

LAND AS HOME

A PORTRAIT OF THE CIRCUMPOLAR ARCTIC IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING PLANET

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April 2007, Santa Fe, New Mexico

“We need, in short, a history that regards humans and nature not as two distinct entities but as interlocking parts of a single, dynamic whole.”

Professor Karl Jacoby

Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation
University of California Press, 2001

Little more than six years ago when I started planning for my photography in the Arctic, my main motivation was to go to a place untrammelled by tourism or industry, a place untouched by man, pristine wilderness, so called *The Last Frontier*. Today when I think about the Arctic, my mind is filled with contradictions and conflicts, joy and sorrow are dancing in my mind in a deep embrace. I have been struggling to figure out how do I frame the American Arctic in the American mind. I no longer see the Arctic as *The Last Frontier*, I see the Arctic as the most connected land on the planet. I see the Arctic as a mirror on which our human cultures are reflected with clarity. To study the American culture, all one has to do perhaps, is study the American Arctic very deeply.

Nobel Laureate novelist J. M. Coetzee wrote in his essay, *The Picturesque, the Sublime, and the South African Landscape*¹ –

“The wilds, ‘the wilderness’, are resonant words in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In one sense, the wilderness is a world where the law of nature reigns, a world over which the first act of culture, Adam’s act of naming, has not been performed. The origins of this conception of the wilderness lie in pre-Israelite demonology, where the wilderness (including the ocean) was a realm over which God’s sway did not extend. But a second sense of the wilderness grew up in Judaeo-Christian theology: the wilderness as a place of safe retreat into contemplation and purification, a place where the true ground of one’s being could be rediscovered, even as a place as yet incorrupt in a fallen world. Both of these potentially conflicting conceptions of the wilderness have played a part in the history of South Africa.”

As we look into the history of the land debate in the American Arctic – both of these conflicting conceptions continue to play a critical role. The pro-development proponents frame the Arctic in terms of a god forsaken land, empty, ugly, wasteland... so we ought to exploit it for what its worth – oil, coal and natural gas. On the other hand the environmentalists of the dominant culture continue to frame the Arctic as a place untouched by man, a place for spiritual retreat, romantic nostalgia of land lost elsewhere. Unfortunately both these notions reinforce one another and frame the Arctic as a place unconnected with the contradictions and complications of our human society².

Romans called the Arctic *Terra Incognita*, the unknown land. Today Arctic perhaps has become the most connected land on the planet, through celebratory and tragic manifestations. Hundreds of millions of birds migrate from all continents, thousands of miles away, to the Arctic each Spring to nest and rear their young, a planetary celebration of epic scale that connect the Arctic perhaps to every land on the planet³. On the other hand, resource wars (oil, natural gas, and coal extraction), global warming, and toxic migration have connected the Arctic to the lives of people in far away lands in a rather tragic manner.

I hope to frame the American Arctic, neither as a god-forsaken wasteland, nor as a pristine wilderness, untouched by man, but as a real place, a land that embodies the contradictions and complications of our human society. My indigenous friends of the North at times talk about the land, “*it’s just home. To us, it’s home*”⁴ and that is all. I will frame the Arctic not from aesthetic or intellectual considerations but as *home* that supports communities of our species as well as many other species we share this planet with.

BLOOD IN MY MEAT

When I was growing up as a child in India, my father used (he still does the same at age 72) to go every morning to the local market to get vegetables, fish and other groceries. We could afford meat only once a week. I used to go with him often, even though I used to be horrified when the chicken would be butchered right in front of me, “break the neck first, the rest is easy” I was told, or I would find it grisly looking at the skinned goat hanging in front of me – blood in my meat. I came to the United States and felt relieved for the first time in my life, I could go to the grocery stores and buy my chicken or beef or lamb neatly packaged in styrofoam covered with plastic, no blood and I never had to know where it came from. Years passed, my friends started telling me, “chickens are fed antibiotics”, “chickens are fed their own waste” and so on... I got a job in Seattle and escaped all that by buying my grocery at Whole Foods Market – organic meat, no blood in my meat and I still do not need to know where it came from. I saw valet parking outside of Whole Foods Market in Bellevue and I knew my meat was safe.

I knew the bison were killed off from the American plains and the Native Americans now primarily ate flour and sugar and store bought meat, which many a times they do not know where it came from. I did not know there are still *People of the Deer* and *Hunters of the Northern Ice*, whole cultures still existing in North America whose primary food source is the land. I went to the Arctic – killing, butchering and eating of large animals; caribou, moose, sheep, whale; I saw where the food came from and I again saw blood in my meat. My dear friend and renowned Gwich’in activist Sarah James said, “We are the ones who have everything to loose. Maybe there are too few of us to matter. Maybe people think Indians are not important enough to consider in making their energy decisions. But it’s my people who are threatened by this development. We are the ones who have everything to loose. We are the caribou people. Caribou are not just what we eat; they are who we are. They are in our stories and songs and the whole way we see the world. Caribou are our life. Without caribou we wouldn’t exist.” Indigenous peoples all across the American Arctic feel seriously threatened by proposals to open up the entire Arctic land and sea to oil development and more recently coal development. The situation brings to mind University of Chicago Professor Jonathan Lear’s book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*⁵. The book starts with what Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation said, “When the

buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.”

Recently I realized that the *face* of the Native Americans has disappeared from the American consciousness as well as the American imagination. African Americans, as well as Latino and even Asian communities have established their presence in the dominant culture, while the *people of the land* continue to retreat from our imagination. I am not interested in a romantic people of the north, I am interested in people of the north just as they are with all the joy and struggle – traditional and modern ways of living coexisting in a delicate balance.

After years of spending time with my indigenous friends from the north both in the field in fifty below zero going sheep hunting or cold rainy fall days upriver for caribou hunting or wearing good clothes to visit Senators in the United States Capitol, I have only finally began to photograph the relationships the Gwich'in have with caribou and the land and the Inupiat have with the whales and the sea. However, as an outsider I will never be able to feel how the Gwich'in feel about onshore oil development or how the Inupiat feel about offshore oil development.

I have become deeply interested in the topic of our disconnection with food - where does our food come from? To borrow the terminologies introduced by Columbia University Professor Richard W. Bulliet in his book, *Hunters, Herders and Hamburgers*⁶, I realize I was born and grew up in a domestic society (India), have been living my adult life in a post-domestic society (lower forty-eight states of the United States) and for the past six years have been spending time in a primarily pre-domestic society (American Arctic). I am trying to understand and create a visual culture of these experiences as it relates to my own life and to society at large.

I have become deeply interested in the topic of our disconnection to nature – our children have gotten connected to each other across the planet more than ever before through the Internet and television, but have they lost all connections with the birds in their back yard? Painfully I read Rabindra Nath Tagore's Gitanjali, nobel-laureate poet-philosopher from my birthplace – *On the seashore of endless worlds the children meet with shouts and dances...*

My ongoing cultural work is deeply influenced by the work of mid-nineteenth century French painter Jean-François Millet and contemporary photographer Nan Goldin. Both artists deal with *Life* with intense engagement.

FROM KEROSENE TO CARS

When I was growing up as a child in India, often I used to stand in long lines to buy kerosene, that my mother would use to cook with in kerosene-stove or light up the kerosene-lanterns, as there would be frequent power outages. If I were late getting to the line, I would have to buy kerosene in the black market at a higher price. Natural gas powered stoves came only a few years before I left India to come to America. In America I never had to stand in long lines to get my cooking fuel or know where the source of any of the energy I was using came from. My life was easier and I was pleased. My financial status improved as I received several University fellowships and then well paying jobs. I bought nice cars – used Mercedes Benz, followed by new Jeep Cherokee, followed by new Jeep Grand Cherokee

Limited Edition. My American dream was coming true... Many years later I started learning about fossil fuels, oil and coal, that drive our energy infrastructure and its impact on our planet.

Petroleum and coal are the two key contributors to global warming. In addition, coal burning power plants and oil refineries in the United States and around the world are among the key contributors to toxins, known as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POP) that are ending up in the Arctic ecology at an alarming scale. These toxic compounds bio-accumulate and bio-magnify in the animals – from polar bears, fish, seals, and whales, to women’s breast milk, impacting women, children and the unborn. Los Angeles Times journalist Marla Cone in her extensively researched book, *Silent Snow: Slow Poisoning of the Arctic*⁷, details how the breast milk of high Arctic women in Greenland and northern Canada have become contaminated to the point of being considered hazardous waste, and how the Arctic, traditionally thought of as the last great unspoiled territory on Earth, has become home to some of the most contaminated people and animals on the planet. Barbara Freese, a former assistant attorney general for the state of Minnesota, in her extensive book, *Coal: A Human History*⁸ details the impact of coal on human societies. In the chapter, Invisible Power, she details, while from a consumer’s perspectives coal may not be a significant energy source, the nation (United States) burns more of it than ever before.

As I contemplate about oil and coal to drive our energy future, as many in America tend to believe, versus clean energy some in place, some perhaps coming soon, I think about T. S. Elliot’s Little Gidding,

*“What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning
The end is where we start from.”*

I have become deeply interested in the topic of our disconnection to energy - where does our energy come from? And what are its impacts on our planet?

BEAUTY OF LAND

When I first arrived in the American Arctic it was a very overwhelming and disorienting experience for me. Beauty was not in my mind, Survival was. I saw the land as grand yet simple and harsh, a place where existence of life, including wild flora and fauna and native cultures, is modest and fragile. Employing simple compositions, mostly subdued light of cloudy days, I wanted to portray the duality of grandness and simplicity. It is the simplicity that I was irresistibly drawn to. Many who visit this Arctic land do not find it to be beautiful in a classical sense. Gail Norton, former Secretary of Interior, during a Congressional testimony famously described the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain as an object of conceptual art, she called it, “a flat white nothingness.” Ted Stevens, senior Senator from Alaska, also juxtaposed words to create images, he called the Arctic Refuge coastal plain, “It’s empty. It’s ugly” and “It is a barren wasteland, frozen wasteland.” Frank Murkowski, former Senator and former Governor of Alaska, called it, “It’s flat, it’s unattractive.” Am I searching for Truth? No there is no one truth – perhaps what I am searching for in my work is community – communities of our species and other species that inhabit the land.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I have been working closely with writer Peter Matthiessen, my dear friend, to bring the story of the Arctic to public attention, perhaps with the hope that the yellow wagtail will still visit the Arctic from my birth land of India or the Gwich'in will know pregnant caribou will go where they have gone for thousands of years⁹ and not meet pipeline, gravel pads. I hope my work will inspire American citizenry to help preserve some of the ecologically and culturally significant areas of the American Arctic from oil, gas and coal development – Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Teshekpuk Lake Wetlands, Utukok River Uplands, Kasegaluk Lagoon, Beaufort and the Chukchi Seas... and I hope the work will also inspire a debate about many of the disconnections and its devastating impact on our planet we have accepted as normal part of progress. As I visit India today, I see a progress that is frightening, cities are getting polluted beyond description, perhaps the rivers (lifeblood of India) are not too far behind... while at the same time level of consumerism is rising at an unprecedented rate. *American Consumerism* has successfully been globalized to the East. Question remains, if the planet and some of its many species have to survive including our own, who will globalize the idea of sustainable living – West to the East? or East to the West?

Edward Steichen, photographer and former Director of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, once said, "The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each man to himself." This is a tall order, but I think we also need to explain and establish our relationship to the environment and all other species we share this planet with. In my mind, two areas that that the discipline has largely ignored and continue to do so are, thoughtful portrayal of people of the land, the Native Americans and portrayal of our relationship to other species. These two areas have become the primary focus of my work within the larger theme of *Land As Home*, that supports communities of our species and other species we share this planet with.

Land As Home is not a new philosophy. As German poet-philosopher Goethe once said, "The Truth was known already, long ago."

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