing electrolyte such as KPF<sub>6</sub> in MeCN.<sup>43</sup> Due to the presence of SnO<sub>x</sub> on the electrode surfaces, the common method of measuring the doubling layer capacitance via voltammetry is unsuitable due to the propensity for surface Sn oxides to undergo reduction. Therefore, we chose to measure the frequency dependent impedance of the same electrode-electrolyte system using electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). The electrolyte for impedance measurements consisted of 100 mM KPF<sub>6</sub> in N<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN and the chosen frequency for EIS experiments varied from 100 – 10,000 Hz. The EIS measurements were performed under potentiostatic mode with the potential held at  $E = -0.225$  V vs. Ag/AgCl for AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composites or  $E = -0.775$  V vs. Ag/AgCl for the Ag-only film. We note that these potentials are close to the open circuit potentials for these films under the electrolyte conditions employed for the impedance measurements. The EIS data we obtained (Figure 4a) were fit to a



**Figure 4.** Double layer capacitance measurements for determining the relative surface Roughness Factors for electrodeposited AgSn electrodes. (a) Nyquist plots constructed for EIS data recorded for electrodeposited AgSn composite films in 100 mM KPF<sub>6</sub> in MeCN at  $-0.225$  V vs. Ag/AgCl. The solid lines are data simulations generated using the modified Randles equivalent electrical circuit that is shown in panel (b). The parameters associated with adsorbed ionic species on the electrode are represented by  $R_{\text{ct}}$  and  $\text{CPE}_{\text{ads}}$  connected in parallel to the double layer capacitance  $C_{\text{dl}}$ .  $R_{\text{ct}}$  is an adsorption resistance, and  $\text{CPE}_{\text{ads}}$  is the constant phase element to model the adsorption of electrolyte components on the electrodes surface. (c) Plot of the relative surface roughness versus a bare nickel electrode as a function of the electrode surface composition.

modified Randles circuit (Figure 4b) consisting of an  $R_{sol}$  element (electrolyte resistance) as well as a parallel combination of a capacitor and resistor representing the electrode-electrolyte double layer.<sup>44,45</sup> An additional constant phase element (CPE) is included in series with the  $R_{ct}$  element to model a pseudo-capacitive contribution of the  $SnO_x$  reduction as well as electrolyte adsorption.

In order to compare the intrinsic properties of the electrodes, the surface Roughness Factor of each electrode was calculated using Equation 1. Consideration of the relative surface roughnesses of each of the thin film electrodes is relatively convenient and allows us to compare the activity of the different electrodeposited thin films to one another, while normalizing for differences in ECSA.

$$Roughness\ Factor = \frac{C_{Film}}{C_{Nickel}} \quad (Eq. 1)$$

The surface Roughness Factor for each thin film was determined by comparing the double-layer capacitance for each of the electrodeposited films ( $C_{Film}$ ) to that of a smooth and planar bare nickel electrode ( $C_{Nickel}$ ) onto which the films were deposited. All double layer capacitance measurements were performed using freshly deposited thin films in fresh electrolyte solutions to avoid electrode contamination. Figure 4c indicates that the roughness of the films increased linearly with Ag content up to about 50% mixtures of Ag and Sn, after which the roughness decreases uniformly. Relative surface roughnesses for each of the composite films are tabulated in Table S1.

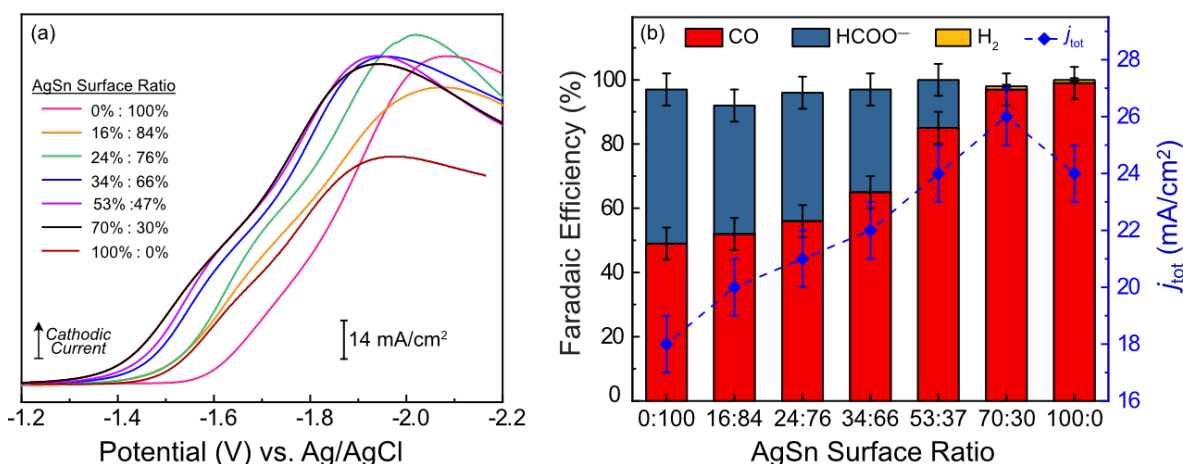
### ***AgSn Composite Films as Electrocatalysts for CO<sub>2</sub>RR***

The electrocatalytic activity of each of the film electrodes was probed by linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) using a standard three-electrode configuration in a one-compartment electrochemical cell. Voltammetric analysis was performed at a scan rate of  $\nu = 100$  mV/s in CO<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN containing 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub>. Before each LSV was recorded, the film electrodes were preconditioned in the same electrolyte solution to remove



nonspecifically adsorbed metal particles and ensure surface homogeneity. Representative linear sweep voltammograms recorded for Ag-only, Sn-only, and AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite films are shown in Figure 5a.

Analysis of the LSVs in Figure 5a reveals that the AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite films have onset potentials for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction that are shifted *positively* relative to the Ag-only and Sn-only films. Even the incorporation of relatively small amounts of Ag into the composite films (e.g. ~25% Ag, Figure 5a, orange trace) shifts the resulting voltammogram for CO<sub>2</sub>RR to more positive onset potentials than for either the Ag- or Sn-only films. The shift to more positive potentials continues with increased Ag content, with the least negative onset potentials for CO<sub>2</sub> activation being observed for composite films that were electrodeposited from solutions that contained Ag<sup>+</sup> and Sn<sup>2+</sup> triflates in a 3:1 ratio. Based on the XPS analyses compiled in Table 1, these represent AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite films with surface compositions that feature Ag:Sn in a 7:3 ratio. The variable onset potentials observed for each of the thin films probed for CO<sub>2</sub>RR may in part reflect the increased surface roughnesses of the composite films relative to those of the Ag- and Sn-only electrodes (Figure 4c, Table S1).



**Figure 5.** (a) Linear sweep voltammograms (LSVs) recorded for electrodeposited Ag, Sn, and composite AgSn films in CO<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN solutions containing 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub>. (b) Faradaic efficiencies for generation of CO, formate, and H<sub>2</sub>, as well as total geometric current density for CO<sub>2</sub>RR using Ag, Sn, and composite film electrodes. CPE experiments were performed at -1.85V vs. Ag/AgCl for 2 hours in MeCN based electrolyte solutions containing 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub>.

**Table 3.** Electrocatalysis metrics recorded for the Ag, Sn, and composite film electrodes.<sup>a</sup>

Electrode Film Ratio Ag:Sn Ratio	FE <sub>FA</sub>	FE <sub>CO</sub>	FE <sub>H<sub>2</sub></sub>	j <sub>tot</sub> (mA/cm <sup>2</sup> )
0:100 (Sn-only)	48 ± 2	49 ± 2	—	18 ± 1
16:84 AgSn	40 ± 2	52 ± 3	—	20 ± 1
24:76 AgSn	40 ± 2	56 ± 3	—	21 ± 1
34:66 AgSn	32 ± 1	65 ± 3	—	22 ± 1
53:47 AgSn	15 ± 1	85 ± 4	—	24 ± 1
70:30 AgSn	—	97 ± 5	1 ± 0.5	26 ± 1
100:0 (Ag-only)	—	99 ± 5	1 ± 0.5	24 ± 1

<sup>a</sup>CPE experiments were performed at −1.85V vs. Ag/AgCl for 2 hours in MeCN based electrolyte solutions containing 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [DBU–H]PF<sub>6</sub>.

To investigate the electrocatalytic performance of the electrodeposited films, controlled potential electrolysis (CPE) experiments were performed at −1.85 V vs. Ag/AgCl over the course of 2 hours in MeCN based electrolyte solutions containing 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [DBU–H]PF<sub>6</sub>. Under these conditions, the Ag-only and Sn-only cathodes support distinct electrocatalysis (Figure 5b, Table 3). The Ag/[DBU–H]<sup>+</sup> electrocatalyst system is quantitatively selective for the 2e<sup>−</sup>/2H<sup>+</sup> reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> to CO (FE<sub>CO</sub> = 99%), with relatively fast kinetics of  $j = 24 \text{ mA/cm}^2$ . By contrast, the Sn/[DBU–H]<sup>+</sup> system shows roughly equal selectivity for both 2e<sup>−</sup>/2H<sup>+</sup> reductions of CO<sub>2</sub> to generate CO and HCO<sub>2</sub>H (FE<sub>CO</sub> = 49%, FE<sub>FA</sub> = 48%), with overall CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics ( $j = 18 \text{ mA/cm}^2$ ) that are approximately 25% slower than those displayed by the Ag/[DBU–H]<sup>+</sup> system. The lower current density observed for the Sn-only thin film is expected based on the voltammetry in Figure 5a, since this cathode material displays the most negative onset potential for CO<sub>2</sub>RR. The differences in electrocatalytic performance of Ag versus Sn have been observed previously and can be ascribed to the adsorption energies of key intermediates such as CO<sub>2</sub><sup>•−</sup>, COOH and O<sub>2</sub>CH which are dependent on the identity of the metal electrode.<sup>7,28,29</sup>

The CO<sub>2</sub>RR selectivity profiles displayed by the composite AgSnO<sub>x</sub> films is closer to that of the Sn-only cathode up to films whose surface composition is approximately 66% Sn (34% Ag) based on XPS analysis (Figure 5b, Table 3). Although initially the CO<sub>2</sub>RR selectivity does not change markedly as the percentage of Ag is increased in the Sn films, the kinetics for CO<sub>2</sub>RR

undergo a clear enhancement of nearly 20% (Figure 5b, Table 3) as up to 34% Ag is added to the composite films. Although the films containing approximately 66% and 50% Sn do show enhanced selectivity and kinetics for CO evolution relative to the Sn-only cathode, their activity is unstable over the course of a 2-hour electrolysis suggesting that their surface composition or morphology may evolve during the CPE (Figure S3). Nonetheless, within the first 2 hours of electrolysis at  $E_{appl} = -1.85$  V, the selectivity for CO evolution shows a nearly linear dependence on the film surface composition (Figure 5).

Of all the composite films that were evaluated for CO<sub>2</sub>RR, the film consisting of ~70% Ag, displayed the most positive onset potential and also selectively evolves CO gas with little to no HCO<sub>2</sub>H or H<sub>2</sub> production. Accordingly, the composite electrode with surface composition of 70% Ag displayed FE<sub>CO</sub> values that are virtually identical to the Ag-only cathode but operates with the fastest kinetics of all the systems considered in this study. Accordingly, the composite film comprised of AgSn in a 70:30 ratio represents the most attractive cathode considered in this study as it supports the fastest kinetics for CO<sub>2</sub>RR of all the systems evaluated and is selective for conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> to CO (FE<sub>CO</sub> = 97%).

The Sn 3d XPS spectra (Figures 2 and S1) recorded for the AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite films provide evidence for the presence of oxidized surface Sn<sup>2+/4+</sup> species in those cathode materials. The presence of highly oxidized Sn species has also been suggested to be responsible for enhanced selectivity and activity towards promoting CO<sub>2</sub> reduction rather than HER in a number of aqueous CO<sub>2</sub> reduction systems.<sup>54,55</sup> For instance, Kanan and coworkers have demonstrated that metallic tin promotes H<sub>2</sub> evolution whereas oxidized Sn foil promotes CO<sub>2</sub>RR to deliver HCOO<sup>-</sup> with greater than 90% current efficiency.<sup>39</sup> When coupled with the relatively low proton availability of the MeCN-based electrolyte solutions used in this study ( $pK_a$  of [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> ~ 24 in MeCN), it is perhaps not surprising that HER is not observed as a parasitic side reaction to any significant extent for the AgSn composites.<sup>39,54,55</sup>

## Origin of High Activity in Ag-doped AgSnO<sub>x</sub> thin Films – Kinetics of Charge Transfer: Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy

To probe the origin of the enhanced electrocatalytic performance of the AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite films we performed EIS measurements in the frequency range of 10 kHz – 10 Hz at  $E = -1.85$  V with an AC perturbation amplitude of 10 mV. The choice of an equivalent electrical circuit to fit EIS data usually requires a priori knowledge of the impedance behavior of the system under study.<sup>56</sup> However, using the Distribution of Relaxation Times (DRT) technique, the EIS data which is a function of frequency can be converted into a probabilistic distribution of the relaxation times for each process involved in the electrochemical process.<sup>57, 58,59</sup> Due to the complexity of the EIS Nyquist plots (especially the curvature toward the high and low frequency limits of the experiments) obtained under CO<sub>2</sub>RR conditions for the thin-films considered in this work (Figure S4), DRT analysis was performed to help interpret the impedance results.<sup>46</sup>

Briefly, DRT analysis is a mathematical deconvolution that identifies the relaxation time constant distribution of the impedance data. The frequency dependent impedance in DRT is calculated by fitting the EIS data at various frequencies using the following equation.

$$Z_{DRT}(f) = R_{\infty} + \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{\gamma(\ln\tau)}{1 + i2\pi f\tau} d\ln\tau \quad (\text{Eq. 2})$$

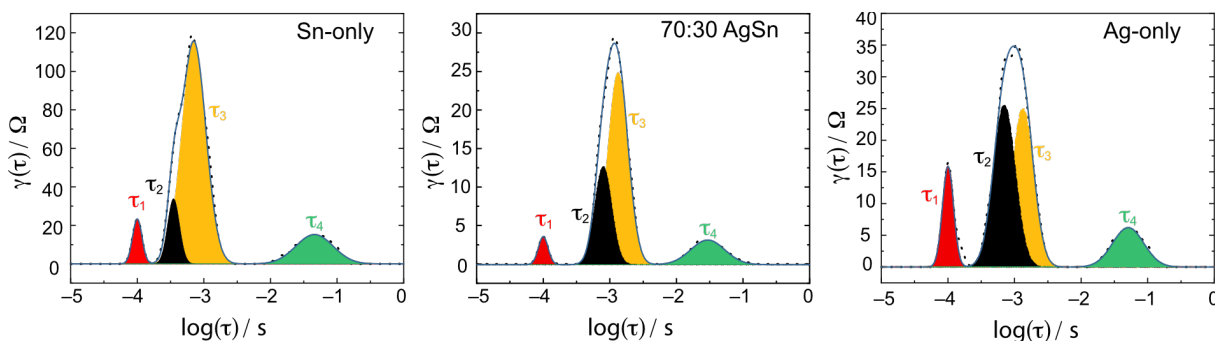
In Equation 2,  $R_{\infty}$  represents the solution resistance and  $\gamma(\tau)$  is a function that describes the characteristic relaxation time constants for the electrochemical system being studied. The integration function describes the total polarization resistance of the electrochemical system and the DRT analysis affords various time or frequency dependent peaks representing the individual resistances associated with specific electrochemical events such as charge transfer or potential dependent generation/adsorption of intermediates which are characteristic for electrocatalytic processes.<sup>46</sup> The term  $\tau$  represents the time constant and  $f$  is the frequency, respectively.

Compared to common representations of EIS data such as Nyquist plots, DRT analysis makes it easier to clearly show the different relaxation events contributing to the total impedance of the system under study, particularly in cases where these processes overlap. Furthermore, DRT analysis can be used to help guide development of an equivalent circuit to model the

experimental impedance data. For in depth discussion of the DRT analysis and the underlying theory, interested readers are referred to the primary literature detailing the development and implementation of these methods.<sup>46, 57, 58,59</sup>

The mechanism of electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction is expected to involve three major physicochemical processes, which include (1) the diffusion of reactants, products, and other electrolyte components to/from the electrode surface; (2) adsorption of reactants at the polarized electrode; and (3) multiple proton-coupled charge transfer steps that ultimately drive the CO<sub>2</sub>RR processes. In addition, for electrocatalysis conducted using electrodeposited films (as is the case for this study), one also anticipates a fourth relaxation processes relating to the ohmic contacts between the catalyst film and the underlying substrate, or between individual particles that comprise the film, especially at higher frequencies.

As shown in Figure 6, the DRT spectra indicate that within the frequency range of interest, there are three main regions with distinct distributions of relaxation times that provide information about the kinetics of charge transfer at the electrode potentials relevant to CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Since the 70:30 AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite film exhibited the fastest kinetics (and lowest onset potential) for CO<sub>2</sub>RR, its calculated DRT results were compared to the Ag-only and Sn-only films. In this study the relaxation events in the DRT spectra of Figure 6 are correlated to several physicochemical processes as follows:  $\tau_1$  (red) - Ohmic contact between the thin film and the nickel substrate;  $\tau_2$



**Figure 6.** Distribution of Relaxation Times (DRT) plots for Ag-only, Sn-only, and 70:30 AgSn composite film electrodes measured at -1.85V vs. Ag/AgCl in CO<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN containing 100 mM [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub>. The colors represent relaxation events with different time constants that contribute to overall impedance during CO<sub>2</sub> reduction:  $\tau_1$  (red) - Ohmic contact between the thin film and the nickel substrate;  $\tau_2$  (black) - Adsorption of electrolyte ions and related intermediates;  $\tau_3$  (yellow) - Charge transfer kinetics and  $\tau_4$  (green) diffusion/capacitive behavior related to mass transport.

(black) – Surface adsorption of CO<sub>2</sub> and electrolyte components and related intermediates;  $\tau_3$  (yellow) - Charge transfer kinetics; and  $\tau_4$  (green) diffusion/capacitive behavior related to mass transport. The exact nature and dependence of these processes on experimental conditions relevant to electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction is still under investigation in our lab.

The DRT plots shown in Figure 6, show the resistance associated with each relaxation process with specific time constants. The first relaxation process ( $\tau_1$ ) is related to the ohmic contact between the electrodeposited film and the nickel substrate. This relaxation process is also related to the interparticle contact resistance in the bulk film. Depending on the electrodeposition conditions such as bath composition and applied current, each of the three film cathodes subjected to DRT analysis may have different or mixed phases. Therefore, the surface composition, morphology, phase, and thickness features of the catalyst can be factors that affect the associated resistance. The processes  $\tau_2$  and  $\tau_3$  are related to formation of an adsorbed layer of [TBA]<sup>+</sup> and [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> electrolyte cations at the electrode surface, and the associated resistance of charge transfer that drives CO<sub>2</sub> activation, respectively. Lastly, relaxation process  $\tau_4$  is related to mass transport-controlled processes such as the diffusion of reactants to and products from the electrochemical double layer. A summary of the values of the calculated DRT spectra corresponding to the kinetics of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction on the Ag-only, Sn-only, and 70:30 AgSn composite films are shown in Table 4.

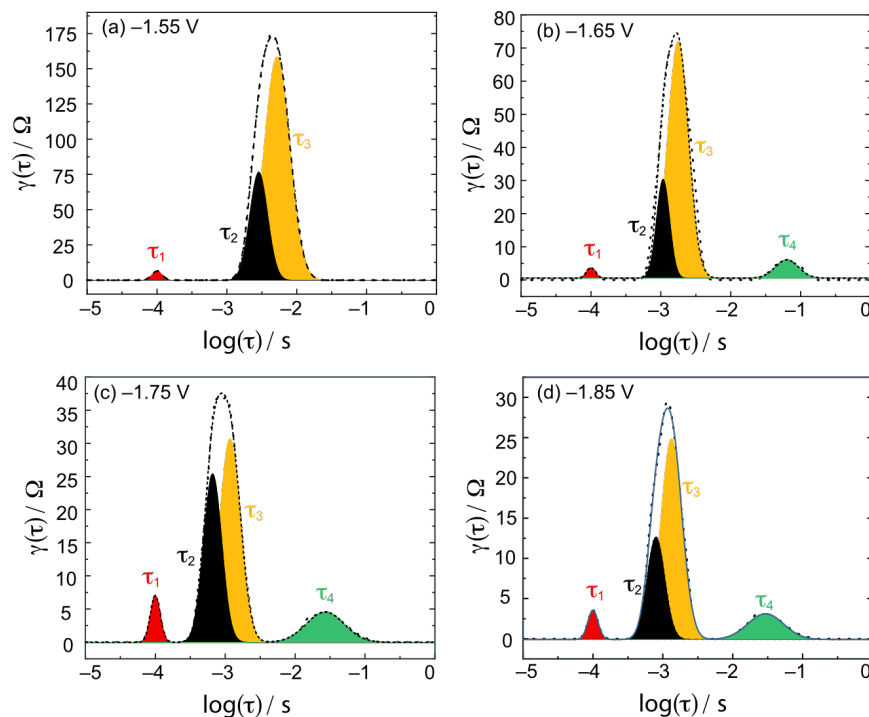
In an effort to evaluate the role of surface composition on the kinetics and mechanism of electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub>RR, the nature of the impedance relaxation processes was probed as a function of the applied potential for the most active cathode of Figure 5b (*i.e.*, the 70:30 AgSnO<sub>x</sub>

**Table 4.** Values of the DRT spectrum parameters corresponding to the kinetics of CO<sub>2</sub>RR on Ag-only, Sn-only, and 70:30 AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite film electrodes as calculated from the DRT plots in Figure 6.

	$\tau_1$	$\tau_2$	$\tau_3$	$\tau_4$
Electrode	$R_1 (\Omega)$	$R_2 (\Omega)$	$R_3 (\Omega)$	$R_4 (\Omega)$
SnO <sub>x</sub>	22	35	115	15
75AgSnO <sub>x</sub>	7.5	9	23	2.5
AgO <sub>x</sub>	16	26	26	6

composite film electrode). EIS measurements were recorded under the same electrolyte conditions as for the CPE experiments. Potentiostatic EIS data were collected at  $-1.55$  V,  $-1.65$  V,  $-1.75$  V, and  $-1.85$  V vs. Ag/AgCl (see associated Nyquist plots in Figure S5). As shown in Figure 7, the DRT spectra indicate that the number of discrete relaxation process do not change within the studied potential range, however, upon deconvolution of the DRT through gaussian fitting, it becomes clear that the contribution of each impedance process does change significantly as a function of the potential. Since the potential dependent DRT calculations are performed under the same electrode conditions, the relaxation process  $\tau_1$ , remains at a constant position and total resistance over the entire potential range considered (see Figure 7 and Table 5).

The processes  $\tau_2$  and  $\tau_3$  (which are the most prominent features in the DRT spectra) show a clear trend as a function of applied potential. At more negative potentials, these time constants



**Figure 7.** Potential Dependent DRT plots calculated for the 70:30 AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite film electrode measured at various potentials in CO<sub>2</sub> saturated MeCN containing 100 mM [TBA]PF<sub>6</sub> and 100 mM [DBU-H]PF<sub>6</sub>. The colors represent relaxation events with different time constants that contribute to overall impedance during CO<sub>2</sub> reduction:  $\tau_1$  (red) - Ohmic contact between the thin film and the nickel substrate;  $\tau_2$  (black) - Adsorption of IL and related intermediates;  $\tau_3$  (yellow) - Charge transfer kinetics and  $\tau_4$  (green) diffusion/capacitive behavior related to mass transport.

**Table 5.** Resistance parameters extracted from the DRT plots in Figure 6 corresponding to the kinetics of CO<sub>2</sub>RR on the 70:30 AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite film as a function of applied potential ( $E_{app}$ ).

$E_{app}$ vs. Ag/AgCl	$\tau_1$	$\tau_2$	$\tau_3$	$\tau_4$
	$R_1 (\Omega)$	$R_2 (\Omega)$	$R_3 (\Omega)$	$R_4 (\Omega)$
−1.55 V	4.5	75	160	—
−1.65 V	4.5	90	70	24
−1.75 V	6.5	25	31	12.5
−1.85 V	7.5	9	23	2.5

shift to shorter times (Figure 7 and Table 5) suggesting that the events become faster. Likewise, the associated resistances of  $\tau_2$  and  $\tau_3$  decrease as the applied potentials become more negative consistent with more favorable CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics as the overpotential for electrocatalysis is increased. Both  $\tau_2$  and  $\tau_3$  directly relate contributions of the heterogenous electron transfer kinetics to the overall resistance of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. Since these events are directly connected to the potential dependent CO<sub>2</sub> reduction kinetics, the contribution to the total resistance is expected to be potential dependent as well. As shown in Figure 7 and Table 5, the resistances associated with these relaxation processes do indeed decrease at more negative potentials.

Lastly, the broad time constant  $\tau_4$  may be attributed to mass transport-controlled polarization resistance during CO<sub>2</sub> reduction and is highly influenced by the diffusion of electrolyte components to the electrode surface as well diffusion of products from the double layer to the bulk solution. As shown by the voltammograms in Figure 4a, for the AgSnO<sub>x</sub> electrode of 70:30 composition, potentials more negative than −1.55 V are approximately within the regime of mixed kinetic and diffusion control. As would be expected for a reaction under mass transport control, the associated resistance ( $\tau_4$ ) reaches a maximum value at an applied potential that is ~ 200 mV past the foot of the electrocatalytic wave (*i.e.*,  $E_{app} = -1.65$  V for 70:30 AgSnO<sub>x</sub>) and decreases further as the applied potential is raised further (See Figure 6 and Table 5).<sup>60</sup>

The 70:30 AgSn composite film exhibits decreased contribution of the diffusion-controlled polarization resistance to the overall resistance, which agrees well with the faster kinetics of CO<sub>2</sub>RR observed for these films. This film composition also exhibits a lower onset potential for



CO<sub>2</sub>RR in the presence of [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup>. The decreased overall contribution of the charge transfer resistance to the total polarization resistance might also indicate higher electrical conductivity of the thin films upon alloying as has been observed for PbO<sub>2</sub> that had been alloyed with Bi and/or Sn.<sup>61</sup> Although metal oxide derived cathodes have been shown to be highly active and selective for electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, they are not always highly conductive due to ohmic interparticle resistances, which can compromise the intrinsic electrokinetics of such platforms.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the overall surface composition is also expected to control the selectivity and electrokinetics of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction on the metal oxides under study.<sup>6,62,63</sup>

The collection of electroanalytical investigations that have been presented herein support the notion that synergistic interaction between Ag and SnO<sub>x</sub> give rise to rough films that support enhanced CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics. Interestingly, inspection of the distribution of relaxation times also indicates that upon combining Ag with SnO<sub>x</sub>, the relaxation times for the events associated with the adsorption-controlled charge transfer events shift to larger relaxation times (*i.e.*, higher frequencies) whereas the relaxation events associated with the diffusion-controlled charge transfer kinetics do not exhibit a significant relaxation time shift. These observations are consistent with the notion that mixing of Ag with SnO<sub>x</sub> enhances the efficacy of adsorption and stabilization of reduced CO<sub>2</sub> intermediates and [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> cations to facilitate CO evolution at the cathode/electrolyte interface.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Both Ag- and Sn-based materials have been previously considered as CO<sub>2</sub> reduction catalysts that may offer practical benefits for the sustainable production of carbon-based fuels and commodity chemicals. In this work, we have considered electrodeposited Ag-only, Sn-only, and AgSnO<sub>x</sub> composite film electrodes prepared from electroplating baths with varying ratios of Ag<sup>+</sup> and Sn<sup>2+</sup> triflates to understand how the performance of such composite materials varies as a function of composition. In particular, the study of electrodeposited AgSnO<sub>x</sub> films with varying

ratios of  $\text{Ag}^0$  and  $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  provided a means to evaluate how the cathode composition impacts  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  electrocatalysis in the presence of  $[\text{DBU}-\text{H}]^+$  based organic cations within MeCN electrolyte. XPS analysis confirmed that Ag existed in the metallic ( $\text{Ag}^0$ ) state, while the Sn was mainly oxidized ( $\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$ ) for electrodes that were prepared, including the AgSn composites, which are best considered as  $\text{AgSnO}_x$  films with varying ratios of  $\text{Ag}^0:\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$ .

Evaluation of the  $\text{AgSnO}_x$  cathodes as electrocatalysts for  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  against the Ag- and Sn-only film electrodes showed the selectivity and efficacy of  $\text{CO}_2$  activation varied as function of the  $\text{Ag}^0:\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  ratios within the films. Consistent with prior work, the Ag-only film was observed to be highly selective for the  $2e^-/2\text{H}^+$  reduction of  $\text{CO}_2$  to CO, while the Sn-only film produced roughly equal amounts of CO and  $\text{HCO}_2\text{H}$  during  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  electrocatalysis. Much like the Sn-only cathode, composite films that were rich in Sn relative to Ag showed poor selectivities for reduction of  $\text{CO}_2$  to CO over production of  $\text{HCO}_2\text{H}$ . However, composite films that had roughly equal levels of  $\text{Ag}^0:\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$  were 85% selective for reduction of  $\text{CO}_2$  to CO demonstrating that relatively high current efficiencies for CO evolution could be achieved while cutting the amount of expensive silver in the cathodes in half. Going further, the composite cathode containing roughly twice as much silver as compared to tin, supported  $\text{CO}_2\text{RR}$  catalysis that was slightly better than that observed for the Ag-only electrode. More specifically, the  $\text{AgSnO}_x$  ( $70\text{Ag}^0 : 30\text{Sn}^{2+/4+}$ ) composite electrode was observed to evolve CO with near quantitative current efficiency and current densities of  $\sim 26 \text{ mA/cm}^2$ , which slightly higher than that observed for the Ag-only cathode. Accordingly, this work has demonstrated that mixed-metal CO evolution electrocatalysts can be easily electrodeposited from plating solutions and can support metrics typically observed for Ag (and other precious metals), while substituting a significant amount of the precious coinage metal for inexpensive tin.

Electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) coupled with analysis of the distribution of relaxation times (DRT) was used to evaluate the factors important to the function of the film electrodes considered in this study. Importantly, these analyses showed that adsorption and

diffusion controlled processes are important to the activity of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR electrocatalysts that were subjected to EIS and also provided some insights as to the enhanced performance of the AgSnO<sub>x</sub> (7 Ag<sup>0</sup> : 3 Sn<sup>2+/4+</sup>) composite. The best performing AgSnO<sub>x</sub> (7 Ag<sup>0</sup> : 3 Sn<sup>2+/4+</sup>) composite was found to exhibit decreased contributions of diffusion-controlled polarization to the overall resistance, which is consistent with the more facile CO<sub>2</sub> reduction kinetics observed for these films. This composite film containing a 7:3 ratio of Ag<sup>0</sup> : Sn<sup>2+/4+</sup> also exhibited a lower onset potential for CO<sub>2</sub>RR in the presence of [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup> as compared to the other film electrodes evaluated in this work.

The collection of electroanalytical investigations that we report suggest that synergistic interaction between Ag and SnO<sub>x</sub> give rise to rough films that support enhanced CO<sub>2</sub>RR kinetics and that mixing of Ag with SnO<sub>x</sub> enhances the efficacy of adsorption and stabilization of reduced CO<sub>2</sub> intermediates and electrolyte (*i.e.*, [DBU-H]<sup>+</sup>) cations to facilitate CO evolution at the cathode/electrolyte interface. In addition to pointing to potential strategies to reduce the loading of precious metals (*i.e.*, Ag) in electrocatalysts materials while maintaining exceptional selectivities and high activities for CO evolution, this work also demonstrates how DRT analysis can be leveraged to help analyze EIS data recorded under CO<sub>2</sub>RR conditions. Accordingly, the detailed physicochemical origin of the DRT relaxation processes for AgSnO<sub>x</sub> and other composite electrocatalyst systems continues to be a point of interest within our laboratory.

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## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

**Supporting Information:** This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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**Author Contributions:** TK and JR contributed equally to the design and writing of the manuscript. TK conducted all experimental work described herein. AA contributed to discussions that spurred the undertaking of this project.

**Notes:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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# TOC Graphic

