

Photography's Silence of Non-Human Communities

Subhankar Banerjee (2012)

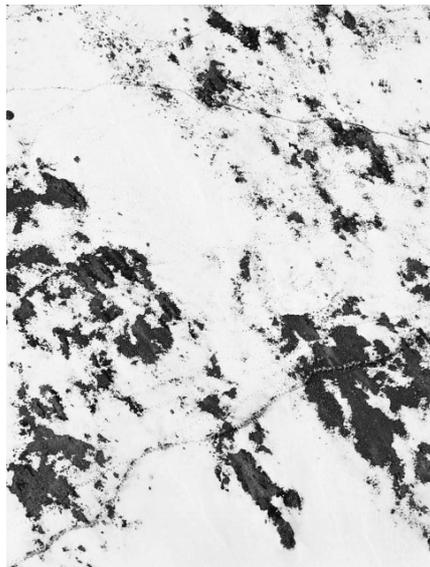
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We are the caribou people. Caribou are not just what we eat; they are who we are. They are in our stories and songs and the whole way we see the world. Without caribou we wouldn't exist.

– Sarah James, Gwich'in elder and activist¹

I grew up in Kolkata, a city on the edge of Bay of Bengal of the Indian Ocean – population about 15 million. Through a rather zigzag path, I ended up in Kaktovik, an Iñupiat community along the Beaufort Sea of the Arctic Ocean – population about 280.

My engagement with the North Country began with this story. In 2000, I left my science career, wandered aimlessly from Florida to British Columbia, and showed up in autumn as a tourist in Churchill. Polar bears gather there along the Hudson Bay. They wait on land for the bay to freeze over. Once on ice, they hunt and eat. I saw and snapped a photo of one bear eating another – not normal I was told, but no one in town said a word about warming. I now read that the bears of Hudson Bay will disappear within few decades at best, or a decade at worst. 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. Further north, during summer months, they're swimming farther out into the Arctic Ocean, looking for sea ice to rest and hunt; at times finding none, dying of exhaustion – mother and cubs alike.



Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Migration III*, from the series *Oil and the Caribou* (detail), 2002, digital chromogenic print face-mounted to Plexiglas, 173 x 218 cm.

¹ Sarah James, 'We are the ones who have everything to loose', in *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*, Subhankar Banerjee (ed.), Seven Stories Press, New York, 2012.

In 2010, the United Nations declared access to clean water a human right. Ought not we establish access to food a species right?²

Edward Steichen once remarked, ‘the mission of photography is to explain man to man and each man to himself. And that is the most complicated thing on Earth.’ I would note that Steichen was talking about relations in photography that exist in the human world, and ‘relations in photography’ is difficult. Art institutions – museums and MFA programs with real and fictional photography – continue to perpetuate Steichen’s vision faithfully.

Let us now imagine this scenario: a group of aliens decide to visit the photo galleries in some of our venerable art institutions, such as the Pompidou, MoMA or Tate Modern. At the end of their visit, they would conclude that the only species that moves and lives on Earth is Homo sapiens. Perhaps we need a Scream in the spirit of Linda Nochlin, and ask, ‘where are all the great photographs of the non-human world?’ I am not talking about animals-as-objects, or their actions-as-moments, even decisive moments. Instead, I am talking about relations that exist in the non-human communities, and the relations we humans make with those communities. That is the central question I have been attempting to explore for the past eleven years.

One species, we humans, are wiping out other species at an unprecedented rate – with species going extinct, falling away from our Earth like autumn leaves fall away from the trees. We are taking away their homes and their food. Ecophilosopher and activist Vandana Shiva remarked during her acceptance speech for the 2010 Sydney Peace Prize:

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.³

Photography must participate in this moment of crisis – with subjectivity instead of objectivity; engagement instead of distance; opinions instead of neutrality; and empathy instead of cynicism. There are a few exceptions – photographers who paid less attention to the dominant movements in the photography of their time, and instead engaged with non-human communities. Over the past four decades, photographer Jean-Luc Mylayne, for example, has photographed common birds in their natural habitat.⁴

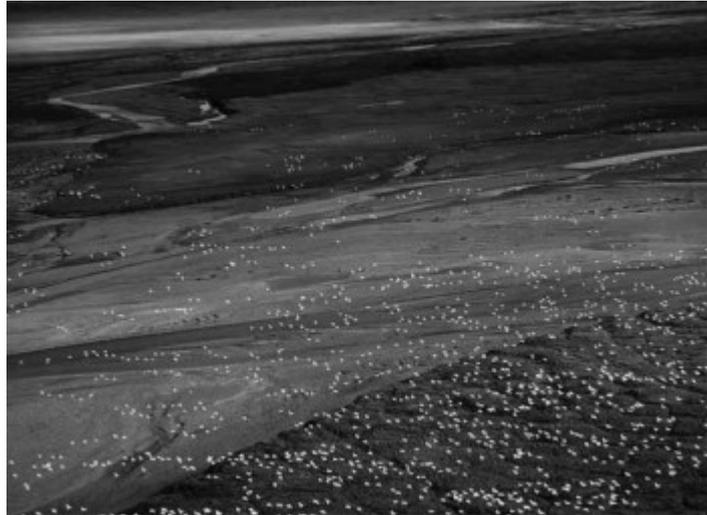
To date, I have only worked in two eco-regions – the Arctic series began in 2000, and the desert series in 2006. In the Arctic, I have been looking at the far. In the desert, it is the near, in a five-mile radius around the suburban home where I lived. Both series address two simple things: the ‘home’ and ‘food’ that land provides to humans and to all other species with whom we share this Earth. I call it land-as-home.

² Subhankar Banerjee, ‘Ought not we establish access to food a species right?’, in *Third Text Contemporary Art and Politics of Ecology*, special issue, T. J. Demos and Yates McKee (eds), Routledge, London, forthcoming.

³ Navdanya International, *Sydney Peace Prize Lecture 2010*, www.vandanashiva.org/?p=380.

⁴ Lynne Cooke (ed.), *Jean-Luc Mylayne: Into the Hands of Time*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte, Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2011. See also: Terry Sultan and Lynne Cooke, *Jean-Luc Mylayne*, Twin Palms Publishers, Santa Fe, 2007.

For me, there is no idea in the beginning, just a desire. Both my Arctic and desert work began with photographs of death that I took: in the Arctic it was the photograph of one polar bear eating another; in the desert it was a photograph of a dead bird. Death resulted in desire. In the Arctic, it was a desire to live with polar bears in the wild. In the desert, it was a desire to know where I live. So I began. Then a combination of lived experience and thought – each informing the other and evolving in an intertwined manner – eventually helped me to define conceptual frameworks in which I continue to work. But it is the lived experience that is an essential part of my creative process. I am interested in photography insofar as it leads me to knowledge.



Subhankar Banerjee, *Snow Geese II*, from the series *Oil and the Caribou*, 2002, digital chromogenic print face-mounted to Plexiglas, 150 x 188 cm.

Up in the north, I have been working with three motifs. The first is colour – not as a medium but as a motif. It is a political choice. In the popular conception around the world, the Arctic is primarily thought to be a space of ‘snow and ice’ and ‘ice and snow’. In the words of pro-oil-development USA politicians, the Arctic has been variously described as ‘flat white nothingness’, ‘frozen wasteland of snow and ice’ and ‘barren wasteland’. In the popular TV program 60 Minutes, it was described as ‘hostile wasteland’. I began to ask: Can I make a photograph with only brown; white and brown; only grey; white, grey and brown; white, blue and brown; only green; green and blue? ... Colour, I thought, would be a wonderful visual language to help us unlearn some of these intolerances.

The next two motifs addressed aesthetic ideas for natural and cultural ecologies and ethics. Instead of focusing on all kinds of wildlife, I have been focusing on only four species: caribou, birds, whales and fish. My main interest lies in the ideas of local, regional, and global interconnectedness. This was a political choice as well, as the Arctic is thought to be a remote land that is disconnected from our lives. On the contrary, deadly industrial toxins migrate to the Arctic from every part of our planet, making animals and humans of the far north among the most contaminated inhabitants on Earth. The breast milk of Inuit women, in parts of Greenland and the Canadian high Arctic, is now scientifically regarded as being as toxic as hazardous waste – planetary tragedy of global interconnectedness.⁵ But also, hundreds of millions of birds migrate to the Arctic each spring from every corner of the Earth for nesting and rearing their young – planetary celebration of global interconnectedness. On the other hand, caribou, whales and fish

⁵ Marla Cone, *Silent Snow: The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic*, Grove Press, New York, 2006.

migrate hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles to connect numerous indigenous communities through subsistence food harvest – local and regional interconnectedness. I think of the Arctic as the most connected place on Earth.

The ‘ecocultural’ is a space in which animals and people cohabit and are interdependent. These days, there is much talk about restoration, including ‘ecological corridors’ to connect ecological spaces that we fragmented throughout the twentieth century – from Yellowstone to Yukon, and from Baja to Bering. In the Arctic, however, we are going in reverse – fragmenting the ecocultural space with greater speed. There are resource wars everywhere in the Arctic – from Alaska to Siberia, with Nunavut and Greenland along the way. In Arctic Alaska, these wars have intensified since I began more than a decade ago. My works touch on these conflicts: oil in caribou calving ground (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge – Oil and the Caribou); oil in bird nesting ground (Teshekpuk Lake wetland – Oil and the Geese); coal in caribou calving ground (Utukok River upland – Coal and the Caribou); and oil in whale migration path (Beaufort Sea and Chukchi Sea – Oil and the Whales). All of these are also human rights issues for indigenous communities – for the Gwich’in, for the Iñupiat, and for the Yup’ik.⁶ And then there is rapid Arctic warming from all of us burning coal, oil and gas.

Does art have a role in any of this? I’m a storyteller, so I try with photos and words. My hope is that a viewer might enjoy and then leave the photographic frame, perhaps to enter the streets to participate in a resistance-against-destruction rally. I partner photos with words, however, one doesn’t aid the other.⁷ But there is juxtaposition – large photos of migrating pregnant female caribou are partnered with small photos of caribou hunting. Three tensions are present: scale – we stand back to see a large photo, whereas we get close to see a small one; emotion – for most people, seeing migrating caribou over a frozen river and high mountains is attractive, while seeing blood of butchered caribou is repulsive; and history – American conservation is rooted in the idea of preserving pristine wilderness untouched by humans, but humans hunt in the wilderness for food.⁸

I recently came across an article in which the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) Executive Director, Achim Steiner, writes:

Up to 10,000 animal species are thought to migrate. Yet, increasingly, air, water and land routes are being destroyed by barriers, ranging from roads, fences, dams and power lines, to unsustainable hunting or fishing practices, habitat degradation, pollution and climate change ... The trend looks bad. But some countries are taking action. Since the ‘Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals’ entered into force in 1983, its membership has grown steadily to include 116 countries in Africa, Central and South America, Asia, Europe and Oceania.⁹

Migration that connects us is a recurring theme in my photography. All these species that Steiner is talking about are indeed our relations.

⁶ Subhankar Banerjee, ‘Terra Incognita: Communities and Resource Wars’, in *The Alaska Native Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Maria Shâa Tlâa Williams (ed.), Duke University Press, Durham, 2009.

⁷ Finis Dunaway, ‘Reframing the Last Frontier: Subhankar Banerjee and the Visual Politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’, in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (eds), University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2009.

⁸ Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001.

⁹ Achim Steiner, ‘Protecting nature’s nomads’, in *Al Jazeera*, 13 November 2011.

I think photography is a kin of philosophy – both help us raise questions about ‘our time’. In that regard, photography can never be dead, as any time is different than what came before. In the climate ravaged Anthropocene era that we have entered, photography has an immense potential to help us raise new questions about the survival of all species.

In late June 2001, I attended a gathering of the Gwich’in Nation in Arctic Village, Alaska. Community members from all fifteen Gwich’in villages of Alaska, and the adjacent Canadian North, had come to renew their resolve in fighting oil development in the calving ground of the caribou in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. At the gathering, each Gwich’in elder ended his or her brief comments with the words: M̀ahsi' Cho. Shalak Nai (Thank you. All my relations). They were referring to members of both the human and the non-human world. Later, there was a caribou skin hut dance and so I learned how to dance, the Gwich’in way.