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Direct air capture (DAC): molten carbonate direct transformation of airborne CO₂ to durable, useful carbon nanotubes and nano-onions†

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This study introduces the concept and first demonstration of an effective molten carbonate chemistry for Direct Air Capture (DAC). Molten carbonate electrolysis is a high-temperature decarbonization process within Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) that transforms chemistry transforming flue gas CO₂ into carbon nanotubes and carbon nano-onions. The key challenge for molten carbonate DAC is to split air's 0.04% CO₂ without heating the remaining 99.6%. This is accomplished by integrating a diffusive, insulating membrane over an electrolyte with a high affinity for CO₂.

Introduction

Direct air capture technologies

Atmospheric Greenhouse gas removal is a necessary component to limit climate change.^{1,2} Today's chemical Direct air capture decarbonization technologies² typically rely on active CO₂-concentration, often using sorbents such as amine binding, or lime reactions, as described in the ESI.^{†3,4} CO₂-concentration is energy-intensive, produces rather than reduces CO₂, and provides just the initial step in Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) or Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage resulting in concentration, rather than storage. In contrast, this demonstration presents an efficient chemical DAC process that eliminates the need for active CO₂ concentration.

C2CNT: transition metal nucleated electrolytic CCUS

We've developed a large-scale transition metal nucleated molten carbonate chemistry to electrolytically split CO₂ into carbon nanotubes (CNTs) and nano-onions (CNOs) and other Graphene NanoCarbon allotropes (GNCs) (ESI Section†). This

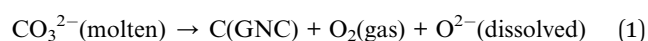
Sustainability spotlight

The concept and first demonstration of an effective direct air capture molten carbonate chemistry is presented for removal of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide to mitigate global warming which is an existential threat to the planet. Molten carbonate electrolysis is an CCUS high-temperature decarbonization chemistry transforming flue gas CO₂ to graphenes. Its direct air capture challenge is to split air's 0.04% CO₂ without heating the remaining 99.6% of the air, which is accomplished here by integration of a membrane over a high CO₂ affinity electrolyte.

C2CNT (CO₂ to Carbon Nano Technology) process is highly effective for flue gas decarbonization. Graphite, as a multi-layered graphene, demonstrates the long-term sequestration potential of structures built from graphene. The challenge for C2CNT as a DAC Technology is to efficiently split air's 0.04% CO₂ without heating the remaining 99.96% composition to the ~750 °C of the C2CNT electrolysis. This study presents the concept and first demonstration of an effective DAC molten carbonate chemistry.

CNTs possess the highest tensile strength ever recorded (93 900 MPa) and feature exceptional thermal conductivity, high charge storage, flexibility, and catalytic properties.^{5,6} As described in the ESI,[†] they enhance structural materials such as cement and steel, and are used in a variety of applications including in medical and electrochemical fields, electronics, batteries, supercapacitors, sensing, plastics, textiles, hydrogen storage, and water treatment.

High-temperature molten carbonate electrolytic CO₂-splitting into C and O₂ as a mitigation strategy was first introduced by our group in 2009–2010.⁷ By 2015, it was demonstrated that this process could convert CO₂ into valuable, specialized graphene carbons, GNCs, through transition metal nucleated growth.^{8–10} The type of useful GNCs, such as CNTs and CNOs produced depends on the electrochemical conditions (ESI[†]), which offers a promising climate change mitigation approach. The process follows a 4-electron redox reaction of carbonate:



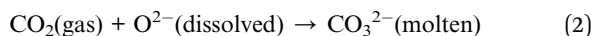
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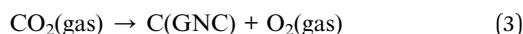
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The oxide reacts with CO₂ to regenerate carbonate:



These reactions combine to split CO₂ into carbon products and O₂:



The CCUS molten carbonate electrolysis process for CNT and CNO production has evolved into a sophisticated technology. By adjusting the CO₂ electrolysis conditions, specific GNCs can be produced, including doped, thin, thick, long, magnetic, nano-bamboo, and helical CNTs, as well as nano-scaffold, graphene, nano-pearl, and nano-onion morphologies as described in the ESI.^{†9,10}

We have explored alternative alkali carbonate mixtures and lower electrolysis temperatures, which can produce 3D-symmetry graphene scaffolds (ESI[†]). Electrolysis current densities ranging from 0.03–0.6 A cm⁻² affect GNC growth; higher densities favour the formation of helical CNTs (ESI[†]). Electrolysis requires a voltage range from 0.8–2 V. Using renewable energy sources can further reduce the CO₂ footprint (ESI[†]). High purity GNCs form directly on the cathode and are separated from the molten electrolyte through high-temperature filtration, as described in the ESI.[†]

C2CNT process modules are called the Genesis Device®, and large-scale CCUS Genesis modules transforming the 5% CO₂ flue gas from the Shepard Natural Gas Power Plant are operating in Calgary, Canada. Today, large-scale Genesis electrolysis uses cathodes over 10 000 cm². The oxidation resistance of the CNTs produced is high, with a 97.1% TGA purity. SEM and TEM images of the CNT product are detailed in the ESI.[†] The units tested in this study are bench-top scale, using similar Muntz brass cathodes, 304SS anodes, and 99.5% purity Li₂CO₃ electrolyte. These units are housed in a 12 × 12 × 15 cm carbon pot electrolyzer, which contains the molten electrolyte and serves as the electrolysis chamber, housed within a converted Caldera Paragon kiln. The CO₂-concentration is measured with a CO2meter (<http://co2meter.com/>) sensor situated externally from the hot chamber connected *via* a 304SS tube which allows sufficient cooling to facilitate the room-temperature sensor performance.

C2CNT decarbonization is a unique process, unlike other CCS processes in that it directly (without pre-concentration) transforms CO₂ to high-purity, high-yield GNCs at ~750 °C. This decarbonization process, which eliminates the need for CO₂ concentration, as the electrolyte is a carbon sink that draws in CO₂ with a high affinity, applies to both C2CNT industrial CCUS (Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage) and C2CNT DAC. However, the feed gas for industrial gas typically ranges from 5% CO₂ (natural gas power plant stack emissions) to over 30% CO₂ (cement plant emissions), and furthermore is generally hot coming off the industrial process. In contrast, DAC utilizes ambient temperature air containing a very low CO₂ concentration. Unlike C2CNT CCUS, DAC may require more energy to heat the entire air feed to >700 °C electrolysis

temperatures. Air contains 0.042% CO₂, with the remaining >99.95% consisting of N₂, O₂, H₂O and Ar. While the latter are highly insoluble in molten carbonates, CO₂ dissolves reactively as shown in eqn (2). For effective DAC decarbonization, the C2CNT process energy should not be used to heat the 99.95% non-CO₂ components of air.

The first DAC technology is presented that simultaneously (1) directly (without preconcentration) removes CO₂ from the air, (2) transforms the CO₂ into a valuable product (such as CNTs) provides a strong incentive to remove this greenhouse gas, and (3) unlike previous regular C2CNT processes, insulates the feed air from the hot electrolysis chamber while still allowing CO₂ to diffuse into the electrolysis chamber.

CO₂ diffusion through high temperature insulation

The known diffusion coefficient of CO₂ in air varies as:¹¹

$$D_{\text{CO}_2}(T_K) = 2.7 \times 10^{-5} T_K^{1.59} / e^{(102.1/T_K)} \quad (4)$$

We recently characterized the rate of CO₂ diffusion at room temperature through a variety of high temperature porous insulations acting as membranes.¹¹ These diffusion results are now used to develop a new high temperature direct air capture, in which these membranes are placed between the feed air and a high-temperature molten electrolyte that removes CO₂ *via* electrolysis in the carbon pot. Insulation materials tend to be porous and low-density. The majority of high-temperature alumina or CaO/MgO silicate insulations we recently studied have densities ranging from 0.06–0.14 g cm⁻³, with a measured porosity, of ϵ ranging from 0.89–0.96. Higher density-insulation (0.59 to 0.70 g cm⁻³) had a measured porosity of $\epsilon = 0.45$ –0.67.¹¹ As expected, the manufacturer's thermal insulation values tend to vary linearly with thickness and, to a lesser extent, with density. For example, 1/4" insulation with densities of 0.10 and 0.13 g cm⁻³ have respective *R*-values of 0.3 and 0.4, while 4× thicker insulation has *R*-values of 1.1 to 1.5. Alumina and CaO/MgO silicate insulations had similar *R*-values.

In that room temperature study, we determined that CO₂ readily diffuses through porous ceramic thermal insulators. The measured CO₂ diffusion coefficient for the silicate membranes was found to correlate with the measured open-channel porosity as follows:¹¹

$$D_{\text{M-porous-CO}_2} = D_{\text{CO}_2} \cdot \epsilon(M)^{3/2} \quad (5)$$

These diffusion rates were further increased by approximately 50% with turbulent flow (either parallel or perpendicular flow) over the upper membrane surface.¹¹ These findings, combined with eqn (4) and (5), are now used to configure a DAC C2CNT process that enables the chemical permeation of CO₂ while insulating air's other components from the hot molten carbonate electrolysis.

Experimental section

Electrolyses were conducted using a 750 °C Li₂CO₃ (99.85%, Shanghai Seasongreen Chemical Co.) electrolyte, with or



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The Genesis DAC efficiency

Δm_{elec} is the measured mass change of the system during the electrolysis. The maximum Δm_{elec} , corresponding to a DAC efficiency of 100%, represents a full absorption of CO_2 , *i.e.* $m_{\text{max-CO}_2} = 44.01 \times \text{mol}_{\text{max-CO}_2}$, its conversion to carbonate, and the maximum amount of carbon, *i.e.* $m_{\text{max-C}} = 12.01 \times \text{mol}_{\text{max-CO}_2}$. The worst-case scenario occurs when DAC Efficiency = 0%, meaning there is no CO_2 absorption during the electrolysis. In this case, all carbon formed reacts with the O_2 produced and is then released as CO_2 ; *i.e.* $\Delta m_{\text{elec}} = -m_{\text{max-CO}_2}$. The max DAC efficiency (100%) case occurs when all the electrolysis required CO_2 is absorbed during that electrolysis at $I_{\text{electrolysis}}$ for $t_{\text{electrolysis}}$, and is converted by the electrolysis, and retained as pure carbon GNC product on the cathode, *i.e.* $\Delta m_{\text{elec}} = m_{\text{max-CO}_2}$, while O_2 is evolved. This yields the equation for the molten carbonate direct air capture efficiency:

$$\text{DAC eff (\%)} = 100\%(\Delta m_{\text{elec}} + m_{\text{max-CO}_2})/(m_{\text{max-C}} + m_{\text{max-CO}_2})(9)$$

Measurement of the genesis DAC efficiency

During electrolysis, the 1-inch thick membrane had an outer surface temperature of 40 °C and an inner surface temperature of 560 °C, providing substantial thermal insulation for the air feed gas, above the hot 750 °C electrolysis chamber. The 1/4-inch membrane offered less insulation, with an outer surface temperature of 160 °C and an inner surface temperature of 450 °C.

The membrane temperature is estimated as the average temperature of its upper and lower surfaces, which is 300 °C for both the 1-inch and 1/4-inch thick membranes. The electrochemical current density from eqn (6), JM_{CO_2} (300 °C = 573 K), is 0.67 and 2.5 mA cm^{-2} for the respective 1-inch and 1/4-inch membranes. The $A_{\text{membrane}} = 2000 \text{ cm}^2$, which multiplied by the area current densities, should support respective electrolysis currents of 1.3 and 5.0 A, respectively.

Fig. 2 presents Genesis DAC Efficiencies from eqn (9) based on the measured mass change, Δm_{elec} at the start and finish of 16 hours 750 °C electrolyses with brass cathodes, and with the carbon pot walls acting as anodes. In the Genesis DAC configuration using a 1-inch insulation as a membrane in the pure Li_2CO_3 electrolyte, a maximum DAC efficiency of 87% was achieved with an electrolysis current of 1 A. However, as shown in the black curve, the efficiency decreases rapidly at higher currents due to insufficient CO_2 reaching the electrolysis chamber.

We have previously noted that in accordance with eqn (2), the addition of 1 m Li_2O increases the rate of CO_2 uptake.⁸ At an electrolysis current of 1 A, this addition increases DAC efficiency to 91%. In medium or high airflow ($1.5\times$ or $2\times$ the eqn (8) flow), the efficiency rises further to 95% and 99% DAC (red curve). Even with high airflow, however, the DAC efficiency, as shown in the Fig. 2 red curve, decreases again at cell currents >1 A. The systematic increase in cell current (1, 2, 3, 5 and 9 amps) through the 2000 cm^2 surface area membrane demonstrates

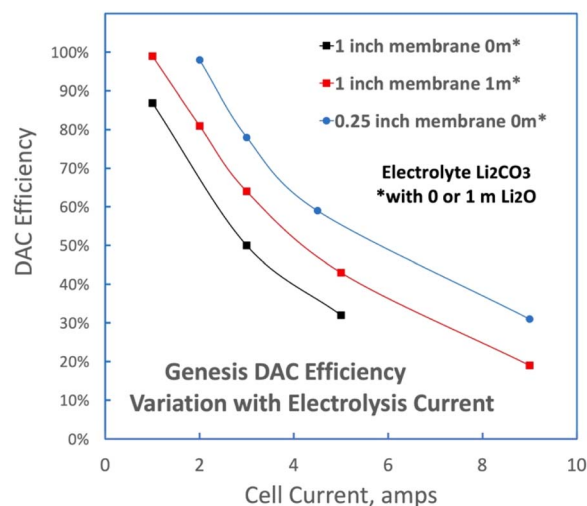


Fig. 2 DAC efficiency as a function of the electrolysis current in DAC Genesis as configured in the lower left of Fig. 1. Black data is measured with eqn (9) required airflow, and red and blue data with $2\times$ higher flow.

that DAC efficiency in Fig. 2 decreases with increasing membrane diffusion limited current density. Lower current densities support higher levels of DAC efficiency.

A 1/4-inch membrane supports greater CO_2 diffusion to the electrolysis chamber improving DAC efficiency. This is measured with turbulent ($2\times$) air flow using a pure electrolysis Li_2CO_3 configuration. This configuration supports the highest electrolysis current of 2 A at 98% DAC efficiency, as shown in the Fig. 2 blue curve. Both this, and the 1-inch membrane, measured maximum DAC efficiencies, but these currents occur lower than the calculated eqn (6) supporting currents. The cathode bus bar (seen in Fig. 1) interferes with downward CO_2 flow in the lower chamber and appears to create a bottleneck for CO_2 mass transport to the electrolyte. Future experiments will explore configurations to mitigate this bottleneck, as well as surface-enhanced membranes, such as zig-zag, dimpled and multiple membrane layer designs, which increase the effective membrane area.

The experimental data verifying the accuracy of the theoretical framework is shown in Fig. 3; specifically, the percentage of the applied cell current used for DAC conversion is compared to the theoretical membrane diffusion-limited current:

$$\text{DAC modelled achieved experimentally (\%)} = (\text{DAC efficiency} \times \text{cell current}) / (A_{\text{membrane}} \times \text{JM}_{\text{CO}_2}) \quad (10)$$

As shown in Fig. 3, the product of the modelled membrane-limited rate of CO_2 membrane diffusion limited current, (based on eqns (5) and (6)), generally underestimates the observed DAC capabilities by up to a factor of two, depending on the applied cell current. The observed DAC rate is higher for thinner membranes and tends to increase at higher currents. This two-fold underestimate in the model is a satisfactory preliminary approximation for CO_2 membrane diffusion constants



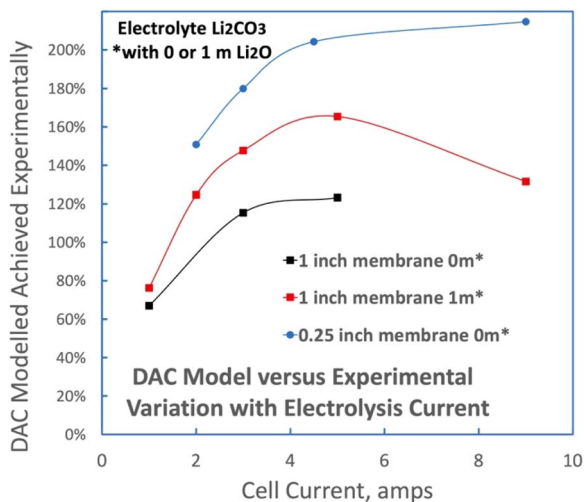


Fig. 3 A comparison of the DAC modelled CO_2 diffusion limited currents and the experimentally measured DAC currents. Black data is measured with eqn (9) required airflow, and red and blue data with 2× higher flow.

measured at room temperature and extrapolated for use with the 750 °C electrolysis of the Genesis DAC configuration. Future studies will explore whether the membrane porosity exponent in eqn (5) ($\epsilon(M)^{3/2}$) is itself a function of temperature, and the assumption of a linear temperature profile through the membrane's cross section. For example, the results suggest that the lower outer wall temperature of the membrane has a larger effect on the rate of CO_2 diffusion.

CNTs and CNOs products from CO_2 in the air

At 750 °C in Li_2CO_3 , the CO_2 -splitting electrolysis consistently produces high-purity CNTs as exemplified by the SEM images of the washed product in Fig. 4 panels A & B.

Under CO_2 -limiting conditions, where insufficient air CO_2 is fed into the DAC system, an oxide buildup occurs as described by eqn (1) oxide. In this case, we observe that the product tends to be high-purity carbon nano-onions (CNOs) as shown in Fig. 5, panels A through I. When excess CO_2 is reintroduced to the DAC Genesis, CNT production resumes.

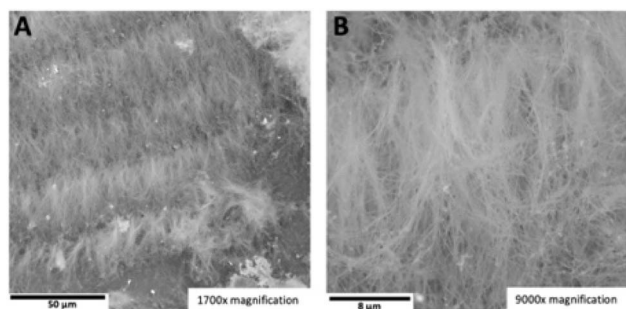


Fig. 4 DAC Genesis CNT products formed at CO_2 sufficient conditions. 750 °C Li_2CO_3 electrolyte electrolysis with a brass cathode and a stainless steel anode and case. SEM of the washed products: CNTs (A & B) 1700× and 9000× magnification.

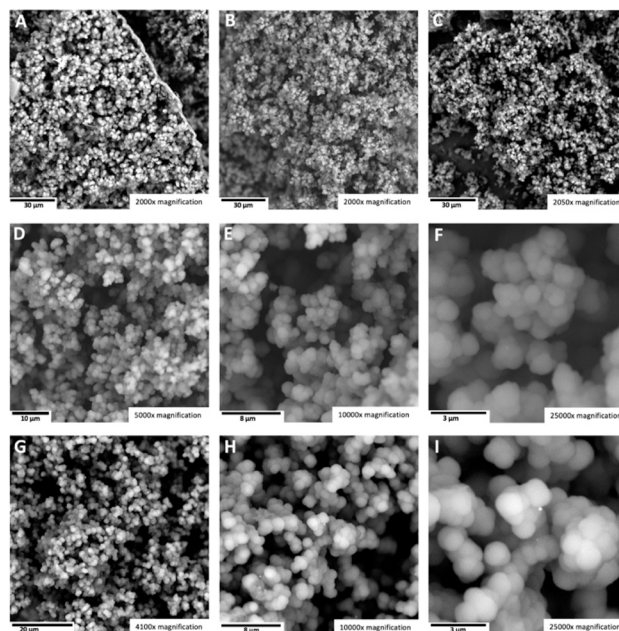


Fig. 5 DAC Genesis CNO products formed at CO_2 insufficient conditions. 750 °C Li_2CO_3 electrolyte electrolysis with a brass cathode and a stainless steel anode and case. SEM of the washed products: CNOs sample 1 (A–F) magnification at 2000×, 2000×, 2050×, 5000×, 100 00×, 250 00×. CNOs sample 2 (G–I) 4100×, 10 000, and 250 00×.

As with CNTs,¹² and as seen in the upper left corner of Fig. 5 (panel A), the CNO growth begins with a thin layer of graphene (observed as removed from the cathode) from which a matrix of CNO growth occurs. Under conditions of insufficient CO_2 , higher oxide concentration buildup in the electrolyte, this (i) reduces the solubility and prevalence of transition metal cations in the electrolyte, inhibiting CNT growth by transition metal nucleation, and (ii) induces sp^3 defects in the sp^2 graphene lattice. These sp^3 sites favor the formation of spherical, rather than planar cylindrical, graphene growth.^{8,13} Thus, an oxide-rich electrolytic environment promotes CNO over CNT growth.¹³

Alternative graphene nanocarbon products from CO_2 in the air

We have studied the morphology and purity of the GNC products using CO_2 from the air since 2015,⁸ although previously without an effective means to separate heat losses between air and the molten electrolyte. In 2016, we demonstrated that using the ^{13}C isotope resulted in the first pure ^{13}C multiwalled carbon nanotube, and tracked the transformation of gas-phased CO_2 into CNTs *via* electrolysis.¹⁴ In 2021, we applied high current density (0.6 A cm^{-2}) and added oxides to the electrolyte, which induced sp^3 defects and torsional effects transforming to CO_2 to helical carbon nanotubes.¹⁵ By controlling electrolysis conditions – including variations in current density, anode, cathode and electrolyte composition, and temperature – we can produce high purity morphologies with a range of properties, including thin-walled, magnetic, doped, nano-bamboo, nano-pearl, and nano-tree CNTs as detailed in the ESI.^{†10,12–24}

Alternative electrolytes and an approximation of DAC costs

The CCUS Genesis Device® for decarbonization of flue gas is significantly more mature than the new DAC Genesis Device® for direct air capture. The CCUS electrodes have been scaled up from the original 5 cm² area (ref. 8) to over 10 000 cm² in electrolysis modules, which comprise 1000 tons of CO₂ decarbonization. These modules are directly fed with 5% CO₂ flue emissions from the adjacent 860 MW Shepard Natural Gas Power Plant in Calgary Canada.²⁵

In a recent advancement of the CCUS C2CNT decarbonization chemistry, the majority of the lithium carbonate electrolyte was replaced by strontium carbonate-based electrolytes. The thermodynamic and kinetic chemistry of the electrolytes has been shown to be equivalent for the electrolytic splitting of CO₂ to GNCs. This is economically significant, as strontium salts are an order of magnitude less expensive and considerably more abundant than lithium salts. This shift also alleviates competition for limited lithium carbonate resources which are increasingly used for EVs and grid electric storage. An analysis of C2CNT decarbonization costs based on energy consumption, and the new strontium electrolytes, estimates \$198 per tonne of CO₂ (\$791 per tonne GNC produced).²⁵ In that study the equivalent affinities of SrCO₃ and Li₂CO₃ for absorbing and releasing CO₂ are demonstrated to be comparable, and are unlike all the other alkali and alkali earth carbonates. The temperature domain in which the CO₂ transformation to GNCs can be effective is <800 °C. Although the solidus temperature of SrCO₃ is 1494 °C, it is remarkably soluble in Li₂CO₃ at temperatures less than 800 °C, and the electrolysis energy is low. High purity CNTs are synthesized from CO₂ respectively in SrCO₃ based electrolytes containing 30% or less Li₂CO₃. These strontium-based electrolytes are also applicable to the DAC Genesis Device® for direct air capture. The components of DAC and CCUS C2CNT technologies are similar and the additional cost of the porous ceramic diffusion membranes is minor. As a first approximation, the cost per tonne of decarbonization will be similar, and will be analyzed in depth in a subsequent study as the technology is scaled. It is important to note that the C2CNT deployment involves not only the costs mentioned, but also revenue, as GNCs have high value. This provides an additional incentive for DAC C2CNT Genesis deployment.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we have achieved a high rate of CO₂ direct air capture, without requiring active CO₂ concentration. Molten carbonate electrolysis is a powerful method for high-temperature CCUS that converts flue gas CO₂ into GNCs. The main challenge for its DAC counterpart has been extracting CO₂ from air, which contains only 0.04% CO₂, without needing to heat the remaining 99.6% of the air. This study introduces a novel concept and provides the initial demonstration of an effective molten carbonate chemistry for DAC. CO₂ diffuses through high-temperature aluminosilicate insulation, where it is reactively consumed in a molten electrolyte carbon sink and electrolytically transformed into CNTs and CNOs, while the

major components of air – N₂, O₂, and H₂O – remain highly insoluble in the electrolyte. Low air feed gas temperatures and moderate electrolysis currents are maintained, ensuring high DAC efficiency.

Data availability

The data supporting this article have been included as part of the ESI.†

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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