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—IAN FRAZIER, *The New York Review of Books*

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COVER PHOTO Subhankar Banerjee. Pregnant female caribou migrating over the frozen Coleen River on their way to the coastal plain for calving, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, early May 2002.

\$23.95 US / \$23.95 CAN

ISBN: 978-1-60980-496-1



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EDITED BY
**Subhankar
Banerjee**

**arctic
voices**
resistance
at the
tipping point

**"A marvelous work, a marvelous land—
hear the voices that call us to save these
jewels of our planet."**

—JAMES E. HANSEN, former director of
NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies
and author of *Storms of My Grandchildren*

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SEVEN STORIES PRESS
New York

From Kolkata To Kaktovik En Route To Arctic Voices

Something Like An Introduction

SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

“I learned by living out in the wilderness.”

—Sarah James¹

“When we think of wars in our times, our minds turn to Iraq and Afghanistan. But the bigger war is the war against the planet. This war has its roots in an economy that fails to respect ecological and ethical limits—limits to inequality, limits to injustice, limits to greed and economic concentration.”

—Vandana Shiva²

1.

How do we talk about the Arctic?

How do we think about the Arctic?

How do we relate to the Arctic?

And, why talk about the Arctic, now? These are some questions we explore, through stories, in this volume.

Along the way, we talk about big animals, big migrations, big hunting, big

land, big rivers, big ocean, and big sky; and also about big coal, big oil, big warming, big spills, big pollution, big legislations, and big lawsuits.

And we talk about small things, too—small animals, small migrations, small hunting, small rivers, small warming, small spills, small pollution, small legislations, and small lawsuits.

2.

In the Arctic, impacts of climate change can be seen and/or experienced everywhere.³ Indeed, the Arctic is warming at a rate double that of the rest of the planet. When I was in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 2001–02, there was much talk in the communities about oil development, but very little about climate change. But when I returned north to Alaska/Siberia/Yukon in 2005, 2006, and 2007, almost everyone was talking about the effects of climate change on animals and on the communities. I had witnessed things that I had not seen before—an exposed coffin from melting of permafrost (plate 15); a drunken forest in Siberia, trees leaning at odd angles from softening of the permafrost; and the skeleton of caribou that had died from starvation due to winter icing on the tundra. I also had heard stories of communities that needed to relocate because of coastal erosion (see Christine Shearer's essay in this volume); the drying up of lakes that is affecting subsistence fishing; and deeper snow or taller and bushier willows making the migration much harder for the caribou, for examples. We tell many stories of climate change in *Arctic Voices*.

At the same time, I am realizing that there is an Arctic paradox: that oil, coal, and gas, the burning of which has caused unprecedented Arctic warming, are the same nonrenewable resources whose extraction projects are expanding rapidly in the Arctic—terrestrial and offshore.

These days there is talk about ecological restoration, including ecological corridors—to connect up landscapes that we fragmented all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from Yellowstone to Yukon; from Baja to Bering. In the Arctic, however, we are going in reverse—severely fragmenting the ecocultural space with great speed. There are resource wars⁴—for oil, gas, coal, and minerals—everywhere in the Arctic—from Alaska to Siberia, with Nunavut and Greenland along the way. In Arctic Alaska, these wars have intensified since I first arrived there more than a decade ago. I'd also note here that Arctic Alaska resides in the most biologically diverse quadrant of



In the winter of 2006 about a thousand caribou from the Teshekpuk Lake herd came over to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a 240-mile journey. Kaktovik resident Robert Thompson said that this never happened before. He speculated that the tundra froze, and the caribou came looking for food. The tundra also froze in the Arctic Refuge, resulting in the deaths of several hundred animals that winter. The skeleton shown is one those dead caribou that was photographed the following summer. Due to unprecedented Arctic warming there is thawing of snow and rain during the autumn and winter months, followed by freezing that produces solid ice on the tundra. Hoofed animals, including caribou/reindeer and musk ox are able to dig through snow to find food, but are not able to break through ice—they are starving and dying. In many parts of the arctic these freeze-thaw cycles have contributed to significant population decline for these animals. (Photograph by Subhankar Banerjee, August 2006.)

the circumpolar north. There is a great irony in the fact that oil sits underneath caribou calving grounds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; oil sits underneath bird nesting and molting grounds in the Teshekpuk Lake Wetland; coal sits underneath caribou calving grounds in the Utukok River Upland; oil sits underneath the migration route of bowhead whales in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas.

It's worth taking a look at how much coal and oil is up there in Arctic Alaska. By current estimates, there is some 30 billion barrels of oil in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. Let's put that number in perspective. In the US, each year we consume a little over 7.5 billion barrels of oil—30 billion barrels only amounts to four years of US consumption. Not that long, right? But that's not how it works—with oil coming from elsewhere and also coal and gas contributing to the energy needs, we could drill in the Arctic Ocean for the next thirty years. And, oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? Best estimates go from about 7 billion to 16 billion barrels, meaning one to two and a half years of US annual oil consumption. Again, with help from other energy sources, oil companies could potentially drill in the Arctic Refuge for several decades. Then, there is oil in the Teshekpuk Lake Wetland. . . . Now, consider coal. Nick Jans points out in his essay that there is a possible maximum of 4 trillion tons of bituminous coal in the Western Arctic of Alaska, which is nearly 9 percent of world's known coal reserves. The annual coal consumption in the US is about 1 billion tons, which means at the current rate of consumption we could potentially burn the Arctic coal for the next four thousand years. No, that's not a typo—four thousand years of coal!

If we take the approach of business as usual, we will continue to extract fossil fuels—from the Arctic and elsewhere in North America—and then burn it, at least through the end of this century, and perhaps beyond. Burning of fossil fuels has brought us to the Anthropocene! Now we must stand up and stop any maniacal plan that would set us on a path to another one hundred years of fossil fuel culture. A counterargument to this would be: China and India will continue to burn coal and oil, so why should we stop burning fossil fuels in the US? While this ping-pong argument-counterargument is beyond the scope of this anthology, we must imagine a planet where our primary sources of energy are not coal-oil-gas, but clean sustainable energies that are healthy for all life on earth, including humans.

The first color plate in this volume includes photographs that I took in the Arctic—Alaska, Siberia, and Yukon in Canada, during 2000–07. I use photography to raise awareness about the Arctic,^{5,6} but I never would have

imagined that my photographs would be used on the US Senate floor to argue against oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—yet that is exactly what Senator Barbara Boxer did and won a crucial vote on March 19, 2003. Nor did I imagine that my exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution would be censored⁷ and become the topic of a Senate hearing at which Senator Richard Durbin would support my work, or that later a Senate investigation would follow. But when then-Senator Ted Stevens during a May 2003 Senate debate said that President Jimmy Carter and I were giving “misinformation to the American public”—effectively calling us liars—then I did fear possible deportation, and realized that if I were to have a voice in conservation in the US, I must become a US citizen. So I did.

3.

The British poet Tom Lowenstein has spent much time, since 1973, in Tikigaaq (aka Point Hope), in Arctic Alaska, to learn about Inupiat spirituality of a bygone era. He writes in his remarkable poetry prose book, *Ancient Land, Sacred Whale: Inuit Hunt and Its Rituals*, what old Tikigaaq people said: “Never tell one story. Always add a second. That way, the first one won't fall over.”⁸ In *Arctic Voices* we tell nearly forty stories in all, so that these voices will stand tall, together—as resistance against destruction.

You might wonder how someone with an Indian-sounding name like mine, someone from the south, comes to concern himself with all things northern. Here is how it all began. In 2000 I left my career as a scientist and was wandering aimlessly from Florida to British Columbia looking for inspiration for a photography project; I had found none when, in late October, I arrived with two friends in Churchill in subarctic Canada—a popular tourist destination. There, polar bears gather along the Hudson Bay and wait on land for the bay to freeze over. Once on ice, they hunt and eat. I took a photo of one bear eating another—not normal, I was told, but no one in town said the Arctic was getting warmer (plate 1). I now read that the bears of Hudson Bay will disappear within a few decades at best, or within a decade at worst, because these days ice is forming later in autumn and melting sooner in spring, leaving the bears longer on land, where they must wait and starve.⁹ This gruesome photograph of death produced in me a desire to live in the wild, with the polar bears.

After nearly five months of research, and discussions with biologists, and with

Iñupiat hunter and conservationist Robert Thompson, I arrived on March 19, 2001, in Robert's village, Kaktovik, along the Beaufort Sea coast, in Arctic Alaska. It was 40 below zero. Robert said, "Let's take a walk on the Arctic Ocean." We did. I was dressed properly and felt fine. Later that evening we traveled by snowmobiles to Arey Island—a thin stretch of Barrier Island that sits in between the Beaufort Sea and the Hulahula-Okpilak Delta. The wind picked up and started blowing at fifty, sixty miles per hour; wind chill dropped to minus 90 degrees Fahrenheit; my camera froze; I panicked and began to wonder, *What the heck am I doing here? I grew up in Kolkata, India. I have gotten myself in over my head. I won't survive this land. Forget about photography. I must return to Seattle.* I barely made it back to Kaktovik—the hardest six-mile journey I ever took. Robert and his wife, Jane, reassured me, "Things will get much worse, but you'll survive." Things did get much worse, indeed. The following year, Robert and I experienced a blizzard during March and April while camping in the Canning River Delta on the western edge of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We had four calm days out of the twenty-nine that we camped there. Other times, a blizzard blew steady at sixty-five miles per hour with temperatures around minus 40 degrees that brought the windchill down to around minus 110 degrees (plate 2). There, we observed a polar bear mother with two cubs play outside the den (plate 3). This isn't an adventure story, as you might think, but instead, as you'll see later in this volume, we ask such questions as, "Can you imagine the oil companies cleaning up a BP-like spill in the frozen Arctic Ocean in such a blizzard?"

During 2001–02, I ended up spending fourteen months in the Arctic Refuge, in all seasons, with Robert Thompson or with Charlie Swaney and Jimmy John from Arctic Village—a Gwich'in community of about 150 residents on the south side of the Brooks Range. Much of that time was during winter, which up there is nearly nine months of the year. I witnessed musk oxen with newborn calf migrating over snow-covered tundra; an American dipper finding food in 40 below zero in the open water of a creek along the Hulahula River; a few caribou digging through snow for food; moose chomping on willow; porcupine chomping on willow, too; wolves and wolverines coming and going leaving their tracks behind; ptarmigans flocking and their talk that sounded like "go back, go back" outside our tent when I was trying to sleep—a sample of life, during the harsh winter months.

Now consider how politicians talk about all this. In March 2002, then-Senator Frank Murkowski held up a flat white poster board on the US Senate floor and said of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, "This is a picture of ANWR as it exists for about nine months of the year. This is what it looks

like. It's flat, it's unattractive; don't be misinformed." Secretary of the Interior Gail A. Norton, during a March 12, 2003, congressional testimony, famously described the Arctic Refuge coastal plain as an object of conceptual art—"a flat white nothingness." In an October 2, 2005, front-page story in the *Chicago Tribune*, then-Senator Ted Stevens was quoted saying, "And they're [the American public] not susceptible anymore to misrepresentations that ANWR is some kind of pristine wilderness. It's empty. It's ugly." Then, on November 5, 2005, Senator Stevens said on *PBS News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, "This is the area in wintertime. And I defy anyone to say that that is a beautiful place that has to be preserved for the future. It is a barren wasteland, frozen wasteland."

Arctic Voices paints a very different picture—we present the Arctic neither as a frozen wasteland nor as a pristine wilderness, but, instead, simply as *home* for numerous species—animal and human—who either visit for a while or live there year-round.

Over the past decade, many people have asked me, "Why should I care about the Arctic?" While I still may not have the whole answer, I've been putting together bits and pieces in response to that question. It's terra incognita; it's the *far North* that we may never get to see, only imagine; it's a place of *snow and ice* and *ice and snow* where icebergs crash and polar bears roam—where we would get hypothermia; it's where Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer fly around—something only a Siberian shaman used to be able to do. . . . These are the things that dreams are made of.

Indeed, around the world, the Arctic is thought to be a remote place disconnected from our daily lives. On the contrary, hundreds of millions of birds migrate to the Arctic each spring from every corner of the earth—including Yellow Wagtail from Kolkata—for nesting and rearing their young, and resting—a planetary celebration of global interconnectedness. On the other hand, caribou, whale, and fish migrate hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles, connecting numerous indigenous communities through subsistence food harvests—local and regional interconnectedness. However, deadly industrial toxins migrate to the Arctic from every part of our planet, making animals and humans of the Arctic among the most contaminated inhabitants of the earth. The breast milk of high Arctic women in some parts of Greenland and northern Canada is scientifically regarded as being as toxic as hazardous waste—a planetary tragedy of global interconnectedness. Marla Cone tells this tragic story in this volume—she calls it "Arctic Paradox." And Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak tells a story of declining public

health in her community caused by pollution from the nearby oil fields of Prudhoe Bay.

There is another kind of Arctic pollution that a photo helped me to understand. Upon seeing one of my photographs people have asked, “Are these colors real or manipulated?” The photograph in question is of a group of musk oxen on the Canning River Delta that I had taken in early May 2001, in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (plate 4). The temperature was about minus 35 degrees Fahrenheit; deep haze severely restricted visibility, as I lay flat on my belly with the lens touching snow to make the animals visible, barely. Indeed, I began to wonder how could there be such vibrant colors in an environment that is supposed to be free of pollution? I remember from my childhood many colorful sunrises and sunsets in Kolkata, where pollution in the air was all around us; it still is. There had to be particulates in the air to create those deep red-orange colors in the musk oxen photo, and I surmised that the source of the pollution was perhaps the nearby oil fields of Prudhoe Bay (plate 36), but on probing further I also came to know about the Arctic haze that a handful of scientists have been studying. I don’t know if what you see in the photo is indeed Arctic haze or pollution from Prudhoe Bay, but, nevertheless, a fact sheet states:

Arctic haze is a thin, persistent, brown haze that causes limited visibility on the horizons of what had been previously very clear Arctic skies. It is most visible in the early spring and can be seen from northern Greenland, the Arctic coasts of Canada and Alaska and occasionally in eastern Siberia. . . . The Arctic haze that accumulates by late winter, trapped under the dome of cold air, is as large as the continent of Africa! . . . Arctic haze is made up of a complex mix of microscopic particles and acidifying pollutants such as soot, hydrocarbons, and sulfates. Up to 90% of Arctic haze consists of sulfates. . . . We can find out where Arctic haze comes from because the chemicals that make up Arctic haze are like a footprint that can lead us back to their sources. The main sources of the sulfates found in Arctic haze are things like power plants, pulp and paper mills and oil and gas activities. The other pollutants found in Arctic haze can be traced to industries such as vehicles, shipping and agriculture. The places in which these industries occur and where these pollutants thus originate are in the heavily populated and industrialized areas of Europe, North America and Asia.¹⁰

The question is: What is the long-term stress acidification from Arctic haze might put on the fragile Arctic ecology? While we don’t know *this* yet, the haze might also be contributing to the rapid polar melt:

Industry, transportation, and biomass burning in North America, Europe, and Asia are emitting trace gases and tiny airborne particles that are polluting the polar region, forming an “Arctic Haze” every winter and spring. Scientists suspect these pollutants are speeding up the polar melt.¹¹

As you can see, the Arctic is far from being a remote place disconnected from our daily lives. Instead, we’re all connected to the northern landscape. In this volume, we tell many stories of local, regional, and global interconnectedness—both celebratory and tragic.

During 2001–02, I visited Washington, DC several times for various activist campaigns that were made possible by Alaska Wilderness League. During one of those visits, upon seeing one of my photographs, one young environmental activist asked me, with honest bewilderment, “How could there be a hunting camp in a pristine wilderness?” The “wilderness” in question was the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and the “hunting camp” was Charlie Swaney’s hunting camp along the East Fork of the Chandalar River, in the Arctic Refuge, near Arctic Village. That day, I didn’t have an answer, but it is that question, more than anything else that prompted me to learn about the history of American conservation.

The reason the young environmentalist asked that question, I think, was because American environmental writing has always glorified, and continues to glorify, the formative years of the conservation movement, when the ideal that was expressed was one that separated man from nature—the second half of the nineteenth century; it celebrates the movement’s founders as prophets and does not take a critical look at what actually happened. The massive 2008 Library of America anthology, *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, which environmental journalist and climate change activist Bill McKibben edited (and to which I contributed my Arctic photographs), unfortunately perpetuates that point of view. Fortunately though, recent scholarship is changing American environmental history by shedding light on the dark side of conservation, which I will share with you as crucial backdrop for the stories presented in this volume. In his groundbreaking book, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, historian Karl Jacoby points out that, in the nineteenth century, when the conservation movement began to take shape, in short order, subsistence hunters—Native Americans and rural whites—were labeled “poachers,” inhabitants as “squatters,” and subsistence gatherers as “thieves,” and those who would set fires for ecocultural reasons

as “arsonists,” if their homelands were deemed worthy of conservation, effectively criminalizing the traditional activities of the inhabitants.¹² One of the case studies in the book illuminates the conflict of conservation and indigenous habitation during the formation of the Yellowstone National Park—the first National Park that was established in 1872. Jacoby points out that five tribes—the Crow, Bannock, Shoshone, Blackfeet, and Nez Perce—actively used the Yellowstone Plateau for subsistence hunting and gathering, and that “Indian trails . . . were everywhere.” Yet,

. . . park backers nonetheless persisted in describing the region as existing in “primeval solitude,” filled with countless locations that “have never been trodden by human footsteps.” . . . Drawing upon a familiar vocabulary of discovery and exploration, the authors of the early accounts of the Yellowstone region literally wrote Indians out of the landscape, erasing Indian claims by reclassifying inhabited territory as empty wilderness. . . . Neither the Bannock, the Shoshone, the Crow, nor the Blackfeet practiced agriculture, and seeing no landscapes in the Yellowstone region that had been “improved” through farming, many Euro-Americans conveniently concluded that the area’s Indian’s were rootless beings, with no ties to the lands they roamed across. What this ideology of dispossession overlooked was that Indian migratory patterns were not a series of random wanderings but rather a complex set of annual cycles, closely tied to seasonal variations in game and other wild foodstuffs.

Jacoby continues:

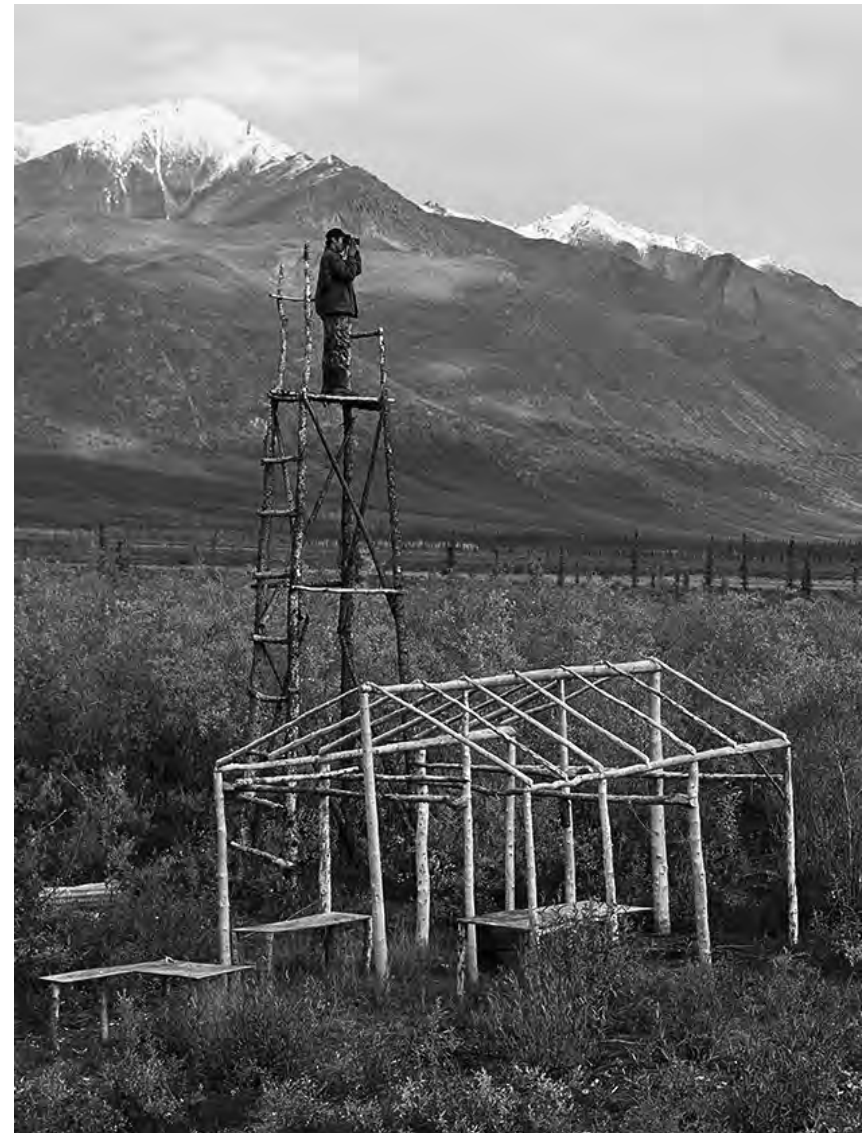
The vision of nature that the park’s backers sought to enact—nature as pre-human wilderness—was predicated on eliminating any Indian presence from the Yellowstone landscape. By 1895, a congressional report on Yellowstone could speak of the park as serving three central functions:

First. As a region containing some of the chief natural wonders of the world.

Second. As the largest of the forest reserves.

Third. As the greatest existing game preserve.

You might be surprised to know that the success of conservation with those clearly articulated central functions was made possible by militarization—the US military ran Yellowstone National Park for thirty-two years—to protect the land and tourists from the people of the land. Jacoby writes that militarization of public lands was met with great enthusiasm:



Charlie Swaney is scanning for animals from his camp along the East Fork of Chandalar River, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, near Arctic Village. (Photograph by Subhankar Banerjee, August 2002.)

John Muir for instance rejoiced at seeing Yellowstone “efficiently managed and guarded by small troops of United States cavalry.” “Uncle Sam’s soldiers,” the Sierra Club president enthused, are “the most effective forest police.” “I will not say that this Rocky Mountain region is the only part of the country where this lesson of obedience to law is badly needed,” agreed Charles Dudley Warner in *Harper’s* magazine, “but it is one of them.” . . . Sharing Muir’s and Warner’s enthusiasm for “military discipline,” many conservationists soon suggested that much of rest of the federal government’s conservation program be delegated to the military.

George Parkins Marsh had published his influential conservation manifesto *Man and Nature* in 1864; Yosemite was protected by a land grant signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 (later to be named National Park in 1890) that laid the foundation for Yellowstone National Park to be established in 1872, and the idea to remove Native Americans and rural whites from conservation-worthy land took shape. But what environmental historians perhaps have overlooked is that during the same decade American artists had imagined, or at a minimum presented, wilderness differently than how conservationists had envisioned it. In particular, I’d point to two paintings, both by Hudson River School painter Sanford Robinson Gifford: *In the Wilderness*, circa 1860, in which we see a Native American family inhabiting a lakeshore in the foreground and (presumably) Mount Katahdin in the background; and *A Home in the Wilderness*, circa 1866, in which we see a small home in a wooded land along a lakeshore with Mount Hayes in the background. The idea to put small human figures in large landscapes with the intent to show human habitation and labor preceded Gifford—John Constable¹³ in England and Barbizon School painter and conservationist Théodore Rousseau¹⁴ in France. While rooted in the tradition of the sublime, I’d suggest that Gifford’s two paintings—*In the Wilderness* and *A Home in the Wilderness*—are also works of moral ecology.

As you can see, there were two roads for American wilderness in the 1860s—only one of them was taken and “that has made all the difference,” and that is why it is difficult for a young American environmentalist today to imagine a hunting camp in a wilderness.

Land conservation that excludes indigenous habitation continued through the rest of the nineteenth and all through the first half of the twentieth century and culminated successfully with the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act—considered a monumental achievement in conservation. Howard

Zahniser, one of the chief architects of the Act, proclaimed, “Man himself is a visitor who does not remain [in a wilderness].” This philosophy of exclusion is coming to a halt now, and is being reimagined—with critiques from scholars and resistance from indigenous inhabitants throughout the world. In his influential essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” historian William Cronon writes:

This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God’s natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like.¹⁵

What relevance does all this wilderness history have to the Arctic landscape today? If we ask a simple question, “What do you think of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?” we might potentially get the following answers. “It’s home. To us, it’s home,” says Robert Thompson. “It’s a beautiful landscape,” says the tourist. “It’s a pristine wilderness, untouched by man,” says the conservationist. “It’s a frozen wasteland,” says the politician. “It’s a nursery. This is where I was born,” would say a bear or a bird, or a caribou if it had a voice. They are all talking about the same piece of land. Additionally, from early ideas of terra incognita—as Romans once imagined the Arctic—to male white explorers’ fantasies discussed by Lisa Bloom in her book *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*,¹⁶ and to a present political landscape in which Native philosophies of habitation are more important than ever^{17,18}—the Arctic today contains all of these histories, including that of the wilderness.

In 2004, I did a joint event with Gwich’in Elder, cultural activist, and *Arctic Voices* contributor Sarah James at Harvard University (in conjunction with my exhibition *Seasons of Life and Land: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* at the Harvard Museum of Natural History).¹⁹ It was June and the dogwoods

were in full bloom; we walked around campus. She told me stories and said, “I learned by living out in the wilderness.” (She had said this before in other talks and testimonies.) I was intrigued by her use of the word *wilderness*, as how we talk about something is almost everything. She was referring to her childhood growing up on the land, with her family, along the Salmon River (also known as the Sheenjek River). Her father had a copy of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* that she had read. Several years later, in 2007, during a cold January morning, when I visited her home in Arctic Village, she showed me a hand-drawn map of the Sheenjek River Valley with various Gwich’in family camps marked, and lamented the fact that that particular history of Gwich’in habitation along the Sheenjek was wiped clean when the Arctic National Wildlife Range was established. On December 6, 1960, US Secretary of Interior Fred A. Seaton signed the Public Land Order 2214, establishing the Arctic National Wildlife Range for “the purpose of preserving unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values.”²⁰

Nowhere in this Public Land Order do we find names of the Gwich’in and Iñupiat communities inhabiting this northern region, having done so already for many millennia. Neither do we find names of the Crow, Bannock, Shoshone, Blackfeet, and Nez Perce—in the 1895 congressional report that articulated the central functions of the Yellowstone National Park.

I think Sarah’s statement, “I learned by living out in the wilderness,” simultaneously performs two remarkable things—complicates the wilderness discourse by injecting *justice* into the American wilderness philosophy; and points toward “what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like” in the twenty-first century.

However, habitation in the Arctic is now under great threat from rapid industrialization. To discuss a key topic of cultural survival, I’ll return to the late nineteenth century. Philosopher Jonathan Lear opens his fascinating book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, with what Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow Nation, said shortly before he died to Frank B. Linderman—a white man who “had come to Montana in 1885 as a teenager, and . . . became a trapper, hunter, and cowboy.” Linderman writes at the end of his book:

Plenty Coups refused to speak of his life after the passing of the buffalo, so that his story seems to have been broken off, leaving many years unaccounted for. “I have not told you half of what happened when I was young,” he said, when urged to go on. “I can think back and tell you much more of war and

horse-stealing. But 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. There was little singing anywhere. Besides,” he added sorrowfully, “you know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the buffalo went away.”²¹

Lear goes on to make philosophical inquiries into the statement, “After this nothing happened”—not about what Plenty Coups had meant (which none of us would know anyway), but about what he could have meant.

The people of the Gwich’in Nation fear that oil development in the calving ground of the Porcupine River caribou herd on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would destroy the herd and, subsequently, the Gwich’in culture. Through a poster that reads “Will the caribou go the way of the buffalo? Or will you save our Arctic way of life?” the Gwich’in Nation explicitly connected the fate of the buffalo and the plains Indians with the possible fate of the caribou and the Gwich’in. Sarah James writes in this volume, “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.” Her statement expresses similar concerns as Plenty Coups’s. Also, there is a key common ground in their strategies for survival—collaboration. Plenty Coups collaborated with the US government—an unlikely ally, for the survival of his people, even as their way of life was being destroyed and they had to accept a new way of life on the reservation. Lear calls this “Radical Hope.” Similarly, the Gwich’in collaborate with conservation groups—traditionally an unlikely ally, to help them fight for cultural survival. While Plenty Coups lamented the destruction of the way of life of the Crow people that he had witnessed, Sarah James, by contrast, is staking a claim on the future survival—“Without caribou we wouldn’t exist”—of the Gwich’in way of life as they know it now.

Today, indigenous communities of the Arctic have a voice and participate directly in the political process through their own indigenous human rights organizations—Gwich’in Steering Committee, REDOIL, and others—something that would have been unthinkable, say, five decades ago. And these organizations are working in close partnership with conservation organizations such as the Alaska Wilderness League, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, and others. Perhaps of greatest importance, *Arctic Voices* attempts to bridge the gap between the two expressions: “How could there be a hunting

camp in a pristine wilderness?” and “I learned by living out in the wilderness,” as conservation and indigenous human rights organizations come together to find common ground and build resistance movements against a common foe—industrial destruction of the Arctic land, life, and culture. The 1980 Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act signed by President Jimmy Carter protected more than 100 million acres of land and water in Alaska—the largest conservation act ever, anywhere, but it also protected subsistence hunting and fishing rights in those lands. It has been a long road since Yosemite and Yellowstone to get *here*, but questions continue to linger as we move toward conservation that includes habitation, for our time, in this century. In an earlier essay I wrote:

While both conservation and indigenous human rights organizations are imagining preservation of land for future generations, there is an inherent conflict in these two views. The Gwich'in want to insure that a hunter and his family would still be able to go out to the land to hunt caribou to bring back meat for the family, while the conservationist's view would be that a future generation of tourists would still be able to meet the caribou in the most primordial state. But, what if the tourist meets the hunter? What would they say to each other? The encounter between Native and tourist versions of conservation may be trumped should the political will of the US government prevail in developing the entire American Arctic for fossil fuel.²²

On seeing my photos of hunting/butchering during lectures and in exhibitions in the US and in Europe, audiences have expressed a feeling of unease. In fact, during the 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen, a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) representative told me, “I wish you had not shown these hunting photographs here in Copenhagen.” She was referring to Gwich'in caribou hunting photos that I had taken near Arctic Village, in January 2007 (plates 7 & 8). I wanted to understand the source of such anxiety and realized that I've lived in three different societies—*domestic* (India, for twenty-two years); *post-domestic* (continental US, for twenty-two years); and *pre-domestic* (Arctic, over the past decade)—that historian Richard Bulliet defined in his book, *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships*.²³

I used to be horrified when the chicken would be butchered right in front of me during my childhood in Kolkata. “Break the neck first; the rest is easy,” I was told. Looking at a skinned goat hanging, I thought, *blood in my meat*. I



Gwich'in Nation poster: “Will the caribou go the way of the buffalo? Or will you save our Arctic way of life?” (Courtesy Gwich'in Steering Committee, www.ourarcticrefuge.org)

came to the US and felt relieved that for the first time I could 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 later, I went to the Arctic where I experienced killing and butchering, and then I ate caribou, moose, sheep, and whale that came from the land and the sea. I saw where the food came from and I again saw blood in my meat.

Arctic Voices is deeply rooted in *land-as-home*—“land” that provides “home” and “food” to our species and to all the other species with whom we share this earth.

However, species are disappearing like autumn leaves off the trees. There is now an overwhelming realization that the health of our planet is in crisis. Scientists have suggested that the Holocene era in which human civilization flourished has come to an end, and that we are now living in the Anthropocene—a consequence of global climate change from massive accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from burning first coal, then oil and gas, since the beginning of the Industrial Age. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in his influential essay, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”:

Scholars writing on the current climate-change crisis are indeed saying something significantly different from what environmental historians have said so far. In unwittingly destroying the artificial but time-honored distinction between natural and human histories, climate scientists posit that the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she always has been. Humans now wield a geological force. As Oreskes puts it:

For centuries, scientists thought that earth processes were so large and powerful that nothing we could do could change them. This was a basic tenet of geological science: that human chronologies were insignificant compared with the vastness of geological time; that human activities were insignificant compared with the force of geological processes. And once they were. But no more. There are now so many of us cutting down so many trees and burning so many billions of tons of fuels that we have indeed become geological agents. We have changed the chemistry of our atmosphere, causing the sea level to rise, ice to melt, and climate to change. There is no reason to think otherwise.²⁴

Biological agents, geological agents—two different names with very different consequences.²⁵



Dead baby walrus on barrier island, along the Kasegaluk Lagoon and Chukchi Sea, near Point Lay.

(Photograph by Steven Kazlowski, 2011.)

“Tens of thousands of walruses have come ashore in northwest Alaska because the sea ice they normally rest on has melted. Scientists with two federal agencies are most concerned about the one-ton female walruses stampeding and crushing each other and their smaller calves near Point Lay, Alaska, on the Chukchi Sea. The federal government is in a year-long process to determine if walruses should be put on the endangered species list.” —Seth Borenstein, “Melting Sea Ice Forces Walruses Ashore in Alaska,” *Associated Press*, September 13, 2010.

4.

Each of these experiences over the years contributed to me becoming increasingly engaged with the Arctic—in the field and in the communities—and along the way I befriended writers, scientists, conservationists, and indigenous activists. I have also had the good fortune to accompany writer Peter Matthiessen on three separate trips to Arctic Alaska, in 2002, 2006, and 2007. I feel immense gratitude for all of the friendships that have contributed to this volume. And that is the story I wanted to share with you—why someone who grew up reading novelist-activist Mahasweta Devi in Kolkata keeps talking about all things northern.

As I was writing this introduction and completing the final draft of this book, the Occupy Movement was born and quickly went global—more than nine hundred cities total. Each morning I considered taking the train from Princeton, where I was a Director's Visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study, to Penn Station to join Occupy Wall Street. Instead, I had no choice but to work long hours to complete *Arctic Voices*. It seemed at the time that I was doing the lesser thing while the world was bursting out with infectious resistance: First came the Arab Spring—and dictators fell; then came Wisconsin—pizza got ordered from Cairo for Madison, a good story you might like to tell; then young climate justice activist Tim DeChristopher was put in jail for two years for disrupting a fast-track Bush-era oil lease sale; then came the Keystone XL pipeline protest, outside the White House—more than a thousand arrests; and finally came Occupy. All in just one year. I remained a spectator, working on a book.

Then again, putting together *Arctic Voices* made a certain kind of sense, inspired by all these big acts of resistance. The Arctic, after all, is big—it is the top of our earth, the ice cap, some call it, but it is so much more, and it's that so-much-more that this book is about.

The Arctic has become our planet's tipping point—climate change is wreaking havoc up there. Resource wars continue to spread. Industrial toxins continue to accumulate widely. But also, the voices of resistance are gathering, are getting louder and louder—and that is the story this volume presents. It is the noise and the music of all our voices bundled together.

Arctic Voices doesn't have a linear structure; it isn't arranged chronologically or even geographically, but rather as a web of interconnections with loosely defined themes that you may read in any order you wish. I have found plenty of things in common between essays—for example, the spectacled eiders

that winter in the frozen Bering Sea written about by Nancy Lord, also nest in the Teshekpuk Lake Wetland that Jeff Fair writes about; both writer Velma Wallis and artist Annie Pootoogook use stories and art as an outlet for healing as they both address alcoholism in their unique ways; and common words take on new meaning, for example, Seth Kantner and Matthew Gilbert put the word *subsistence* on its head, while Andri Snær Magnason tells us how Alcoa hijacked the word *sustainability* in Iceland and Greenland. I'm sure you will find more such interconnectedness, and I surmise that you will begin to think and talk about the Arctic differently than you did before. And perhaps you'll find an answer to the question, "Why should I care about the Arctic?"

—SB

PRINCETON, KOLKATA (INDIA),
AND NEW YORK CITY
DECEMBER 2011–FEBRUARY 2012

NOTES

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