
Digital and Environmental Erotics: Reflections on the 42nd American Indian Workshop

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It's strange to recall the 2021 meeting of the American Indian Workshop – principally because, as life has returned to normal over the past couple of years, it becomes increasingly hard to remember the way things were in the pandemic era. Having originally intended to hold this conference in my home city of Nicosia, Cyprus, I instead found myself working out how an online event could be as welcoming and stimulating as a physical meeting. This was especially important given the topic of the erotic, a concept that in Audre Lorde's formulation involves "those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings" (56). Without physically being in the same room, might our thoughts about the sensual be diluted? Spread half way across the world, with some participants joining us just after waking up and others joining after dark had already fallen, could there be any sense of psychic connection?

These questions matter, and they matter now. In the networked world, we as academics have to face up to the fact that the big international conference has to find a way to truly decarbonize (Reyes-Garcia *et al*; Parncutt; Klöwer *et al* 356; Etzion *et al* 350-351; Bjørkdahl 1-7; Shift Project 3). Although carbon offsetting is often proffered as a fig leaf, the truth is that many if not most carbon offsetting schemes have been exposed as environmentally damaging, unsustainable, or sometimes even fraudulent (Watt 1069; Broadhead and Placani 410-412; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 58; Guix *et al* 11-12). Multiple studies have sustained the extraordinary difference in environmental impact between online and in-person, with the online conference having as much as a 98% lower impact on the planet (Evrard *et al* 205-210; Jäckle

456-457; Achakulvisut; Froilan *et al* 1-2). To read a truly comprehensive account of the damage and immorality of academic flying, I recommend the open access collection *Academic Flying and the Means of Communication*, edited by Kristian Bjørkdahl and Adrian Santiago Franco Duharte.

Indigenous Studies should be feeling this pressure most intently, given the disproportionate impact of global heating on Indigenous communities (Baldwin and Erickson 3-11; Kåresdotter *et al*; Suliman *et al* 318; Adams 282-284). The old model of the academic conference, in which academics fly long distances, emitting clouds of greenhouse gases behind them and in some cases merely reading a twenty-minute paper to a few people before wandering off to do some sightseeing, is immoral, unjust, and a tool of climate oppression (Barnett 1-6). Academics who continue to participate in this economy while preaching activism may see this as a necessary hypocrisy – but then, every colonizer and ecocidist has thought in terms of necessary hypocrisies (Cesaire 31-33; Douglass; Dunlap 80-83).

These are not the only problems with the standard international conference. As a white male-presenting able-bodied in-post academic with a loud voice, I admit that it took me a while to realize how much the physical conference can be a hostile environment for others. But those of us who enjoy these privileges should not deny the disadvantages faced by new mothers or disabled persons in even getting to a physical conference, or the problems students and adjunct faculty in poverty, not to mention academics such as myself working long distances away from the metropole experience in having to pay vast sums for hotels, conference fees, networking banquets (Bos 755-756; Oswal 21-22; Wing 53-72; Mooken and Sugden 595-597; Vossen 126, 129; Niner and Wasserman). And, though I am myself often an enthusiastic participant in the after-hours alcohol-fueled camaraderie of the conference bar, recent articles on the barriers to networking this creates for people who do not drink (alcoholics, expectant parents, Muslims and other religious minorities), and the opportunities inequality and alcohol create for sexual predators, show just how the academic conference is imbricated with structures of patriarchy and

white supremacy (Kean 178-179; Nicholson 59-61; Flores 139-140; Kibbe and Kapadia; Karami; Biggs 393-396; Jackson 694-699).

This insight was reinforced by the decision of the AIW committee to announce at the conference that they had awarded the following year's conference to Hungary. LGBTQ+ attendees and others made it clear that they would not be comfortable attending a conference in a country that had just passed a law outlawing "homosexual and transexual propaganda" (Bayer). Many of the papers offered at the 42nd AIW might be considered in breach of this law. The conference went ahead nonetheless, placing barriers in the way of trans and queer academics who might otherwise have attended in person. Although hybrid conferences are often suggested as a solution to access barriers, it takes a high investment of time and technology to make an event truly "hybrid" rather than creating a second class tier of digital attendees. Such investment is beyond the budgets of most conferences in the humanities.

Yet if the erotic contains teachings, those surely concern the power of the physical to create connection, love, empathy and compassion. As the world has spent more and more time staring at screens, getting instant dopamine hits from smartphone and tablet, we have seen the rise of figures such as Andrew Tate and the many, many far-right politicians who outright reject empathy and compassion for anyone unlike themselves (Bauer 2-4). The virtuality of our shared experiences, while it may not be the only explanation for such a deadening of collective compassion, surely accelerates it (Terry and Cain 58; Andrejevic and Volcic 295-297; Hodalska 421-422; Sergura 9-10). In a time when we are facing unprecedented threats to the rights of women, ethnic minorities and queer identities, we need to find methods of creating collective experiences through the liquid crystal display which include empathic and intellectual engagement (Yu and Bailey 8-11). This becomes harder when the distractions of the real are always intervening. Many of us at this conference had children in lockdown and schooling from home, and even beyond the covid era it is always true that online experiences can be interrupted by a

colleague popping in to discuss an urgent matter, a dog throwing up on the carpet, a sudden power outage (or, in this case, my children bringing in a sick bat while I was hosting one session).

There is an increasing number of studies on how to adapt the conference format to the online environment (e.g. Raby and Madden 3607-3613; Oruç 231-242; Falk and Hagsten 718-719; Cai 8358-8361; Popovic and Kustra; Rich *et al*). In structuring “The Sovereign Erotic” I freely borrowed from several of them. Papers other than keynotes were restricted to ten minutes apiece, making fewer demands on the collective attention span, communicating key insights only. The next stage was what mattered most – the group was randomly split into smaller virtual rooms of only 5-8 people, giving their immediate unstructured responses to the papers, one participant being tasked with leading the discussion and synthesizing the responses. This randomness turned out to be the key, democratizing the encounter and pushing everyone who participated to think about the issues raised in every paper. Rather than focusing on three or four panelists’ responses to random audience questions as in the traditional model, these encounter groups pushed all of us to engage with themes beyond the individual papers. Only after the group leaders had reported back did we open for a general full-conference discussion, by which time everyone had skin in the game and was willing to engage through the digital void. Since there were no parallel sessions (the conference was spread over six days to accommodate time zone differences) this created rich discussions of very diverse themes with equally diverse audiences. The friendly atmosphere thus created was attested to by the large numbers attending the “hangout sessions” at the end of each day – lasting connections were forged, and in some cases have blossomed into new collaborations that continue long after the conference itself has finished. When one misjudged contribution triggered trauma for several delegates, it was in one of these rooms that Ashley Caranto Morford (and others) brought empathy and compassionate presence to a moment of shared healing that I will not soon forget.

Most of all, looking back at the conference, I will remember the keynotes – superbly meaningful work from Lisa Tatonetti (who, I want to note, only agreed to keynote once she had confirmed that all other keynotes were by Indigenous academics), talking about the responsibility to others inherent in the erotic. Kai Minosh Pyle, speaking about their research into buried lines of two-spirit connection. Chrystos read poetry and discussed the liberation to be found in sexual connection, in a talk that was messy, funny and deeply honest. And Shaawano Chad Uran’s keynote, reproduced in this section, ... no, actually, I don’t want to tell you. Read it for yourself. Just know that there was laughter, and there were tears, from more than one attendee. There were also many brilliant papers, of which the following section is just a selection.

I offer these recollections not to memorialize this one event, but to show that there truly is a better way forward, one that needs to be adopted more widely. Far from being an alienating, remote, cold experience of screens and switched off cameras, this was as friendly, involved, intellectually and emotionally stimulating an event as I have ever attended. There are many alternative options. Rob Raven and his co-authors have proposed hub models for conferencing, involving local meetups as well as international collaboration via digital streaming media (1-5). Mattia Thibault *et al* describe methods of gamifying the conference experience (161-164). Laura U. Marks, who points out that the Jevons paradox means that even a move to digital may not be enough to truly decarbonize, has done amazing work on small-footprint collaboration methodologies (Marks and Przedpełski a 207-210; Marks and Przedpełski b; Makonin). Even streaming platforms themselves offer a plethora of tools, tips and hints for making digital collaboration work (Wiederhold 437-438). Yet instead of learning the lessons from the pandemic, we again hear online conferences constantly referred to as second best options (Bastian *et al* 12). Far too many of the conferences in the Humanities that do take place online are organized using the deathly dull three-20-minute-papers-followed-by-questions template.¹

The sovereign erotic, the focus of this conference, is a way of conceptualizing the role of play, of sex, of presence, of beauty, of the physical, of the sensual and sensory, in the continuation and healing of communities and people after the experience of trauma (Driskill 52-54; Burns 30-31; Siepak 497-498; Schellhammer 95). I do not believe that such work can be aided by a community of scholars stubbornly resistant to changes to the status quo and wedded to the way things have always been done. If anyone reading this is organizing an event, I urge them – I urge you – to think creatively about whether you can reduce, even eliminate, carbon emissions in the process (without recourse to offsetting) while still creating joy. There are many resources available to conceive of alternative conferencing mechanisms, many of them in the bibliography of this introduction (see e.g. Mulders and Zender on VR conferencing). There are numerous games available to help you think through the impact of your activities. Those of you on the boards of larger organizations might think about taking up a workshop from *Ma Terre en 180'*, a game designed for just such a group. Living as I do in Cyprus, a country that will likely see a sharp rise in temperatures out of proportion to the rest of the planet's overall heating, I hope we manage to make this move as a profession.

Notes

¹ I base this assertion on a review of the CFPs found on the Upenn server's "online conferences" tab.

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