

ROUTLEDGE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES  
ON LITERATURE

# Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies

Conversations from Earth to Cosmos

Edited by  
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### 3 Long Environmentalism

#### After the Listening Session

*Subhankar Banerjee*

In August 2006, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Dirk Kempthorne, went to Fairbanks, Alaska, to listen to the people talk about their views on energy development in the Arctic. Fairbanks was one of the several stops on a nationwide “Listening Session” tour by the Secretary. After hearing overwhelming opposition to the proposed expansion of oil and gas development in the Alaskan Arctic from the people gathered in a large auditorium, the Secretary told the audience (I am paraphrasing from memory): “I have listened to your concerns, but I must follow the President’s mandate to open up the Arctic land and water to oil and gas development.” The conservationists felt hoodwinked that day. To remember the farcical nature of the event, I made a photograph, *After the Listening Session*. The picture is a group portrait of nine individuals, all of whom have been engaged in protecting significant biocultural areas in the Alaskan Arctic from industrial exploitation. Historically, environmentalists and Indigenous peoples were not traditional allies, as I will soon explain, nor were the Gwich’in and the Iñupiat peoples of Arctic North America. The photograph *After the Listening Session*, however, holds all of them together. The picture opens a doorway into what I call—*long environmentalism*.<sup>1</sup>

When an environmental engagement has lasted for a while—say a quarter-century, or more—it creates a culture of its own, has its own history. Such a multiple-decades-long engagement gives rise to its own distinct form of environmentalism, or what I will call in this chapter “long environmentalism.” The two principal tenets of long environmentalism include: collaboration among unlikely allies through the act of sincere listening, giving rise to *radical hope*; and a period of time that is long enough to enable what was once considered marginal (like a human community or an idea) to become significant and essential. The unlikely allies could be historical adversaries or groups of people who come from different cultures, races, classes, and geographies. The coming-together of unlikely allies, however, creates varieties of contradictions, which often cannot be resolved but will have to be held in place. While holding varieties of contradictions in place within a single engagement, long environmentalism performs four related functions: it illuminates past injustices, highlights the significance of resistance movements to avert potential social-environmental violence (fast and/or slow), shows how

communities respond to slow violence, and points toward social-ecological renewal after devastation. In doing so, it gives radical hope to ideas of coalitional politics, where coalitions are forged with the ethics of livability that pay attention to human and nonhuman alike. I suggest that long environmentalism is an ethic that is universally relevant yet meets cultural practices that are situated in the local.

A study of long environmentalism begins with a statement that specifically addresses multiple-decades-long engagement. Here is one example, which I will return to: “We must fight and do all we can to preserve our way of life even if we feel like we have been fighting the same fight for the last *fifty years*” (Cannon 2013, 320; emphasis mine). Long environmentalism, when engaged for the purposes of an ecocritical study, would analyze such statements, fleshing out their historical, sociopolitical, and ecological contexts.

In this chapter I analyze two case studies from post-1950 Arctic Alaska, that of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge located in Northeast Alaska and that of the Beaufort and Chukchi seas of the Arctic Ocean, for the ways they illustrate long environmentalism. Both are informed in part by my own fieldwork there since 2001. By focusing on the environmental politics of these two case studies, with a history of over half a century for each, I demonstrate how resistance movements of the Indigenous peoples, in this case the Gwich’in and the Iñupiat, help draw the attention of conservationists to issues of environmental justice that redress past histories and illuminate the key tenets of long environmentalism.

### Rights of Nature or Environmentalism of the Poor?

Distinguished environmental historian Roderick Nash lays out centuries of Western intellectual evolution in environmental thought in Europe and North America in *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*, first published in 1989. But what does “rights of nature” mean? Based on his reading of the history of environmental ethics, Nash writes that, “[N]ature has intrinsic value and consequently possesses at least the right to exist. This position is sometimes called ‘biocentrism,’ ‘ecological egalitarianism,’ or ‘deep ecology,’ and it accords nature ethical status at least equal to that of humans” (Nash 1989, 9–10). The principal tenet of deep ecology is biocentrism, meaning that nonhuman biotic life has a right to exist and flourish independent of human intervention and needs. In 2015, a team of scientists announced in a study that “a sixth mass extinction is already underway,” that “the average rate of vertebrate species loss over the last century is up to 100 times higher than the background rate,” and that “our global society has started to destroy species of other organisms at an accelerating rate, initiating a mass extinction episode unparalleled for 65 million years” (Ceballos et al. 2015). At such a time of epic biological crisis, in what is being termed by many as a new geologic age

(the Anthropocene), an ethic that is biocentric is to be welcomed, as it is urgently needed.

The same year Nash's book was published, however, eminent Indian sociologist-turned- historian Ramachandra Guha wrote a combative essay to critique deep ecology, first published in the journal *Environmental Ethics* and later widely anthologized. Guha feared that, "the social consequences of putting deep ecology into practice on a worldwide basis (what its practitioners are aiming for) are very grave indeed" (Guha 1989, 72). He further charged that, "invoking the bogey of anthropocentrism is at best irrelevant and at worst a dangerous obfuscation," while pointing out two key issues that the deep ecologists have remained silent about and what he thought are the key drivers of ecological destruction: overconsumption and growing militarization (Guha 1989, 74). A few years later, in 1994, he introduced, "environmentalism of the poor," considered to be a radical notion at the time, at a conference in Ecuador, and later wrote about it in a co-authored book, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). Deep ecology is an ethic. Environmentalism of the poor, on the other hand, is a practice. Guha envisioned it as a combination of "struggles against environmental degradation" and "struggles for environmental renewal" (Guha 2000, 104). He presented it in part as a protest against what he perceived to be an arrogant and false belief held by many mainstream environmentalists in the U.S. that poor people couldn't afford to be environmental. The phrase "environmentalism of the poor" has resonated with other scholars since Guha introduced it. Juan Martinez-Alier published his own book, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (2003), and eight years later the phrase appeared in the title of Rob Nixon's postcolonial environmental literary studies treatise, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). The rights of nature ethic as articulated by Nash and the environmentalism of the poor practice as articulated by Guha remain, in mainstream environmental politics, uneasy adversaries. In North America, the formalization of the environmental justice movement in the 1990s represents some of this debate and unease, but it also points to grassroots and legal attempts that seek to reconcile concerns for human rights with the survival of nonhuman biotic life (see, for example, Adamson, 2001; Adamson, Evans, and Stein, 2002).

Building on environmental justice discourse that recognizes the interdependency of human and nonhuman, in recent years there has been a new invocation of rights of nature, which was primarily initiated by Indigenous peoples in Latin America. Following the failure of the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (the 15th session of the Conference of the Parties [COP15] to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change) in Copenhagen, Bolivia hosted a World People's Conference on the Rights of Mother Earth and Climate Change in 2010, which was attended by nearly 30,000 delegates from 100 countries. The following year, Bolivia passed the "Law of Mother Earth." The rights of nature have also been discussed

in the context of contemporary art and environmental scholarship. Two notable examples from the year 2015 are the *Rights of Nature: Art and Ecology in the Americas* exhibition at the Nottingham Contemporary in the United Kingdom and the associated international conference there (Demos 2015) and the *Conflict Shorelines: History, Politics, and Climate Change* conference at Princeton University, which included a panel, “The Rights of Nature.”<sup>2</sup> The contemporary rights of nature discourse has developed within a juridical framework and can be seen as a continuation of, and as consistent with, the long environmentalism in Arctic Alaska, which I will now discuss.

### **(Un)Inhabiting America’s Wilderness: The Alaska National Wildlife Range**

One of the two braids of long environmentalism embedded in the *After the Listening Session* photograph addresses the resistance movement to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska from industrial incursion. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, considered to be the most biodiverse conservation area in the circumpolar North, is one of the most debated public lands in U.S. history, as it harbors some of America’s oil and gas reserves. It also happens to provide nutritional, cultural, and spiritual sustenance to two Indigenous communities: the Gwich’in, who live on the south side of the Brooks Range Mountains, and the Iñupiat, who live on Barter Island, along the Arctic coast (Banerjee 2003; Dunaway 2009). The debate over whether to open up the coastal plain to oil and gas development or to protect it permanently has been raging in the halls of the U.S. Congress for nearly four decades. The coastal plain is considered to be the biological heart of the Refuge by scientists and to be *Iizhik Gwats’an Gwandaii Goodlit* (“Sacred Place Where Life Begins”) by the Gwich’in people. After five months of background research, in March 2001, I traveled to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and spent fourteen months over a period of two consecutive years there, becoming involved in the campaign to protect the Refuge.

On seeing my photograph of Charlie Swaney from Arctic Village scanning the land for animals from his hunting camp in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a young environmentalist asked me during a lobbying campaign in Washington, DC, in 2002 with honest bewilderment: “How could there be a hunting camp in a pristine wilderness?” That question, more than anything else, prompted me to learn about the history of American land conservation.

I was led to the groundbreaking book of microenvironmental history, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, by Karl Jacoby (2001). In the nineteenth century, Jacoby points out, when the land conservation movement began to take shape, subsistence hunters—Native Americans and rural whites—were labeled “poachers,” inhabitants as “squatters,” and subsistence gatherers as





*Figure 3.1* Scanning for animals from a Gwich'in hunting/fishing camp, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge near Arctic Village, Alaska, August 2002.  
Source: Subhankar Banerjee.

“thieves,” and those who would set fires for ecocultural reasons as “arsonists,” if their homelands were deemed worthy of conservation, effectively criminalizing these subsistence and traditional activities. One of the case studies in the book illuminates the conflict of conservation and Indigenous habitation and land use during the creation of Yellowstone National Park, the first National Park, which 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, according to a U.S. Army Corps engineer, “Indian trails ... were everywhere” (83). He then writes that “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’” (84). A bit

later Jacoby writes, “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” (85). Moreover, the U.S. military managed the park for thirty-two years continuously after its founding to protect the white tourists from the perceived threat of the Native Americans. In the U.S., militarization marked the dawn of land conservation.

Nearly a century later, on December 6, 1960, the U.S. Secretary of Interior Fred A. Seaton signed Public Land Order 2214 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1960), establishing some of the region now under contestation in northeast Alaska as the Arctic National Wildlife *Range*. The land was set aside for “the purpose of preserving unique wildlife, wilderness, and recreational values.” The first two goals are primarily shaped by deep ecology, but the juxtaposition of all three creates varieties of contradictions when practiced in a single geography. The most problematic part of the Public Land Order, of course, was what it did not include—the Gwich’in and the Iñupiat communities who have inhabited the region for many millennia. This omission, which involves issues of race, class, and gender, was and continues to be characteristic of mainstream wilderness understandings.

Until a few decades ago people of the lower latitudes in North America primarily came to learn about the Arctic from the tales of heroic journeys of white, male explorers. In *Gender On Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, historian of visual culture Lisa Bloom critiqued these gendered-expeditions, and highlighted elements of racism and the significance of nationalism and colonial dominance in those adventures (Bloom 1993). Today, Arctic Indigenous women—activists, artists, and writers—are reclaiming the narratives about their homelands. Gwich’in activist Sarah James, Iñupiaq activist Caroline Cannon, Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook, and Gwich’in writer Velma Wallis, to name just a few, are exemplary figures in correcting the white, male-dominated view of the circumpolar North.

Sarah James said, “I learned from living out in the wilderness, our natural world” (James 2013, 260). This is a confrontational statement for American land conservation as, historically, no habitation is permitted inside a designated wilderness. What did James mean by that statement? There are at least two possible interpretations: one literal and the other ethical. Sarah James grew up with her family on the *Sheenjek*, or Salmon River valley, until they were encouraged to take up village life in Arctic Village in the mid-twentieth century. Today, about 150 residents live in Arctic Village, along the East Fork of the Chandalar River. 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 and use along the river was obliterated when the Arctic National Wildlife Range was established in 1960.



*Figure 3.2* Sheenjek River valley, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. May 2002. Source: Subhankar Banerjee.

Today, that river valley, where James grew up, is a designated wilderness. So in a literal sense she indeed “learned by living out in” what is today a “wilderness.” But there is also an ethical interpretation that says that wilderness areas in the Arctic ought not to exclude Indigenous peoples, whose cultural and material subsistence critically depends on these lands and its resources. Not acknowledging habitation of the wilderness had been the case with the formation of the Arctic National Wildlife Range. Yet, as I became more and more engaged in the Arctic Refuge campaign and began to learn about its history, I came to realize that long environmentalism as practiced by people like James sustains itself over a long period of time and is able to accommodate multiple perspectives, in large part through the act of sincere listening—unlike the insincere listening that I witnessed at the Fairbanks Listening Session.

### **Forging of Unlikely Allies: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Beyond**

Given that the Public Land Order 2214 did not recognize the presence of and the traditional rights of the Indigenous communities living in or near the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, how did the Gwich’in people establish their rights to continue their subsistence way of life? Tlingit scholar Maria Williams has pointed out that Native solidarity, combined with a culture of resistance, eventually succeeded in getting social rights recognized in Alaska, including subsistence rights (Williams 2009).



The passage of the 1980 Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act (ANILCA) is likely the most significant achievement in U.S. conservation history, as it protected 104 million acres of public lands and waters in Alaska, including significant areas in the Arctic. Following on the heels of the 1970s Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), it was negotiated with active input from Alaska's Indigenous communities. Thus, while it set aside land for biotic life, it also did something unprecedented—it protected the way of life of the Indigenous communities by granting subsistence rights inside federally protected lands, including wilderness. ANILCA also doubled the size of the original Arctic National Wildlife Range, renaming it a Refuge, and designated eight million acres of it as wilderness where Indigenous people once more had the legal right to subsistence practices. However, even though ANILCA protected a significant part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness, the coastal plain was left in limbo for the U.S. Congress to decide in future, whether to allow oil drilling there or not.

During the mid-1980s, when the Reagan administration made a push to open up the coastal plain to drilling, the Gwich'in Nation called a historic gathering in Arctic Village in 1988. The community members from fourteen villages in northeast Alaska, as well as the Yukon and Northwest Territories in Arctic Canada, attended the gathering and passed a resolution, the "Gwich'in Niintsyaa" ("Gwich'in Elders Statement" 1988). The resolution called on the U.S. government to recognize the rights of the Gwich'in people and to prohibit drilling in the calving and the post-calving aggregation grounds of the caribou. The Gwich'in saw the drilling as an affront to their material subsistence and to the sacred life of their nonhuman relatives, symbolized most powerfully through their own identification as the "Caribou People". The resolution urged permanent protection of those lands by designating them as "wilderness." With ANILCA's passage, they understood that such a designation would protect the calving grounds of the caribou from commercial exploitation, while maintaining subsistence possibilities within the Refuge lands.

The 1988 gathering resulted in the founding of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, which continues to work actively with various environmental organizations for the continued protection of the Arctic Refuge, even though they have not always prioritized the same reasons; in particular, the importance of cultural preservation was one that the Gwich'in added to the agenda of conservationists focused on land preservation. This has been a hard-fought coalition, but one that is proving to be effective. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge continues to remain free of industrial development, while the campaign to protect it permanently, goes on.

Today, we hear about alliances for most contemporary environmental struggles—environmentalists are collaborating with Indigenous peoples, scientists are collaborating with religious leaders. One of the most public environmental collaborations of an environmental collaboration is Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Francis

2015). A symposium on science, physical and social, at the Vatican in 2014 helped in part lay the foundation for the encyclical. At the same time, the encyclical is also informed by recent scholarship in environmental humanities. Chapter 4 of the encyclical, “Integral Ecology” brings to mind Sean Esbjörn-Hargens and Michael Zimmerman’s book, *Integral Ecology: Unit-ing Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (2009). In a critical appreciation of the encyclical, Zimmerman points out that, starting in the 1990s, environmental humanists, including ecocritics, and environmental justice activists have addressed the need to close the traditional Western dualist gap between human and the nonhuman world (Zimmerman 2015). Long environmentalism is a continuation of and contribution to this ongoing multiperspectival effort in environmental humanities, and one of its principal tenets is collaboration between unlikely allies.

While science, especially in modernity, has been suspicious of religion (and vice versa), as we see in the Pope’s encyclical, they can work together. In Indigenous traditions, the two have often worked side by side. As this volume attests to, a growing number of environmental humanists, including ecocritics who are writing on “cosmopolitics” and “multispecies ethnography,” have highlighted the significance of Indigenous stories as they are being placed on the political stage for the purpose of supportive, innovative alliances for change. Joni Adamson has observed that these stories are being “employed as authoritative commentary/theory illuminating the consequences of global economic development for local humans, animals, and nonhumans” (Adamson 2013, 173).

In the case of Alaska, *Protect: Caribou & Salmon*, a communal and artistic performance by the Gwich’in Nation helps us understand the co-existence of an Indigenous creation myth with science and its significance for social-environmental activism. Alarmed by the devastation caused by British Petroleum’s Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, the Gwich’in Nation gathered in Fort Yukon, Alaska. On July 21, they created *Protect: Caribou & Salmon* on the sandy shore of the mighty Yukon River, to send a message to the world—protect the habitats of the caribou and the salmon, and consequently the culture of “the fish people, the caribou people, or just the Gwich’in people,” as Gwich’in novelist Velma Wallis puts it (Wallis 2013, 498). From afar it looks like colorful ants have created three shapes on the sandy shore of a river: the word PROTECT, the outline of an antler, and the outline of a fish. But as we get close we see that the shapes are built out of human bodies, both men and women of all ages, from children to elders. In another era, this communal act would not be considered art, but perhaps part of a spiritual ceremony. In our time, however, the people of the Gwich’in Nation, who participated in the performance, insist that it is *art*—human aerial art. But, protect what? Protect from what? Protect for whom?

In the image, the antler refers to caribou, more specifically the caribou of the Porcupine River herd. That the Gwich’in people created the caribou

antler image with their bodies could be understood within the context of their creation story:

Our creation story tells of the time when there was only animals, the animals became people, when that happened the Gwich'in came from the caribou. There was an agreement between the two that still stands, the Gwich'in retain a piece of the caribou heart and the caribou retain a piece of the Gwich'in heart for all time. We are like one. Whatever befalls the caribou will befall the Gwich'in.

(Gemmill 2001, 49–50)

In the campaign to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the environmental organizations speak about science, while the Gwich'in people speak about their creation story. The two views have co-existed peacefully in the fight against a common foe—the fossil fuels industry that wants to drill in the calving grounds of the caribou. The fact that religion and science have co-existed peacefully is radical indeed and has given rise to hope, radical hope for continued survival of the caribou and the eco-spirituality of the Gwich'in that depend on the caribou.

In *Protect: Caribou & Salmon* the salmon are the majestic Yukon River kings, or Chinook that the Gwich'in communities that live along the Yukon River depend on for sustenance. Their presence in the piece defies a proposal to open up the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge (which abuts the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) to oil and gas development. Despite persistent pressure from industry and pro-development politicians, both the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge continue to remain free of fossil fuel development. In this campaign, the Gwich'in creation story has been used effectively as a statement of resistance against industrial destruction: a myth of the past establishes Indigenous rights in the present and becomes the central argument in the fight for a healthy future—for the human and the nonhuman biotic life.

Indigenous peoples all over the world are experiencing destruction, or the prospect of destruction—of their homelands, food, and culture—from ever-expanding resource exploitation for oil, coal, gas, minerals, timber—to satisfy the ravenous appetite for materials consumption in the developed and the developing world. Many Indigenous communities are using their creation myths and art and literature as a means of resistance. In this sense Indigenous creation myths have taken on new significance for our time. Their purpose is not so much to answer the question, Where do we come from? But rather to address, Where are we going? Adamson (and others in this volume) make similar observations. Indigenous stories are being effectively used as “seeing instruments” by ecocritics and activists “for making abstract, often intangible global patterns associated with climate change, accessible to a wider public” (Adamson 2013, 172).

### The Role of Time in Long Environmentalism

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Plenty Coups, the great chief of the Crow Nation, shared his sentiment with an outsider: “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground; they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” Philosopher Jonathan Lear opens his rather slender book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, with Plenty Coups’ statement and for the rest of the book makes philosophical inquiries into that last line—“After this nothing happened”—with regard to strategies for cultural survival (Lear 2006). 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 said, “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” (James 2013, 262). Her statement expresses similar concerns to those of Plenty Coups. There is also a key common ground in their strategies for survival—collaboration. Plenty Coups collaborated with the U.S. 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 unlikely allies—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 today.

Land conservation in the U.S. began with a rift, marked by deep injustices against the Native Americans, but more than a century and half later conservationists and the Indigenous peoples are beginning to come together to oppose destructive, large-scale corporate extractive projects and government policies that support them. In case of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge campaign, the two opposed ideas—“deep ecology” and “environmentalism of the marginalized”—seem to co-exist to avert potential social-environmental destruction.<sup>3</sup> This has been possible because of long environmentalism, which in this case has lasted for more than six decades and is ongoing.

When a social-environmental engagement has lasted for more than six decades, it naturally becomes intergenerational. In a letter to U.S. Senator Daniel Akaka, young Gwich’in writer-activist Matthew Gilbert (2013, 484) poignantly illuminated the intergenerational attribute in the Arctic



Figure 3.3 Gwich'in caribou harvest, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge near Arctic Village, Alaska. January 2007. Source: Subhankar Banerjee.

National Wildlife Refuge campaign. Reminiscing about the 1988 gathering in Arctic Village, Gilbert writes, “As a kid, I remember the leaders with their traditional talking sticks on stage speaking passionately. Though at that young age, the topic was new and unfamiliar, I nonetheless saw the sincerity of the Gathering and respected it, even as a kid.” He also highlights his own engagement in the campaign with these words: “I’ve been protesting against opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas drilling since I was nine years old. I was an innocent kid holding up two marker-colored banners made by two other kids, posing for a photographer. I ended up in *Time* magazine. From there, it never stopped” (480).

You might be wondering what role time plays in long environmentalism. Time enables the “marginal edge” and the “radical edge” to move from the periphery and toward the center, deflating the circle of power by challenging race and class induced injustices. The Gwich'in people were considered marginal (or even nonexistent) during the formation of the Arctic National Wildlife Range six decades ago, and the idea to allow subsistence activities inside wilderness would have been considered radical (or even preposterous) back then. And yet today, the Gwich'in are significant agents in the Arctic Refuge campaign and Indigenous subsistence activities inside the (Alaska) wilderness are considered essential. This is why the need to keep radical hope alive over a long period of time is so important and is an essential tenet of long environmentalism.



### Slow Violence Requires Long Environmentalism: Point Hope and Beyond

The photograph, *After the Listening Session*, weaves two braids of long environmentalism—resistance to destruction as exemplified in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge campaign and response to slow violence that I will now discuss briefly in a second case study. This case study is epitomized by renowned Iñupiaq cultural activist Caroline Cannon’s testimony in support of a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Interior, filed in 2009. The statement captures the ethos of the battles Indigenous peoples have had to fight all over the world: “We must fight and do all we can to preserve our way of life even if we feel like we have been fighting the same fight for the last *fifty years*” (Cannon 2013, 320; emphasis mine).

Cannon lives in Point Hope, a community of about eight hundred residents. Point Hope is situated along the Chukchi Sea coast in Arctic Alaska and is considered to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in North America. With the words “same fight,” Cannon links two distinct and consecutive struggles, to “preserve” the “way of life” of the Iñupiat people against first, militarization, and then, industrial incursion.

In 1958, nuclear physicist Edward Teller, considered to be the father of the hydrogen bomb, went to Alaska to promote Project Chariot—to create a deep-water harbor at Cape Thompson, about thirty miles southeast of Point Hope, by detonating a string of nuclear bombs. Appropriately alarmed by the potentially devastating consequences of nuclear contamination on people and on biotic life, the Iñupiat people of Point Hope, with help from biologists Leslie Viereck and William Pruitt, geographer Don Foote, and a handful of conservationists, including Ginny Wood, launched a courageous and creative campaign to stop the project (O’Neill 1994). After a drawn-out and acrimonious fight, Project Chariot was shelved in 1963. The project created a deep scar in the psyche of the people of Point Hope. Cannon explains in her testimony:

With Project Chariot, the federal government took advantage of us. They treated us like we were nonexistent people ... They were ready to relocate us and told us that the radiation wouldn’t harm us. They took something away from us then. It was trust. We were emotionally damaged—feeling that we didn’t count, that we were nothing.

(Cannon 2013, 320)

Critics, including Ramachandra Guha, have charged that environmentalism in the U.S. rarely engaged with, or challenged, the nation’s growing militarism. The campaign to stop Project Chariot should be considered an exemplary exception. It is also likely the first major grassroots environmental movement in the U.S. in which Indigenous people, conservationists, and scientists worked together to oppose social-environmental destruction through militarization.

Even though the bombs were not detonated, the U.S. government performed a nuclear experiment at Cape Thompson in 1962 and buried the waste. Thirty years later when clean up began, low levels of radioactivity were detected at a depth of two feet from the surface in the area where animals and people cross paths. In 2007, conservationist and author Peter Matthiessen and I visited Point Hope (Matthiessen 2007). During our conversation with the village council members (including Caroline Cannon), we learned that the community members believe that Project Chariot irradiated the animals and the people. “Many of our young people have died of cancer,” Cannon writes. “My own daughter was diagnosed with leukemia in August of 2005, which is known to be linked to exposure to radiation” (Cannon 2013, 320). The environmental degradation and the consequent health impacts that the people of Point Hope have endured could be apprehended as *slow violence*. As postcolonial literary scholar Rob Nixon writes, slow violence occurs “gradually” and remains “out of sight” for the mainstream society (Nixon 2011). How do communities respond to slow violence? As this case study illustrates, slow violence, if it is to be addressed successfully, requires a long, concerted environmentalism.

The struggle against one environmental degradation from Project Chariot spilled over into another—this time, against oil and gas drilling in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas of Arctic Alaska, which is of great concern not only for residents of Point Hope but also for many other Iñupiat who live in various communities along the Arctic sea coasts in Alaska. The Iñupiat people, who value their traditional culture, fear that a blowout from drilling activities in the Arctic seas may ruin the millennia-old relationship they have built with the sea. They depend on the sea and its biotic life for nutritional, cultural, and spiritual needs, not unlike how the Gwich’in people depend on the caribou. In a cold, early November morning in 2001, I photographed an Iñupiat cemetery on Barter Island along the Beaufort Sea coast. The cemetery is marked by a pair of bowhead whale jawbones, which seems to honor both the family members who passed away and the whale that fed the community.

The first wave of oil development in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas began in the late 1970s and lasted through the early 1990s. The expensive hunt for oil in the Arctic seas, however, largely failed, as exploration did not lead to production, except in one case, and that too not in far offshore but a near-shore, anchored-to-the-ground facility (LeVine, VanTuyn, and Hughes 2014). As a consequence, the companies relinquished almost all of the leases they had purchased. The second wave of U.S. Arctic offshore oil and gas activities started when George W. Bush took office in 2001. Between 2003 and 2008 leases were sold on more than three million acres in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. The lease sales generated substantial controversy and met with court challenges from the tribal Iñupiat and conservation organizations, for which I wrote supporting declarations. The plaintiffs won twice, first in the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska in 2010, and then in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in January 2014. But such victories were only short lived.



Figure 3.4 Iñupiat cemetery marked by bowhead whale jawbones, Barter Island, along the Beaufort Sea coast, Alaska. November 2001. Source: Subhankar Banerjee.

A *Deepwater Horizon*-like blowout in the Arctic seas would be devastating, worse than what happened in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 (Banerjee 2013). For a variety of reasons, drilling for oil and gas in the Arctic Ocean is likely the most dangerous industrial project on Earth, as there is no proven technology to clean up an oil spill from underneath sea ice in one of the harshest environments on the planet. Even during the open-water season, there is frequent fog and severe storms, as well as large ice floes—all of which would make effective clean-up very difficult, if not impossible. The Arctic is also warming at a rate of about two to four times the global average, which has significant impacts on the Arctic ecology and the Indigenous communities. Oil and gas drilling in the Arctic seas would only add further stress and devastation. For example, it would exacerbate Arctic warming from various pollutants that industrial operations would generate (Banerjee 2015a). Moreover, extraction of fossil fuel resources from the Arctic is “incommensurate with efforts to limit average global warming to 2°C” above the pre-industrial level (McGlade and Ekins 2015, 187–190). Despite all of these concerns, as well as the continued lack of comprehensive scientific understanding of the marine ecology in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, the Obama administration granted Shell Oil the necessary permits to drill in the Chukchi Sea during the open-water season in 2015.

Overall, two interrelated attributes have emerged from the push to industrialize America’s Arctic Ocean, which are made visible by long environmentalism: the *inevitability* and the *rush*. The “inevitability” is a mindset that drilling in U.S. Arctic waters is inevitable, as opposed to protecting those seas as international ecological treasures replete with tens of thousands of whales, thousands of polar bears, hundreds of thousands of walrus and seals, millions of birds, and innumerable fish, not to mention all the tiny sub-sea life that make up the food chain. The inevitability I speak of has

been exhibited repeatedly in Arctic science research sponsored by the U.S. government, including in an important booklet, *Arctic Matters: The Global Connection to Changes in the Arctic* (Polar Research Board and National Research Council 2015). Also consider this as another example: In 2015, the U.S. Fulbright Program launched the Fulbright Arctic Initiative (Council for International Exchange of Scholars n.d.). Of the four research areas, the first on the list is “Energy” and the first question asked is this: “How will oil, gas, and other natural resources be developed in the Arctic?” The keyword “ecology” is missing from the Fulbright Arctic Initiative research goals. I mention the omission because environmental humanists are now paying particular attention to ecology and other critical “Keywords for Environmental Studies” (Adamson, Pellow, and Gleason 2016).

The “rush,” on the other hand, is a practice of both the fossil fuel industry and the government (Banerjee, 2015b). These examples illustrate why there is a need for research in Arctic humanities, in addition to Arctic science, so that a more just future for the Arctic can be envisioned that is not merely informed by an ideology of exploitation.

Long environmentalism here, which began with a grassroots movement against Project Chariot, has evolved over six decades incorporating legal challenges and exposing continued injustices in the U.S. government’s attitude toward Indigenous peoples. Cannon writes that “the government and industry continue to ignore our concerns and run roughshod over our community.” But she also writes: “We have a right to life, to physical integrity, to security, and the right to enjoy the benefits of our culture. For this, we will fight” (Cannon 2013, 327).



Figure 3.5 Prayer after an Iñupiat whale hunt to thank the Creator and the whale for offering food for the community. Barter Island, along the Beaufort Sea coast, Alaska, September 2001. Source: Subhankar Banerjee.

After nine years of trying to pry open the Arctic seas for oil, spending more than \$7 billion, and receiving all the necessary permits for exploratory drilling, Shell announced on September 28, 2015, after a brief season of exploration in the Chukchi Sea, that the company has abandoned its Arctic Alaska offshore program, citing “disappointing exploratory results, high operating costs, and strict U.S. environmental regulations” (Neslen 2015). A few weeks later, the Obama administration announced that it was canceling future lease sales in those seas. It would be safe to say then that the second wave of Arctic offshore development has come to an end. This is very significant news for climate change mitigation and a relief for the Iñupiat people, who value their traditional culture.

## Coda

A study of long environmentalism is a work in progress. In summary, then, I return to the four functions mentioned in the introduction that long environmentalism performs, the first three of which are addressed by the two braids of long environmentalism embedded in *After the Listening Session* photograph: it illuminates past injustices, as we have seen in both case studies; it highlights the significance of resistance movements to avert potential social-environmental violence (fast and/or slow), as we have seen in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge campaign; and it shows how communities respond to slow violence, as we have seen in the Iñupiat people’s struggles against destruction. The fourth function, which points toward social-ecological renewal after devastation, while not addressed in the two case studies discussed here, can be seen in other instances of long environmentalism, as in the case of the current restoration of the Elwha River in the Olympic National Park in Washington State following the recent destruction of two dams that were built a century ago and which destroyed the epic salmon runs by preventing the fish from reaching their ancestral spawning grounds and consequently the culture and nutritional needs of the Lower Elwha Klallam people. In all of these cases, both collaboration among unlikely allies made possible through sincere listening proved essential, and radical hope was kept alive over decades, proving that those two attributes are essential for long environmentalism. In the Anthropocene, varieties of environmental violence are here to stay, will likely get worse, and many new ones will arrive. The inevitable social response, it seems to me, is long environmentalism.

## Notes

1. This essay grew out of several conference talks the author gave on the theme of “long environmentalism”: a keynote lecture at the “PostNatural” conference of the twenty-seventh Annual Meeting of the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts at the University of Notre Dame in 2013; and three talks in 2015: the inaugural lecture for a yearlong series, “Environmental Humanities,”



at the University of Texas–Austin, an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Visiting Artist lecture at the University of New Mexico–Albuquerque, and a lecture at the “Conflict Shorelines: History, Politics, and Climate Change” conference at Princeton University.

2. A selection of my Arctic photographs was included in the *Rights of Nature* exhibition. I also participated in both conferences and pointed out that the contemporary invocation of rights of nature is distinctly different from what Nash wrote about, and the difference is this: one takes into account the survival concerns of the poor and marginalized human communities, while the other does not. Both, however, are concerned about the survival of nonhuman biotic life.
3. From my years of working with Indigenous communities in the Arctic, I have learned that even when a community is struggling financially, as many rural communities in Alaska are, the people take offense when someone refers to them as “poor.” They consider themselves rich, because of the still-abundant biotic life on the land, in the rivers, and in the oceans on which they depend on for nutritional, as well as cultural and spiritual, needs. To be able to accommodate, without offending, communities from the circumpolar North in the discourse of the “environmentalism of the poor,” I have chosen to use the term “marginalized” instead.

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