The Near North

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The word arctic is derived from the ancient Greeks, for whom arktos meant the Bear (or North) Star. To those of us who live amid today’s suburbs and strip malls—places where space shuttles and satellite TV have become familiar topics of everyday conversation—the stars may now seem far closer than they did to the ancient Greeks. In contrast, the Arctic evoked with such stark beauty in Subhankar Banerjee’s photos remains a remote and forbidding world. Food, rather than appearing neatly encapsulated in plastic shrink-wrap at the local supermarket, is in the Arctic encased in fur, blood, and blubber, graphically revealing the connection between human sustenance and living creatures. No less telling is the fact that the indigenous peoples inhabiting the Far North—the Gwich’in, Inupik, Athabaskan, Yukaghir, Inuits, and others—constitute some of the last representatives of humanity’s hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Although Homo sapiens once hunted and gathered across the globe, this mode of existence is now confined to those few areas like the Arctic where climate does not allow for the cultivation of the agricultural staples—corn, wheat, soybeans, rice—on which the vast majority of the world’s population today depends.

Because of their elemental hunter-gatherer existence, one may be tempted to view the indigenous communities peopling Banerjee’s photos as vestiges of an almost vanished past, inhabitants of a time and place centuries removed from our own. Indeed, a powerful strain of salvage ethnography running through the American artistic tradi-
tion predisposes audiences for just such an interpretation. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, George Catlin, Edward S. Curtis, and numerous other celebrated painters and photographers journeyed to remote corners of North America to document what they believed to be the last traces of American Indians’ fast-disappearing way of life. Such projects produced images that remain iconic even today. But they seldom sought to give their viewers anything more than a nostalgic last glance at what was imagined to be a doomed and dying world.1

What might happen, however, if we were to reverse this long-standing salvage impulse and, rather than viewing the Arctic and its residents as existing across some sort of unbridgeable temporal divide, consider them instead as existing in the same moment in time as ourselves? For the Arctic that Banerjee’s photos so poignantly capture is far more modern than many of us care to acknowledge, and in ways that go far beyond the stray snowmobiles, parkas, and steel tools incorporated into its communities’ daily lives.

Consider, for example, the caribou herds and beluga whale pods that inhabit so many of Banerjee’s images. These creatures make their annual migrations over some of the last untapped reserves of petroleum available in our ever-more energy-hungry world. According to recent U.S. Geological Survey predictions, one-fifth of the planet’s yet-to-be-discovered oil and natural gas is located north of the Arctic Circle, making the region, in the agency’s words, “the largest unexplored prospective area for petroleum remaining on earth.”2

That the world would look north for its energy needs is a development abounding in ironies. For the past two centuries, the industrializing nations of Western Europe, North America, and Asia have burned vast quantities of fossil fuels, the very substances now being sought in the Arctic. This unparalleled energy consumption has led, in turn, to a steady increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, from 275 parts per million in the 1700s to 385 parts per million today.
It is now widely accepted that this rise in carbon dioxide has contributed to a warming of the global climate—and that this warming trend is taking place twice as fast in the earth’s northern latitudes as anywhere else on earth.

For those who know where to look, signs of climate change are everywhere in the Arctic Circle. The permafrost that undergirded the region for centuries is no longer so permanent. As the soil thaws, it produces “drunken forests”—acres and acres of trees that lean at odd, surreal angles as the ground literally shifts beneath them. Storms in the Arctic now contain less snow and far more freezing rain than ever before. As a result, the lichens that nourish the Far North’s caribou are often trapped beneath layers of ice, leading to the mass starvation of many herds. The region’s most notable feature—the ice cap covering the North Pole—has shrunk by half since the 1950s.

Paradoxically, it is many of these very same changes—above all, the retreat of the Arctic ice sheet—that have made it possible for energy companies to imagine extracting the Far North’s oil and natural-gas reserves. Once removed, refined, and shipped to the rest of the world, these fuels will, of course, only contribute more carbon to the atmosphere. In other words, we find ourselves having set in motion a cycle in which the residents of the Arctic are asked not only to tolerate the climatic shifts created by the industrialized nations but also to contribute their resources to this process—to become, as it were, both the leading suppliers and the leading subjects of humanity’s current experiment in warming the planet.

The connections between the Far North and the rest of the modern world do not stop at climate change. Over the past few decades, scientists have discovered, much to their surprise, the “Arctic paradox.” Even though the top of the world may be one of the most remote spots on earth, it is also, it turns out, one of the most polluted. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT), mercury—all examples of what Rachel Carson once called the
industrial world’s “elixirs of death”—are highly mobile. Once released into the environment, they are spread far and wide by wind and tide, their migration halting only when cooler temperatures cause them to precipitate out of the air and water. Over the years, this process has caused PCBs, DDT, mercury, and other deadly substances to pool in the coldest spot in the northern hemisphere, the Arctic.

As they collect in the polar ecosystem, these toxins are incorporated into the living tissues of the region’s biota. They then move up the food chain, becoming more concentrated in the fatty tissues of their hosts with each step. As a result, the indigenous peoples of the Far North—simultaneous occupants of the top of the world and the top of the Arctic food chain and avid consumers of whale blubber and other high-fat foods—contain some of the highest concentrations of toxic chemicals ever recorded in world history. In fact, the breast milk of some Inuit mothers is so contaminated that it should be classed, according to current scientific standards, as toxic waste. The North’s peoples thus face the awful dilemma of wondering whether they should abandon the hunting and fishing practices that have nourished them for generations—and, if they do, what new forms of subsistence could ever emerge to take their place.

Other residents of the Arctic, of course, are not even able to contemplate such a switch. The North Pole’s bears, ringed seals, sea otters, narwhals, and other nonhuman predators also exhibit unprecedented toxin loads and a corresponding host of health problems. At high concentrations, PCBs and other organochlorines disrupt their host’s hormone system. It is likely that the osteoporosis, suppressed immune systems, pseudohyperplasticism, and other maladies that have increasingly been documented among polar animals represent a manifestation of their ongoing exposure to the contaminants filtering up to the Far North.

So as much as Subhankar Banerjee’s photos reveal an unfamiliar and austere physical landscape, they also open up a new and
discomforting intellectual terrain. Above all, the images invite us, the viewers, to think of ourselves—even those of us living thousands of miles from the Arctic—as fellow inhabitants of the Far North. Our knowledge of the Arctic ecosystem may be vastly impoverished, compared with that of the region’s indigenous peoples. Our claims over the Northlands may be tenuous in comparison to those of Native communities who have inhabited them for millennia. We may never even set foot in the landscapes depicted here. Yet how distant can the Arctic be when its resources sustain us? When the tissues and immune systems of the animals dwelling in the North—and of the indigenous hunters who consume them—are burdened with fearful quantities of toxins from our industrial society?

Almost a century ago, John Muir observed that “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” Muir’s statement is often interpreted as anticipating the modern science of ecology, with its emphasis on capturing the multistranded web of life. But it really underscores an even larger insight about “environmental” problems. As much as we might like to imagine otherwise—as much as our language itself invites a division of one topic from the next—the challenges of human existence cannot be discretely parceled out into environmental, social, or economic concerns; these facets all con verge and interconnect. The dilemmas that the inhabitants of the Far North face are rooted not only in the Pole’s peculiar ecology but also in the residents’ status as indigenous peoples, the prevailing pollution regime of the industrialized world, geopolitical concerns over energy and national security, the exigencies of a growing world population, and many other similar concerns.

If such issues were to be distilled down to a single category, it would ultimately be not society or economics or ecology but, rather, ethics. We are in the process of creating a planet in which some of us extract scarce resources of great value from the Arctic yet offer its inhabitants little in return except for species loss, altered climate, and
toxic waste. No doubt few among us would find such a state of affairs acceptable if the roles were reversed—and yet we nonetheless tolerate this scenario in its present form. It ought to be enough to ask ourselves what our moral responsibility toward the Gwich’in, Inupiat, Yupik, Athabaskan, Yukaghir, Even, and other native inhabitants of the top of the world is as fellow human beings. But if it is not, we might do well to ponder the fact that, as Bunrejer’s images remind us, the Arctic, despite its name, is not as distant as the stars, and its inhabitants do not dwell in a world geographically or chronologically separate from our own. Whatever happens in the Arctic will eventually happen—indeed, has already begun to happen—to us all.

Notes
1 For more on Catlin’s vision of Native Americans as a “doomed” and “dying race,” see Patricia Nelson Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 40–46.
4 The “Arctic paradox” is explored at length in Maria Camp, Silent Snow: The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic (New York: Grove Press, 2005); her research underlies this paragraph and the two below it. Rachel Carson had a chapter entitled “Hunt of Death” in Silent Spring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
5 John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierra (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 110.

About the author
The Yukaghir people of Nenetsia in the Verkhoyansk region (upper Kolyma River area) of Siberia primarily depend on subsistence hunting and fishing. The Yukaghir culture. Decreased abundance and local and global extinctions of Arctic-adapted fish species are projected for this century. Southern migrations are projected to shift northward, competing with northern species for resources. The broad white- tailed jackal, which has a very diverse diet, is particularly vul- nerable to displacement as they are wholly or primarily northern species. As water temperatures rise, spawning areas of cold-water species extend further northward, and are likely to diminish. As continental-scale species are projected to shift northward, they may introduce parasites and diseases to new areas which are not adapted to the diseases. The climatic changes and their impacts on this herd are not adapted to the increasing climate. The implications of these changes for Arctic vegetation are likely to be significant northward, reducing the area of tundra and increasing the area of wasteland. For these reasons, Arctic climate change is a very important issue.
Subhankar Banerjee is an artist, educator, and activist. He uses his photography to raise awareness about issues that threaten the health and well-being of our planet. Since late 2000 he has focused all his efforts on indigenous human rights and land-conservation issues in the Arctic. His photographic work has been instrumental in the ongoing conservation efforts of the ecologically and culturally significant areas of the American Arctic, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Teshekpuk Lake wetlands, Utukok River uplands, and the Boreal and Chukchi seas. He works closely with the Gwich’in and Inupiat indigenous communities of Alaska and the Canadian Yukon and, most recently, with the Yuktahge and the Even indigenous communities of Siberia. His Arctic photography has been exhibited in nearly forty one-person and group exhibitions in the United States and Europe, including at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. In 2009 Banerjee’s work will be exhibited in the group exhibition IMPACT: Living in the Age of Climate Change, which will open in Copenhagen at the Statens Museum for Kunst and at Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, and will travel to Iceland, Norway, and Sweden through 2010. Banerjee has given over fifty lectures, including presentations at the United Nations and at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia universities. He received an inaugural Green Leaf Artist Award from the United Nations Environment Programme and an inaugural Cultural Freedom Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation. Banerjee serves on the advisory board of the Blue Earth Alliance and has been a visiting scholar at the College of Humanities at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and a visiting artist at F.A.R. (Future Arts Research) at Arizona State University in Phoenix. Banerjee and his wife, Nora, live in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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