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Carbon neutral conferencing: A case study in poetics

Abstract:

The author was co-convenor of the Australian Capital Territory's first government-certified, carbon-neutral conference, *Out of the Ordinary: On Poetry and the World*, 5–7 December 2022. This paper centres upon a case study of that conference, intended to serve as a model for future such events. Bookending that case study are two discussions. The first addresses recent scholarship on the internationalisation of the university sector and the conflict it poses to concurrent policy drives towards environmentally sustainable operations. The literature on sustainable conferencing reveals the extent of that conflict, but also contains many practical measures for staging responsible events that involve genuine emissions reductions. Some of those measures feature within the poetry conference case study: vegetarian catering, eradication of printed materials, free registration for Indigenous delegates, compulsory travel offsetting, deliberate regionalisation. A final section considers problems with the very idea of carbon neutrality – as a concept based in “net” accounting practices that equate measures intended to affect the removal of emissions with no emissions – in the interest of driving further change in our conferencing practices.

Biographical note:

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An idling car

In February 2007, artist Santiago Sierra staged an installation at the Sala Mendoza gallery in Caracas, Venezuela, entitled *Cuatro Automóviles Negros con el Motor Encendido en el Interior de una Sala de Arte* (“Four Black Vehicles with the Engine Running inside an Art Gallery”).

One of Sierra’s typically programmatic descriptions accompanied the work: “Four black vehicles with their engines running were placed inside an art gallery, with the consequence that tubes had to be connected to the vehicles’ exhaust pipes to channel the fumes outside the gallery” (Sierra 2007; my translation). What this description does not capture is the gallery’s stunning hillside location, its floor-to-ceiling window views out over Caracas, and the almost sensuous way the black tubes curved out from the exhaust pipes of these four black, humming SUVs and over to the windows to which they were hermetically sealed, through which they thus poured a continuous stream of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, benzene, nitrogen, water vapour and particulate matter. You see this fuller context in photographic documentation of the work, and you see one other element left out of the artist’s provocatively dispassionate description: over to the right of the four pumping cars, Sierra has positioned a live canary in a cage.

On first blush it might appear that this is a work about the indifference of rich gallery-goers, happily asphyxiating the rest of the world through the emissions of their idling luxury vehicles. But a moment’s reflection makes it clear that the glass walls are illusory. Those gallery-goers will be walking outside after the show, albeit just back to their cars and air-conditioned homes. They will be walking outside tomorrow as well, and/or enjoying their gardens. I think what the work ultimately forces us to question is whether there really is that much difference between leaving a car running in the enclosed space of a garage, living room or gallery, and leaving it running in the relatively enclosed space of the earth’s atmosphere, where carbon dioxide can just as surely accumulate. The metaphor, in other words, is suicide. Our culture is on a suicidal path.

Climate champions?

Sierra’s installation provides a stark way into our topic, which concerns what we, as conference organisers, can do to make the university’s work less environmentally toxic. One thing we can do is stare matters in the face.

I will set forth something of the tertiary sector’s deficient relationship to sustainability over the following section, prior to describing my and my colleagues’ specific intervention into this troubled space. I am referring to *Out of the Ordinary: On Poetry and the World*, a three-day conference on poetry’s relationship to the extraordinary, held at the University of Canberra over 5–7 December 2022, a conference which simultaneously served as the Australian Capital Territory’s first government-certified, carbon-neutral event.

But before getting to that event, why might one describe the tertiary sector's relationship to sustainability as deficient, deficient enough to merit comparison with this 2007 Santiago Sierra artwork, in all its moral turpitude? (I use the phrase advisedly: for Sierra may well be critiquing our climate vandalism in *Cuatro Automóviles*, but he keeps those four cars running in the process.) Aren't universities climate champions?

In a new collection of essays entitled *Academic Flying and the Means of Communication*, Australian academics Andrew Glover, Tania Lewis and Yolander Strengers note that “air travel has come to be an expected and somewhat routinised part of academic life as a means to attend conferences, symposia, meetings and conducting fieldwork” (2022). The rewards that come from such travel are considerable, both for individuals – internationalisation of one's work is high among the criteria for promotion – and institutions. As the *Times Higher Education* website puts it – in a page explaining the research-heavy, and therefore implicitly travel-promoting criteria by which the World University Rankings are judged – “an isolated institution without international connections simply cannot count itself among the world's best universities in an increasingly global and mobile world” (THEStudent, 2022).

Yet as the editors of the collection of essays I have just cited from point out, the routinisation of academic air travel is starting to appear increasingly dubious “in a world that appears to be waking up—finally—to the inequities that attach to global warming” (Bjørkdahl & Duharte 2022, n.p.). Academics of the Global North are in steady danger of appearing as “hypermobile ‘kinetic elites’ (Sheller, 2018)—a class ... whose globetrotting rests on the involuntary sacrifices of less privileged groups” (Bjørkdahl & Duharte 2022, n.p.). It is hard not to come to such a conclusion when one learns of the 285 million kilometres that the 28,000 delegates of the 2019 San Francisco meeting of the American Geophysical Union travelled to get there and back, generating in the process emissions equivalent to the weekly output of a city the size of Edinburgh (Klöwer et al., 2020, 357). A 2020 article by the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene likewise estimated that the 44.6 million kilometres its 4,834 delegates flew was equivalent to 58 return trips to the moon (Bousema et al., 2020, 1758–9).

Leadership is very much the issue here. In an assessment of American universities' performance on their sustainability commitments, Andrew Barron and his colleagues note that higher education institutions are “uniquely positioned to play a role as climate action leaders” due to their relatively uncompromised status as “enduring non-profit institutions with educational missions” (Barron et al., 2021, 1248). Yet the moral clarity that status affords is compromised when researchers engage in such constant, unsustainable travel. The fact that the amount of international travel one is called upon to perform increases with the renown of one's research and the seniority of one's academic position (Glover et al., 2022; Baer, 2022) only exacerbates the matter, leading to the unfortunate situation biologist David Grémillet noted in *Nature* back in 2008, whereby “those who are particularly renowned and most involved in environmental politics become ‘constant fliers’ who are always jetting off to field sites and meetings” (1175).

As the 2008 dating of Grémillet's letter indicates, these moral conflicts have been aired for a long time, including by climate denialists anxious to detect hypocrisy. But there is a deeper, and in some ways even more disturbing story to be told here. I am referring to the situation Glover, Lewis and Strengers first diagnosed in 2018, the ruse whereby university strategic documents make strong commitments to the internationalisation of their operations – without mentioning the extensive and unsustainable air travel this will necessitate; while in a reverse move, those same institutions' sustainability policies make strong commitments to lessening their institution's carbon footprint through efficiencies in the built environment, waste disposal, and daily commuting – but make little or no mention of air travel (2018). Specifically, only six of the 43 Australian institutions surveyed in Glover et al.'s 2018 research listed measures to achieve less flying in their sustainability policies. The trio's overall conclusion, reiterated in 2022, was that “the Australian university system lacks a comprehensive ... strategy for reducing air travel emissions” (Glover et al., 2022, n.p.).

One sees this invisibilisation of air travel in other jurisdictions as well. For instance, the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) to achieving carbon neutrality “as soon as possible” (as cited in Barron et al., 2021, 1248) has been signed by over 800 higher education institutions in the USA. Air travel appears under the scope 3 emissions (carbon embodied in the supply chain) that do not have to be reported under the terms of the commitment (Baron et al., 2021, 1249–1250). Air travel plays an “assumed, hidden and seemingly absent role” (Glover et al. 2022, n.p.) in many jurisdictions, but its invisibilisation from the academic policy landscape in the Australian case is particularly egregious, for two reasons. Firstly, Australia is so far away. Its internationalisation agendas are accordingly so much more costly, in terms of carbon emissions, than those of most other countries. Secondly, Australia has predicated the viability of its institutions on the market in international educational goods. In the equally disturbing Chapter 5 of *Academic Flying*, Hans Baer points out that although Australia's total investment (public and private) in higher education is among the highest in the OECD (fourth highest in 2015), the public component of that investment is among the lowest (2022). The way the country has maintained such high overall investment is through that strange form of “export” – Australia's third largest, after coal and iron ore – that involves inducing foreign nationals to travel to the country and study there for fees. The issue is under-researched, but the amount of long haul flying involved is clearly very large, and again, so much larger than would be the case in countries that are less geographically peripheral (Shields 2019; Baer, 2022).

I write this as an Australian citizen and committed internationalist. Rather than despair at this point, I want to turn to the practical actions one might take.

The obvious solution to the complications raised to this point, at least as far as conferencing goes, is the ascetic one. Make the event online only. This will not result in zero emissions. In Yanqiu Tao et al.'s (2021) exhaustive life cycle assessment of inputs and emissions, the carbon footprint of a virtual conference will be about 6% of an equivalent in-person event (most of that from food preparation and electricity consumption). The downsides to such a strategy are considerable. Tao and colleagues refer to “digital meeting fatigue, loss of serendipitous

hallways conversations, impersonal interactions and challenging time-zones” (Tao et al., 2021, 2). Bjørkdahl and Duharte, for their part, note that “everything from gestures, to turn-taking, to simultaneous speech, to various forms of response ... get either diminished or lost entirely on video” (2022, n.p.). One might add that the virtual conference is particularly prejudicial to the upcoming generation of academics, who lack the pre-existing face-to-face contacts that make the online medium a more or less serviceable means of generating ideas and maintaining networks for those with more established careers. Putting up with such disadvantages is certainly an option. After all, the planet is at stake. One might therefore make virtual-only conferences a blanket rule.

One criticism I would have of such a strategy, beyond those already tabled, is that it fails to capitalise on a key finding of the literature on sustainable conferencing. That literature is mainly from the sciences and shows an admirable facility with statistical reasoning as a result. The point is this: the vast majority of international conference emissions come from a small and very specific – in fact, mappable – group of delegates. Klöwer et al.’s discussion of the Fall 2019 meeting of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) was cited above: 28,000 delegates, travelling 285 million kilometres there and back – “almost twice the distance between Earth and the Sun” (2020, 357). Drilling into the team’s analysis, one discovers that 75% of the delegates’ travel emissions (60,000 of a full 80,000 tonnes of CO₂), were generated by just 36% of the delegates, the ones on flights greater than 8,000 kilometres – delegates from India, China and Australia, in the main (357). Taking the disproportionate carbon footprint of such long haul flyers as a key point of intervention, the authors propose a hybrid model of the very same event, that would involve: 1) a more central USA location; 2) having the annual event rotate biennially between in person and virtual; and 3) imposing virtual-only attendance at all times upon 36% of delegates, the ones whose travel is responsible for, as we have just seen, 75% of the emissions. Klöwer et al. estimate that the meeting could achieve a 90% or greater reduction in travel-related emissions through these three measures (358). Noting that this model would result in a lesser experience for the 36% relegated to digital-only attendance, many of them from the Global South, they proceed to set forth a more inclusive international conference model for geophysicists based around the idea of a distributed event, with multiple regional hubs running concurrently. You attend your regional hub in person and give and attend papers in that context, but also experience plenaries distributed across all the hubs virtually and have access to live feeds streaming all the other hubs’ sessions as well. To show how this might be brought about, they turn their sights from the AGU annual meeting to three currently distinct geophysics conferences that each attract multiple international guests. Were these three events combined and treated as regional hubs of the one, virtually connected event, an 80% reduction in emissions might be achieved (358). The authors of the 2019 American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene conference, for their part, argue that staging that same event across five distinct regional hubs (Washington, Lima, Bangkok, Nairobi and Amsterdam) would cut its emissions by 58% (Bousema et al., 2020, 1760).

But it is not merely that a blanket ethical ban on in-person conferencing fails to take creative advantage of the actual issues (namely that relatively few, long haul flights cause most of the damage, so direct your interventions there). Such a ban lends itself all too readily to the

operations of guilt. If you take such an absolute ethical stance, you are setting yourself up for feeling guilty whenever you fail to live up to it. And we have little choice but to fail in this regard – given just how deeply embedded air travel is in the academic career trajectory, as Bjørkdahl and Duharte (2022) point out in their critique of the idea that video conferencing might of itself solve the problem. To cut to the chase here, I would say that the reason that guilt is such a politically useless phenomenon is that it is also actually a form of pleasure. One of Sigmund Freud’s key points is that the superego is not merely self-punishing, it simultaneously allows disavowed access to unconscious enjoyment. We actually get secret and obscene pleasure at the same time as feeling tortured by it. So why change? Whether you accept Freud’s analysis or not, I think it has to be allowed that this is a field in which hypocrisy is rife. Take the related issue of the voluntary offsetting of consumer flights. Describing it as “one of the most glaring examples of behaviours not matching attitudes”, Gregory Denton and his colleagues point to a range of surveys “indicating that 45%–70% of travellers are willing to offset their carbon emissions, but only 3–10% of respondents actually purchase offsets” (2020, 2) (see on this matter, in relation to academics specifically, Le Quéré et al., 2015, 9–10). In the section that follows, I suggest that conference organisers avoid such guilty scenarios by making emission-reducing behaviours compulsory, and I suggest that organisers make travel offsetting – for all its attendant problems; see further below – compulsory, as well. In my experience, people actually find it a relief to have the decision – in other words, the opportunity to act hypocritically and feel guilty about it – taken out of their hands. Imposing such a mandate is particularly valuable if the participant is forced to calculate their travel emissions as a result. What we need here is not guilt, but knowledge and pragmatic action.

An insistence on staring the facts in the face and working with them allows us a more realistic assessment of face-to-face conferencing as well. It seems undeniable that in-person events contribute to the generation of new knowledge. But how much is this actually the case? In a fascinating piece, again from the sciences, Laurent Seuront, Katy R Nicastro and Gerardo I Zardi (2021) assess the productivity of conference-going, via 76 marine biologists and oceanographers’ self-reports on their authorship of conference-related publications. The study reveals that productivity, measured in terms of papers spurred by a meeting, certainly increased as a function of the number of meetings attended. But it only did so up to a point, after which point attending meetings becomes increasingly less productive. In fact, an inverse ratio applied, whereby the least productive biologists and oceanographers actually exhibited the largest carbon footprints. This leads Seuront et al. (2021) to propose that a two-fold *decrease* in the average carbon footprints of the scientists studied would lead to a two-fold *increase* in productivity. From a similarly clear-eyed perspective, we can note some of the very real advantages of virtual meetings. Consider, for instance, the fact that attendance at the assembly of the European Geophysical Union went up by approximately 25% on the figures of the previous three year’s assemblies when the event went virtual in 2020, while the number of countries represented at that suddenly online event increased from 113, 106 and 107 respectively to 134 (2021). For its part, the American Physical Society saw a four-fold increase in attendance at its annual conference after the shift to online in 2020 (Bousema et al., 2020). Klöwer et al. (2020) add that the provision of text-based and asynchronous forums can assist

with bandwidth issues in economically deprived countries, amplifying the value of online and hybrid modes.

Other useful ideas in the literature on low-carbon conferencing include: that senior scholars should henceforth insist on giving keynote addresses virtually, or alternatively, that they “should pass on these opportunities to scientists from groups that are underrepresented in their fields”; that high-quality, open-source virtual conferencing platforms be developed “to avoid further dependence on expensive licensing, which creates and perpetuates exclusion”; that funding bodies should assess carbon budgets as well as other financials in grant applications (Klöwer et al., 2020, 359); that “flight consumption measures ... become integrated into academia’s values of quality and status”, setting tonnes of emissions alongside other metrics like citations; and that minimal quantity of emissions should “become a new status symbol used in institutional rankings” (Poggioli and Hoffman, 2022, n.p.). This last measure might seem particularly idealistic, given the perverse incentive to massive air travel in the research-heavy (and, to underline, thereby travel-heavy) rankings systems that have such a powerful influence on the international student market, and therefore on institutional policy, particularly in countries like Australia, for the reasons discussed above. On the other hand, the fact that rankings measures are so inherently arbitrary and debateable (O’Neil, 1996) has, as its upside, that the system might at some point be captured by benign interests and made to serve socially useful ends.

Allow me to underline this last point, about the possibility of institutions being captured by benign interests. In providing the case study that follows, I know I am running the risk of seeming to suggest that the responsibility for reducing our universities emissions should devolve upon the voluntary efforts of individual agents, as if so many Creative Writing programmes might save the day. Clearly we need whole-of-institution and whole-of-government commitments. Campaigning for them is vital, and a vital reason for all of us to join our union. But I think it is, by the same token, true that these commitments are unlikely to happen without our capturing, and thereby greening in practice and outlook, more and more of the organisational units that make up said institutions and governments. Conferences have an exemplary role here. They provide a way of showing how such units might run, as co-condition to the university itself (as per Barron et al., 2021) assuming that kind of flagship role.

Case study

Out of the Ordinary: On Poetry and the World was a three-day conference hosted by the Centre for Cultural and Creative Research (CCCR) at the University of Canberra (UC), over 5–7 December 2022. The conference featured scholarly papers, poetry readings, sound art performances, a scientist-in-residence, evolutionary biologist, Lyndal Bromham, a keynote address by Heather Clark, Sylvia Plath’s latest and most thought-provoking biographer, a poetry and film event, including a showreel of classic moments curated by Sarah-Jane Burton, and a celebration of James Joyce’s notorious last work, *Finnegans Wake*, impressarioed by Russell Smith. Co-directed by the author and Sarah-Jane Burton, *Out of the Ordinary* had the

further privilege of constituting the Australian Capital Territory’s first government-certified carbon neutral event.

The conference took a multi-pronged approach to reducing emissions. Air travel has been the main focus of the discussion to this point, in line with the academic literature on sustainable conferencing. The validity of that focus will be apparent from the breakdown of conference emissions in the table immediately below, which indicates that air travel was responsible for close to two-thirds of our conference’s emissions. Air travel comprised 59% of the overall 47.035 metric tonnes of CO₂the conference generated. The fact that only 20% of our delegates actually flew underlines just how costly flying in fact is.

Item	Emissions in metric tonnes of CO ₂	Percentage of overall conference emissions
Transport (air)	27.68	59%
Electricity	7.46	16%
Food	3.75	8%
Accommodation and facilities	3.32	6%
Transport (land and sea)	2.43	5%
Other (uplift of 5% for non-quantifiable emissions)	2.24	5%
Waste	0.15	.05%
Water	0.005	.001%
Total emissions	47.035	100%

Air travel is clearly a huge part of the conversation. But as the table indicates, there are other targets for conference emissions reduction. Some of these can be quite easily actioned, and I will turn to them now. Then there is the controversial question of offsetting, which I will address in a final section.

No meat

We chose a campus-based caterer, Oscar’s Bakery, because of the quality of their food, their preparedness to provide vegetarian-only cuisine and their propinquity to the venue (300 metres). Oscar’s strong record of commitment to recycling and waste management was a further drawcard. An optional conference dinner was held at Monster Kitchen and Bar, a gourmet outfit in walking distance of many of the attendee’s hotels. Monster has displayed commitment to plant-based cuisine for a number of years now (going vegetarian-only for a full year from October 2020 to October 2021, for instance), and is located in one of the most sustainable buildings in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Our refusal to provide even minimal meat options goes further than some of the published literature (such as Zotova et al.,

2020), and is line with the conference's general commitment to avoiding voluntary delegate decisions on matters of conscience. As it was, no-one reported the slightest issue with having no meat at either the conference venue or the optional gourmet dinner, and many commented on the quality of the food in both venues. A number of vegetarians reported pleasure in the implicit acknowledgement of their status as the new normal.

No single-use culinary items

This required some negotiation, some time and slightly more cost. Oscar's was happy to provide glasses, steel cutlery, ceramic cups and plates, and to include regular dishwashing of these items at a small fee. The bakery's propinquity to the venue was vital here, though it would have been equally possible to pay someone to use the venue's two onsite dishwashers.

Separation of standard, organic and recyclable waste

This was already standard practice for our caterer.

No printed materials

A good web platform will generate a mobile-optimised version of your conference website automatically, at the same time that you construct the desktop version. You or your programmer just have to tweak the mobile version to make sure the pictures and text haven't been oddly displaced in the process. Using a platform with this affordance meant we could dispense with printed materials on the days of the event, referring people instead to their phones. But for Out of the Ordinary, we took the further step of commissioning an undergraduate digital design student, Claire Butler, to create *The Paperless Conferencing App*, which is still live, and best explored on mobile: <https://programme.ucpoetry2022.info/>. Once you have created a username and password and are inside the app, you find an effortlessly navigable, classily-designed interface, the first screen of which comprises a summary timetable that lists panels and keynotes, by day. Swiping changes the day, while clicking any tile serves to open up the next level of specificity (individual names and titles, for panels), which can be further clicked to reach the next level (abstract and bio). The app was funded through a combination of seed funding from UC's Centre for Cultural and Creative Research (CCCR), plus conference registration fees, and designed under a GNU General Public Licence that gives anyone the right to re-use the code.

No registration desk

As well as eradicating printed materials, we did away with name tags (along with any of the other things a registration desk might hand out: university branded stress balls, frisbees, notepads, or pens). We figured people could ask each other their names. The registration desk went too, which freed up voluntary time for measures dedicated to reducing emissions. As for the questions that did need to be asked, we found that attendees rapidly worked out who the organisers were. Not having a formal desk to approach meant that most directed inquiries to the conference-goers in the next seat, or those met over morning tea. Such a strategy –

socialising the help desk – was particularly viable, given the strong contingent of attendees from the University of Canberra itself.

Own institution venue

Holding the event at our own institution afforded particular efficiencies: we could draw on our established networks of suppliers, and at the same time we were not locked in to the exclusive, typically expensive, and by no means necessarily low-carbon, catering contracts held by many of the dedicated conference venues in Canberra, which as the national capital, is of course a conference city. This freed up money for sustainability efforts. An own institution event had the further advantage of making those efforts visible to others in the university, proving that it can be done. Finally, having the event on campus made it even more feasible for our staff to attend, lessening our reliance upon interstate delegates.

Subsidised local registrations

Our thinking was that interstate and international attendees are vital for the unexpected conversations and networking central to any good conference, and their presence is furthermore vital to the development and job-sourcing of the next generation of academics. Outside attendees also provide a good revenue stream, inasmuch as when salaried, they tend to come subsidised by institutional conference funds and are generally happy to pay relatively high registration fees as a result. But interstate, and especially international, attendees also generate the bulk of a conference's emissions, as we have seen. Outside delegates need, in short, to be thought of as a cost (carbon emissions) as much as a resource (outsider input; registration fees).

We therefore decided to reduce our reliance upon them. To this end, we sought and secured thirty registration subsidies, through multiple negotiations with distinct organisational units within the University of Canberra. Given that the total conference attendance was 102 (85 in person, 17 online), this meant that roughly 30% of the attendance was locals subsidised to be there. 13 of the thirty were UC Faculty of Arts and Design staff, subsidised in part by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design, Jason Bainbridge, with 25% own contribution. Another five of the thirty local delegates were UC HDR students, subsidised in full by the faculty's HDR coordinator, Bethaney Turner. A further seven were Indigenous staff and/or community members or bodies, subsidised in full by UC's Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research and Enterprise, Lucy Johnston, in her role as co-chair of the campus's *Reconciliation Action Committee*. A further five were interested ACT college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, subsidised in full for one day's attendance by UC's *Widening Participation* unit. Subsidised registration with 25% own-contribution was offered to ANU staff too, in recognition of the ANU School of Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies' co-sponsorship of our international keynote speaker, Heather Clark. (The ANU is about five kilometres from the University of Canberra). The other thing to note here is that subsidies were offered regardless of whether people were presenting a paper.

It may seem surprising that a university would be ready to subsidise local registrations to this extent. We should not underestimate management awareness of the contribution such events

can make to local research culture, nor their goodwill towards ideas with clearly articulated links to the broad commitments many institutions have already been made to social goods like conservation of the environment or reconciliation with First Nations Peoples. That said, pragmatism helps. Requesting subsidies toward the end of an annual budget cycle, when funds have to be spent or lost, can, for instance, be a very good idea.

Through a combination of these measures and simple marketing, the conference secured 41 in-person ACT and ACT-adjacent registrations, out of a total of 85 in-person registrations. Our per capita carbon footprint was thereby reduced, at the same time that we, our colleagues, and our students, gained that vicarious experience of travel, and the consequent openness to difference that hosting strangers involves.

Free registration for First Nations Peoples

The real hosts in Australia are, of course, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Our thinking, in securing free registrations for any Indigenous scholars, scientists or artists in our institution and/or community who wished to attend, centred upon the importance of providing an extremely disadvantaged population access to the platforms and networks. To put it in more colloquial terms, it was about paying the rent. But an equally important driver was the chance to learn from another source of knowledge and power: as recent scholarship has increasingly made clear, First Nations communities have built up vast understandings of sustainable land management and culture over millennia. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report accordingly mandates learning from Indigenous communities as a key strategy for scientists, scholars and policymakers alike (Pörtner et al., 2022). Why not at a poetry conference?

Deliberate regionalisation

The conference was advertised widely within Australian Literary Studies and Creative Writing programmes and associations, and to a lesser extent in New Zealand. It was deliberately *not* advertised in any other countries. Three of the four international attendees had prior connections to the field in Australia, while the fourth constituted our fully-subsidised and fully-offset keynote speaker. We limited ourselves to one international keynote to reduce emissions and in general sought to programme locally sourced performance and plenary events in preference to single-person scholarly addresses, where the expectation of international headliners (is there some residual sense of colonial inadequacy here?) is so much greater. All of which said, it would be misleading to describe the event as a largely domestic one, given the great distances between Australian cities, and in particular between the eastern seaboard and Western Australia. A domestic Australian conference is closer, in its emissions profile, to one of the regional hub events imagined in the sustainable conferencing literature cited above.

Hybrid delivery

Three of the seven Indigenous delegates attended online. Those three include a block registration taken up by the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community, which is located in the ACT,

but in a tranche of geographically discontinuous territory 143 kilometres away, on the New South Wales coast. The community beamed the full three days of the conference live into their community hall. Hybrid technology also facilitated the attendance of two South Africa-based presenters; it allowed us to programme a keynote poetry reading from Manhattan-based poet, Olena Kalytiak-Davis; it gave a number of UK academics the capacity to audit the event, as well as certain Australians who couldn't make it in person for various reasons; and it also made it possible for one of our presenters on a keynote panel dedicated to the relationship between poetry and philosophy to present and engage, although stuck at home interstate due to sudden child care needs. In short, our experience with hybrid delivery corroborated the internationalisation and accessibility advantages that the literature attributes to virtual conferencing, all while lowering emissions.

As for how we organised it, our on-campus venue came equipped with good-quality hybrid facilities. Running such facilities did not require a huge amount of technical skill, but it did require attention to detail in the moment when things went wrong. Because attention is in short supply for conference organisers simultaneously dealing with the operational demands of a face-to-face event, we hired the same undergraduate digital design student who created *The Paperless Conferencing App* to work as Technical Manager. That involved planning out the various plenary and panel video conferences and overseeing the work of the nine students volunteers, whose main task was to run the hybrid technology. Our technical manager was paid at the appropriate professional staff rate in the university enterprise agreement – this included payment for the time spent setting up the links prior to the event. Her salary was recuperated through online registration sales, which also contributed to the fees for hiring the hybrid-equipped campus venue.

Mandatory travel offsetting

Our strategy here was forthright. Conference communications in the months leading up to the event announced that interstate and overseas participants would need to upload proof of (car/bus/train/plane) travel offsetting prior to the event, if they wished to stay on the programme. Those comms linked delegates to a page (<https://www.ucpoetry2022.info/how-to-offset-travel>) on the conference website, which contained examples of how to calculate carbon emissions for each mode of transport and links to online calculators and reputable sites from which to purchase offsets. Participants with conference travel funds to apply for were simultaneously asked to include the cost of offsetting in their applications, on the grounds that this might spark some important conversations in institutions that lack adequate attention to travel in their sustainability policies. That would include the bulk of Australian institutions, as we saw above.

Requiring compulsory travel offsets from out-of-towners was a good strategy, and one the author intends to continue in the future. We did not, however, fully carry it through in this case. The reason was that it became apparent, six weeks out from the event, that our bid for carbon neutral certification would see us obliged to automatically purchase offsets for all of the

emissions tabulated above, regardless of whether attendees had secured their own offsets or not. We stopped enforcing the policy at that point.

This is the context in which 15 of the 44 non-local participants sent in proof of offsetting. The interesting thing here is that eight of those 15 over-offset. For instance, a presenter from an eastern seaboard city paid close to triple the \$15 cost for offsetting their flight via additional donations. A presenter from the Northern Hemisphere tripled the cost of the carbon offset for their flight, again in donation. A presenter driving in from a regional location eschewed the \$5 or so to offset the approximately 288 kilograms of CO₂, choosing instead to spend \$80 offsetting their car for the entire year. And so forth. A full eight of the 15 over-offset in this fashion. Appropriately seven of those eight over-offsetters were fully-waged while the seven who did not over-offset were with one exception in the HDR/non-full-time employee category. This is good: those in the waged category should be paying much more than those who are not. Obviously these are not robust statistics. But these impressionistic figures do nonetheless suggest something about the considerable desire within the waged section of the scholarly community to go much, much further than we currently do on these matters.

Certification as carbon neutral

In November 2021, I approached Barbara Norman, then chair of UC's Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience Research Network, for advice on staging a carbon neutral conference. Barbara suggested looking at the City of Melbourne as an institution that had been particularly progressive on this front. Pre- and post-event public disclosure statements for *Melbourne Fashion Week* and *Melbourne Knowledge Week*, which the City runs as carbon neutral events, were available online. Both were certified by *Climate Active*, the quasi-governmental body entrusted by the Australian Government with the certification of entities, products and events. Those public disclosure statements were interesting. The pre-event report for the 2021 *Melbourne Knowledge Week* showed, for instance, that the event purchased 103 tonnes of CO₂ abatement from the body representing Aak Puul Ngantam Savanna Burning, which is an Indigenous-led NGO in Western Cape York that “engages local Wik and Kugu Traditional Owners as project rangers in traditional Indigenous fire management practices, carrying out strategic ‘cool’ burns in the tropical winter to reduce emissions from larger, late-season bushfires” (City of Melbourne, 2021, 8). In other words, offsetting is not necessarily just about planting trees. Those documents also set forth the steps that the two events had taken towards further reducing emissions since the previous year's certification, as part of the ratcheting-up requirements built into the process. It is not enough, in other words, just to calculate and pay offsets every year. You have to demonstrate ongoing behavioural change and consequent reductions. What also became clear from reading these documents is that aspects of certification were highly technical. We would need, for instance, to provide the certifier with a figure, in kilowatt hours, for “LGC Purchased and Retired (kWh) (including PPAs)” and another for “Residual Electricity” (City of Melbourne, 2021, 5). In short, we realised we would need to hire a specialist to help us put the bid together and it transpired from further inquiry that they would not come cheap: our consultancy bill for the 2022 event was close to ten thousand Australian dollars.

But we persevered, buoyed by an offer of half that sum in support from Hugh Howarth of UC's Campus Estate office, which has charge of sustainability operations on campus, and by the further sense that our achieving certification would serve as a real wake-up call for others in the institution. We could secure the remaining monies from ticketing revenue, surely. Working with consultancy firm Chribus Climatics, and drawing on the technical knowledge of a range of individuals in Campus Estate, we completed the pre-report in September 2022. Further imposts at this point included approximately \$800 in *Climate Active* registration fees and a further \$1300 in offsets, which went to the upgrade of electricity infrastructure. Both sums were covered by UC's Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience Research Network, with the support of new network chair, Jacki Schirmer.

Our certification was approved in early November 2022. Our Pre-Event Product Disclosure Statement was published at: <https://www.climateactive.org.au/buy-climate-active/certified-members/out-ordinary-poetry-and-world-2022> and announcement of the conference's successfully-achieved carbon neutral status followed shortly thereafter.

Beyond carbon neutrality

It might seem churlish at this point to raise the question of how valid offsetting actually is. I will raise it all the same, on the grounds that as academics we are obliged – here more than almost anywhere else – to find out and acknowledge what we honestly believe to be the facts of the case.

I described above the somewhat fumbled process whereby our *Out of the Ordinary* poetry conference elicited offsets of individual travel from 15 delegates, at the same time that the conference paid for the full cost of offsetting all such participant travel. Otherwise put, the conference *over*-offset its carbon emissions. That would be one way to understand what it is to go beyond carbon neutrality. It is an inadequate way, and its inadequacy gets to the heart of what is wrong with the concept of carbon neutrality itself.

Consider Alexander R Barron and his colleagues' above-cited appraisal of the performance of the over 800 higher education institutions that have signed up to the 2006 American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment. The institutions have thus committed to achieving carbon neutrality "as soon as possible" (Barron et al., 2021, p.1248). In their article, Barron et al. analyse the 11 schools that had by 2021 achieved neutrality under this protocol. While commending these schools for their leadership and ambition, the authors are nonetheless compelled to note that none of the 11 institutions "achieved net neutrality without significant use of accounting-based strategies". In fact, 77% of the 11 institutions' reductions came from purchased offsets, unbundled renewable energy certificates and bioenergy. All three of these measures involve assumptions about climate benefit that are acceptable for the books (hence "accounting-based") but are simultaneously subject to considerable criticism within the scientific community. Even if they are all proved valid, the point is that relying on such purchases to demonstrate neutrality allows an institution to continue – or even increase! – the

amount of emissions it actually emanates. As Barron et al. explain, “carbon neutrality in the context of U.S. HEI commitments is ‘net’ neutrality, allowing for continued emissions, as long as an equivalent amount of off-site emissions reductions” is purchased (2021, 1251).

This is in accord with global trends. Net accounting was “aggressively promoted” by countries with carbon-intensive economies during negotiations over the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, against the resistance of the EU, NGOs and developing countries, and it has been subject to suspicion in climate contexts ever since (Carton et al., 2020, 5). It is net accounting that allows a country like Norway, for instance, to “reconcile its domestic interest in continued oil and gas extraction with its international climate commitments” (Carton et al., 2020, 7). So when Barron and his colleagues suggest that academic institutions need to move beyond “neutrality commitments” (Barron et al., 2021, 1256) in an article entitled “Carbon neutrality should not be the end goal”, they do not mean those institutions need to get a negative number on the books, whether through the kind of over-offsetting our conference inadvertently engaged in, or otherwise. They mean we need to move beyond the state of affairs that treats things like offsets as equivalent to an actual reduction of emissions, as measured at the meter.

It is a wonder we ever imagined we could make that equivalence. The idea that forests saved from harvesting, or newly planted, might serve as “financial instruments ... equivalent to industrial carbon emissions” and so act to cancel out the harm of the latter, is staggering, the moment you think about it (Gifford 2020, 292). Numerous critiques have been made of the way carbon accounting serves to reduce “biodiverse and socioculturally rich landscapes” to so many equivalent units (Carton et al., 2020, 8). A key point here is the simple unknowability of the future, which renders claims as to the necessary permanence of any given act of carbon sequestration just as necessarily unverifiable (Carton et al., 2020). The numerous studies pointing to the deleterious consequences of poorly considered offset projects foisted upon forest communities in the Global South offer a damning assessment of such market-based mechanisms (Carton et al., 2020). This is not to say offsetting is totally useless. Projects can be pointed to that seem very likely to have genuine mitigating effect (Carton et al., 2020). The fact that the 2019 New York Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act limits offsetting to projects with local co-benefits shows that one can indeed practice offsetting, without necessarily buying into the universalising logic it tends to imply, namely that that a forest in any country on the planet can pay for pollution anywhere else. Even more promising would be the widespread uptake McLaren and his colleagues’ (2019) suggestion that institutions, including whole countries, should start having totally separate budgets for the various forms of carbon removal, on the one hand, and for the emissions produced, on the other. Offsets and the like would still be laudable. But you could not claim to be carbon-neutral without eradicating emissions at the meter.

To make that cut might lead to even more creative attempts at sustainable conferencing. For instance, a conference like ours in Canberra might thereby be forced to eschew the comforting illusion that we have extinguished all emissions, just because we have a certificate to prove it. Instead we might capitalise on the comparatively low emissions of trains and the information

we gathered as to the relatively large cohort of Melbourne attendees who flew to the December 2022 event, so as next time to stage a preliminary conference event on the train on the way up.

I have titled this final section “Beyond carbon neutrality”. One might expect a rousing peroration at this point, as I bring section and article to a close. I confess my distaste for the genre. Grand statements on these matters create the preconditions to the politically useless phenomenon of guilt, by providing us with further opportunities for feeling bad at failing to live up to them. What we need is pragmatism and action. Allow me instead to offer the reader a few ways back into this article. For a reminder of the horror from which it proceeds, I refer the reader back to the Santiago Sierra artwork with which this writing began. We tend to associate collective suicide with the intellectual anaesthesia induced by cult leadership. That would be short-sighted. To underline that “carbon neutrality” is an insufficient goal, so long as “net” accounting practices are allowed – the real goal has to be no emissions at all – I refer the reader back over the last six paragraphs. For the sense that this is all the same a space for possibility and creative thought, I refer the reader to the paragraphs just prior to my case study, which detail some key points of intervention. I would like in particular to focus the reader’s attention on the inherent arbitrariness – and therefore capturability – of: 1) the criteria by which academic promotions are decided, and 2) the criteria by which international institutional rankings are determined.

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