

Chapter 3

## Of Survival

### Climate Change and Uncanny Landscape in the Photography of Subhankar Banerjee

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*“Will we fight to ensure that everyone has a right to survival?”*

– Vandana Shiva<sup>1</sup>

*“There can be no image that is not about destruction and survival, and this is especially the case in the image of ruin.”*

– Eduardo Cadava

#### 1.

In Subhankar Banerjee’s photograph, a flat, abstracted field of tans and browns transitions unevenly into an area of formless grey at the two upper corners of the picture. Appearing near these zones of indistinction are several clusters of black pock-marks, giving the impression that the central field is already suffering from a kind of internal deterioration. Traveling up the central expanse of the image is a series of imperfect lines that overlap, interweave, and reinscribe one another. At the bottom of the image, the lines stand out so sharply against the ground as to indicate a microscopic pattern of print-making at work in the contours of the lines themselves; they then vanish altogether, only to reemerge as they approach the dissolving borderline at the top of the image. Fading in and out of visibility like a phantom, the lines undergo a slight diagonalization as they make their vertical procession, a compositional cue that sets the

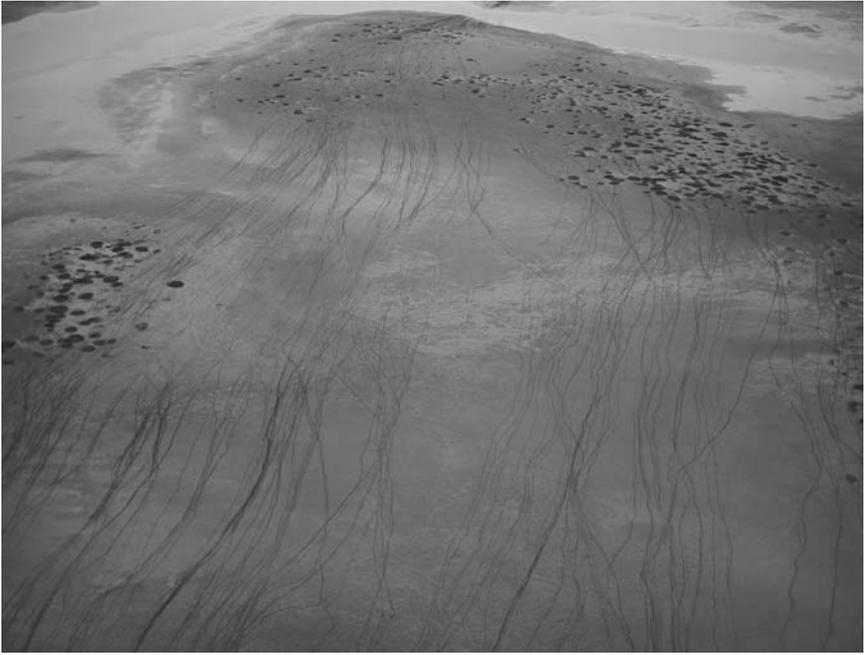


Figure 1: Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Tracks on Wetland*, Teshekpuk Lake Wetland, 2006

image up as landscape, albeit one in which the typical perspectival calibration of figure, ground, and horizon-line has been subjected to a kind of implosive derangement.

The title of the photograph, *Caribou Tracks on Wetland*, marks the otherwise abstract lines traversing the picture as tracks, traces, or vestiges left behind by living creatures in their passage across the surface of the earth. In an earlier epoch, it might have seemed feasible to take the indexical causality ascribed to these tracks by the title at face value; they would pertain properly to the caribou, ephemeral signatures of absent bodies that would nonetheless confirm the creature's migratory paths as they have been governed since time immemorial by the seasonal patterns of their polar habitat. In "our" time of climate change, however, any such appeal to the natural predictability of climate, season, weather (*temps*) is no longer possible—if it ever was—putting the legibility of these tracks and the dissolving ground into which they were impressed radically into question. Photographically suspended between preservation and destruction, inscription and erasure, memory and oblivion, these vestigial remainders testify to a coming-to-pass and a living-on; but of who, or what?

In its posing of this enigmatic temporality of survival, *Caribou Tracks on Wetland* is an exemplary work with which to begin a consideration of Banerjee's long-term photographic project concerning the effects of so-called anthropogenic climate change on the landscapes and ecologies of what he calls the "Near North" of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and its border regions. Shown in venues ranging from the Smithsonian Museum to the *The New York Review of Books* to the nongovernmental counter-summit shadowing the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, Banerjee's photographs eschew the typical iconography of crashing glaciers and melancholic polar bears that dominate the visual cultures of climate change discourse, instead calling for us to read the precarious traces, tracks, and vestiges inscribed in the rapidly transforming Arctic landscape. Banerjee's images at once address and interrogate the identity, agency, and responsibility of the *anthropos* that has recently begun to hold itself accountable for the irrevocable destabilization of the naturally-given climatic horizon against which the lives and deaths of human and nonhuman populations have hitherto been assumed to take place.<sup>2</sup> Recalling Eduardo Cadava's axiom that "the possibility of history is bound to the survival of the traces of what is past and to our ability to read those traces as traces," Banerjee's landscapes of survival, as I will call them, enact a politics of both memory and futurity in which the question of climate change is exposed to claims for what activists recently converging on Copenhagen for the COP15 summit have begun to call "climate justice."<sup>3</sup>

The imperative of survival sounded by Banerjee's images is thus situated between a) a quasi-transcendental register concerned with the temporal structure of life-in-general b) a biopolitical concern with the uneven allocation of economic, ecological, and mediatic life-support systems across the globe and c) a self-reflexive meditation on the violence of photography as a medium that simultaneously freezes and immolates the actuality of life, thus allowing life to outlive itself as a mediatic or archival trace that opens onto an incalculable future. Read in relation to Banerjee's photographs, survival thus emerges as a polyvalent keyword for thinking through critical climate change, understood as both an incalculable alteration of the planetary climate system as well as the ethico-

political reorientation of the 21st century Humanities in response to the latter crisis.

## 2.

In a now-famous passage from his final interview, Jacques Derrida grants survival a quasi-transcendental status. As if stipulating a protocol of reading to his audience with regard to his own imminent end from beyond the grave, Derrida offers a certain affirmation of life as an irreducible force at work in the apparent finality of death. Derrida's affirmation does not of course involve the simple sublation of death into a triumphant continuity of life, but rather an unsettling of both poles that exposes their mutual dependency and contamination. Derrida describes this undecidable impasse in terms of *survival*, or "living-on":

Life is survival. To survive means to continue to live, but also to live after death. All of the concepts that have helped my work, especially those of the trace or the spectral, were linked to 'survival' as a structural dimension. Survival constitutes the very structure of what we call existence. We are structurally survivors, marked by the structure of the trace, of the testament. Everything I have said about survival as the complication of the life-death opposition proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. Survival, this life after life, life more than life, the most intense life possible.<sup>4</sup>

In a moving obituary published in a special issue of the arts journal *Grey Room*, Cadava marks this passage as an exemplary deconstructive lesson concerning the memory of deconstruction itself. According to Cadava, if deconstruction is to survive, or better, if deconstruction *qua* survival is to survive beyond its academic entombment, if it is to have stakes, claims or effects in the future, it would be necessary for us, Derrida's survivors, to move the "multiple legacies" of deconstruction in new directions, requiring that articulate them unforeseen histories, discourses, and problem-sets including "politics, religion, economics, ideology, rights, nationalism, racism, colonialism, genocide, torture, the media, university institutions, capitalist imperialisms of all kinds, rogue states, the war

on terror ... ” (“Derrida’s Futures” 77). Collectively, these problem-sets constitute what Cadava calls “the signature of ‘our time,’” the ethico-political urgency of which he signals by putting the phrase “our time” in quotation marks in order to mark the non-self-identity of both the “we” and that “time” that such a putative collective subject would share. Cadava’s litany of *topoi* closely echoes that put forth by Derrida himself in *Specters of Marx*, including what appears from our current vantage point to be a conspicuous absence: the question of ecological crisis in general and planetary climate-change in particular.<sup>5</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to account for this strange silence, survival can nevertheless be “set to work” in thinking climate change and the conflicts surround it as precisely as an unhinging or disjoining of what Cadava calls “our time.”<sup>6</sup>

The setting-to-work of survival entails, among other things, a consideration of the histories within which the word has been inscribed. In particular, it is relevant to note the ubiquity of survival as an ideogeme in Northern discourses of environmental crisis since the late 1960’s, when books, conferences, and reports with titles such as *The Crisis of Survival*, *Science and Survival*, *Blueprint for Survival*, and *Ecological Conscience: Values for Survival* began to proliferate. Appealing to a general precariousness of the human species preceding any merely political interest or partition, survival has long functioned as a transcendental imperative concerning the potentially suicidal disjuncture between the inhuman temporality of technological evolution on the one hand and the redemptive cultural, moral, or spiritual self-awareness of humanity on the other.<sup>7</sup> As Al Gore put it recently in the first annual “Green” issue of *Vanity Fair*, “What is at stake is the survival of our civilization and the habitability of the Earth. As one eminent scientist has put it, “the pending question is whether an opposable thumb and a neocortex are a viable combination on this planet.”<sup>8</sup>

Left-wing thinkers such as Wolfgang Sachs have over the past two decades made an important point of critically exposing the depoliticizing implications of what he calls “survival as the *new raison d’être* of planetary management”—i.e. the positing of the bare biophysical existence of humanity *qua* species as an unquestioned basis on which to make decisions concerning economic development and environmental regulation on the part of global elites.<sup>9</sup> While such critiques have proven indispensable in

establishing ecology as a site of antagonism rather than taken-for-granted consensus, survival can be productively re-mobilized as both a figure of reading and an ethico-political imperative aligned with the concerns of critical climate change put forth in the current volume.

Rather than a mere semantic frill to be sanctimoniously invoked or critically demystified, the survival would need to be recognized in its aporetic structure, which is to say, its suggestion of a fundamental dependence or indebtedness on the part of life for its own endurance in time on a set of sustained and sustaining conditions that are irreducible to the being-present of the life in question.<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler has recently brought the quasi-transcendental aporia of survival—"the very structure of existence" as Derrida calls it—into dialogue with an analysis of what she calls the "uneven allocation of precarity" in an expanded global frame of biopolitics. For Butler, the "survivability" of lives depends not only on the reliable allocation of material life-support networks, but also, and perhaps more primordially, the conditions of the "representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way? This problem concerns the media, at the most general level, since a life can be accorded a value only on the condition that it is perceivable as a life" (*Frames of War* 51). In other words, crucial among the conditions of non-life on which life depends for its continuation—the "sustained and sustaining conditions of life"—are those mediatic practices and aesthetic frames through which lives are able to appear as livable, grievable, and thus worthy of protection. As Butler puts it, "in this way, media and survival are linked" (*Frames of War* 181).

Banerjee is concerned with precisely such a relay between media and survival, which he stages in terms of the specific formal and historical problems pertaining to photography as a medium. The images exemplify Cadava's axiom that "there can be no image that is not about destruction and survival, and this is especially the case in the image of ruin" ("Lapsus Imaginus"). Banerjee's images are "images of ruin" in several overlapping aspects—in their general status as photographic traces, in their picturing of the destructive effects of climate-change, and in their ungrounding of the humanity routinely held accountable in mainstream ecological

discourses for its own suicidal undermining of the life-support systems of the planet.

Banerjee stages this ungrounding in part by photographing the very ground of the Arctic region itself, a ground that is rapidly losing its physical stability and life-support capacity as it is exposed to the ever-intensifying quantity of solar energy trapped in the Earth's atmosphere by the residual traces of two hundred years of fossil-fuel capitalism. Specifically, many of Banerjee's photographs are concerned with the ruination of permafrost, the frozen layer of compacted soil, decaying vegetal matter, and living vegetation that underlies much of the Arctic terrain and acts as an essential support to regional life-forms. Banerjee's photographs of the dissolving ground simultaneously perform a kind of second-order allegorical meditation on the relay between the disjunctive historical temporality of climate change, on the one hand, and that of photography on the other. Indeed, Banerjee's images are structured by a play of freezing and unfreezing in which the photographic immobilization, displacement, and public witnessing of otherwise ephemeral physical transformations to the landscape becomes among the conditions of possibility for the preservation of the life-forms depending upon it—"survival and media are linked."

Banerjee's photographic project at once insists on the centrality of visual media to addressing climate change while complicating visibility itself, suggesting that a certain encounter with invisibility if not blindness is the condition of any responsible engagement with climate crisis. In Banerjee's photographs it is in what we *do not see* and *cannot be seen* that the most important work is done.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the evidentiary traces of climate-change phenomena that appear in Banerjee's photographs only do so on the condition that they resist being reduced to sheerly visual images; rather, the photographs speak to a certain non-self-evidence of evidence, calling out to be read *as* texts and *in relation* to other texts that are not confined to the images themselves as considered in an idealist vacuum. Indeed, Banerjee forcefully emphasizes the importance of supplementary elements to the operations of his photographs, asking us to read the formal structuring of color and light, figure and ground, detail and prospect, scale and perspective, framing and cropping at work "inside" the image in relation to the social, discursive, and institutional



Figure 2: Subhankar Banerjee, *Caribou Skeleton*, Barter Island  
in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 2006

conditions that mark the circulation, display, and reception of the photograph on the other.

### 3.

In *Caribou Skeleton* a desolate shoreline appears to recede into the distance and curve back towards us at the same time. This circular curving-back is interrupted, however, when the landscape meets a kind of terminal-point in the upper-left-hand corner of the image, giving way to a seascape in which the horizontal dividing-line between water and sky has been all but effaced in a formless expanse of grey. The incomplete recursivity of the shoreline is thrown into relief by the darkness of the sand immediately at the water's edge, the first of several succeeding bands of chromatic saturation and accumulated detritus indicative of the natural ebb and flow of the tide. But the rhythmic patterns of the tidal residue are unsettled by the striking presence of a bleached spinal column and rib-cage lying adjacent to the sea, the zoological identity of which is sug-

gested by the title of the photograph. In an earlier era of the arts and humanities, we might have been content to read these skeletal remains as an allegorical reminder of transience. Such a reminder would keep in check the arrogant aspirations to timeless monumentality on the part of a humanity in denial of its own exposure to the ruinous finitude it shares with other mundane creatures, undercutting any aesthetic idealization of nature as a realm of enduring plenitude: *et in arcadia ego*. Yet when read in relation to the extensive caption Banerjee insists on attaching to it, these photographic remains function less as ciphers of a worldly finitude as such than as an occasion for politico-ecological reading of the ever-intensifying derangement of seasonal and atmospheric dynamics in the polar region for both human and nonhuman populations:

Nearly a thousand caribou from the Teshepuk Lake herd came over to the ANWR, making a 240 mile journey in the winter of 2006. Robert Thompson, my Inupiat friend from Kaktovik stated that this had never happened before, and that the tundra froze and that the caribous came looking for food. The tundra also froze around Kaktovik, resulting in the death of several hundred animals that winter. I photographed the skeleton of such an animal the following summer. The Arctic is experiencing rain during autumn and winter months, a severe climate change phenomenon. The rain is causing ice-crust on the tundra... Ice crust formation resulting from freeze-thaw events affects most Arctic land mammals by encapsulating their food in ice, severely limiting foraging ability and killing plants... dramatic population crashes resulting from ice crusting due to freeze-thaw events have been reported and their frequency appears to have increased over recent decades. (Caption, "Caribou Skeleton")

In other words, the altered migratory trajectories of the Caribou is itself an index of global warming, as is their "unnatural" expiration on terrestrial grounds over which the creatures would not usually pass—including the unseasonably wet lands in which their tracks are impressed in a photograph such as *Caribou Tracks on Wetland*. Banerjee thus insists that we read these remains and traces as in some way anthropogenic, as

self-portraits of humanity. Yet he also questions the putative unity of that humanity in its own self-induced risk by conjuring the voice of Robert Thompson, his “Inupiat friend” who provides the artist with a local assessment of the ecological implications of freeze-thaw dynamics not only for caribou populations, but also for the indigenous populations whose cultural and economic practices revolve around the relatively predictable patterns and dynamics of the caribou as a source of material sustenance.

Banerjee’s attention to the concerns and claims of indigenous communities unevenly exposed to the effects of climate change should be understood in relation to his critical transformation historical genre of landscape photography. In his numerous statements and interviews, Banerjee has acknowledged an originary complicity with this legacy by way of a biographical fable that functions as one among many contexts in which we should read his images. Emerging from a middle-class post-colonial Indian background, Banerjee immigrated to New Mexico in 1990 to study theoretical physics, and then computer science, and later took up a job as a research scientist in Seattle in the late 1990s, where he developed an amateur interest in photographing the governmentally-protected “wilderness preserves” of the Pacific Northwest. Banerjee soon set his sights on Alaska—not the mere touristic landscapes observed from luxury cruise ships, but rather the rugged wilds of the “Far North” in the Arctic region, areas only accessible with the hired assistance of Native-American guides. According to Banerjee, “In late 2000, when I started planning for my Arctic journey, my main motivation was to go to a place untrammelled by tourism or industry, a so-called pristine wilderness or ‘last American frontier.’” Having gone in search of a pristine wilderness, Banerjee’s contact with native guides, initially confined to the level of a sheer economic exchange quite familiar to colonial and postcolonial tourist scenarios around the globe, soon became a form of ecological re-education. According to Banerjee, “After eight years of intense engagement with the Arctic land, animals, and peoples I now think about the Arctic very differently. I no longer see the Arctic as the ‘last frontier’; instead I see it as the most connected land on earth,” as evidenced in phenomena ranging from the melting of permafrost to the migration of “Persistent Organic Pollutants” from the exhaust-pipes and power plants of U.S. cities into the bloodstreams of human and nonhuman Arctic populations, to the

more visually dramatic activities of transnational energy companies prospecting in the region for fossil-fuel deposits that will further intensify the dynamics of global warming.

Banerjee situates his account of this transition from a naive desire for “wilderness” to an ecologically informed post-colonial approach to the region in terms of the history of U.S. landscape photography dating back to mid-19th century era of imperial expansion through to the formation of the National Parks systems and beyond. Rather than merely depict preexistent Western landscapes, according to Banerjee, “photography has played a critical role in the American land conservation movement from its inception. The medium not only helped preserve many important lands but also helped define how we relate to these lands, how we imagine them, and our place in them.” Banerjee cites the work of Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, both of whom worked for the US geological survey in 1860s and 1870s to survey the lands along the transcontinental railroad in terms of their possibilities for capitalist resource-extraction and settler-colonization.<sup>12</sup> Banerjee notes that, ironically in light of the mandate of the geological survey with which he was working, Jackson’s photographs of the Yellowstone plateau became key points of reference for the US Congress declaring Yellowstone to be a “National Park” in 1872, with numerous other Western sites to follow thereafter. According to Banerjee, Jackson’s photographs canonized a “strategy of picturing land-as-scenery, something to be seen and appreciated from a distance and for its aesthetic beauty.” Effacing both the preexistent histories and ecologies of native American peoples as well as the photographer’s own role in colonial expansion, these “iconic images introduced Eastern viewers to the idea of vast, open, and majestic landscapes further in the west. Through these photographs, a viewer could imagine himself in that space—with a tourist’s sense of belonging or entitlement. This voyeuristic and distanced relationship to the land, this idealized notion of landscape, practiced with great success by artists such as Ansel Adams, characterized much [landscape] photography of the 20th century.”

In one fell swoop, Banerjee at once testifies to the rhetorical and ideological power of this photographic legacy as an active historical force in its own right, and indicts this legacy for its complicity with an “idealization” of landscape that implicitly contributed to the ecological crises that



Figure 3: Subhankar Banerjee, *Exposed Coffin*, Barter Island  
in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 2006

we confront today. In an exemplary analysis, Banerjee writes, “this photographic approach ... did as much to destroy the land as it did to preserve it.” First of all, such a fetishization of isolated sites of aesthetic beauty contributed to the intensification of touristic visitation of these very sites, thus contributing to the further disintegration of the putative purity that made them attractive to visitors in the first place. More urgently, however, the fetishistic isolation of such “natural sites” enforced an ideology of wilderness as a sacred zone of purity set over and against the realm of the human, thus implicitly marking such places as outside history, and other places as “unnatural” and thus unworthy of consideration in ecological terms. Echoing the environmental historian William Cronon, Banerjee suggests that this ideological framing of wilderness resulted in more than two decades worth of environmentalist campaigning devoted to the preservation of wilderness as an aesthetic amenity defined over and against the menace of “human intrusion” while ignoring the intensification of local, regional, national, and global ecological crises related to unsustain-

able patterns of capitalist development and the uneven allocation of environmental risk for differently situated human populations.<sup>13</sup>

Banerjee contests hegemonic visions of the region as historically “untouched” in a number of ways. For instance, in a remarkable photograph entitled *Exposed Coffin* that inversely echoes the compositional layout of *Caribou Skeleton*, we see a narrow strip of vegetated land situated a few feet above a beach bearing the regularized marks of tidal protension and recession. Appearing prominently in the foreground is a crudely fashioned rectangular wooden box surrounded by an outline of eroded soil; scattered around this eroded recession are bleached-out members suggestive at once of disturbed skeletal remains and the arbitrary driftwood otherwise cast across the beach. Banerjee writes that, according to an Inupiat friend, the coffin would not pertain to an indigenous inhabitant—who would have been buried according to culturally specific protocols and markers in established funerary zones—but rather an North American or Russian whaler from the late 19th century, which is to say, a primitive precursor to contemporary energy-industrialists looking to the Northern region as a site of resource-extraction. The buried coffin emerged from the frozen ground as a result of anthropogenic thawing; according to Banerjee’s interlocutor, it is likely that the skeletal contents of the coffin were disturbed and scattered by a polar bear displaced from further North searching for food as Caribou herds move further south due to the drastic flooding/freezing of their traditional foraging areas.

*Exposed Coffin* and its caption are exemplary for Banerjee’s practice overall. Banerjee records the insidious feedback loops between energy-extraction and the very carbon-based climate-change processes that make such extraction possible through the thawing of Arctic ground; yet this thawing of the ground also inadvertently brings forth a kind of historical testimony as to the irreducible imbrications of the region in transnational geoenomic processes, thus undermining any appeal to the simple “preservation” of the Arctic as a pristine wilderness that would be set over and against “man-made” effects.



Figure 4: Subhankar Banerjee, *Known and Unknown Tracks*, Teshekpuk Lake Wetland, 2006

#### 4.

As Banerjee has often noted, among the most effective ideological strategies mobilized by the energy industry and its advocates has been to portray ANWR as a “barren, frozen wasteland,” awaiting capitalist investment to bring forth its full productive potential. For decades, liberal activists and legislators in the US have countered this image of the region as a “wasteland” by emphasizing its aesthetic beauty and ecological fecundity as an “untouched” wilderness in the lineage of John Muir and Ansel Adams. While opposed at one level, these two images converge in their occultation of the historical covalence of the region with the processes and contradictions of capitalist modernity, including “climate change, resource wars, and migrations of toxins [that] makes the region a reminder of the consequences of our carbon footprint.”

Banerjee’s invocation of the ecological trope of “our carbon footprint” returns us to the enigma of the vestige at work in *Caribou Tracks on Wetland*.<sup>14</sup> According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the vestige is “just a touch right at the ground ... the vestige is the remains of a step, a *pas*. It is not its image,

for the step consists of nothing other than its own vestige" (Nancy, "Vestige" 96). Rather than preserve a determinate presence, the vestige marks an irrecoverable passage that cannot be resolved into an identifiable image that would enable us to secure a position of cognitive mastery in relation to the traces in question. The vestige testifies to an irrecoverable passage that nonetheless leaves behind a kind of anonymous signature severed from any limited identity, agency, or responsibility: "a vestige shows that someone has passed but not who it is" (Nancy, "Vestige," 94).

The condition of non-identity and non-knowledge associated by Nancy with the vestige resonates closely with Banerjee's photograph *Known and Unknown Tracks*. Taken from an elevated but non-vertical aerial perspective, the photograph records the infinitely receding procession of three mechanically straight parallel track lines across a flat, greenish-tan plain bordered near the top of the image by indeterminate bodies of water. Vanishing into the distance, these lines intersect at a perpendicular angle near the bottom of the picture with an equally mechanical track line that proceeds horizontally, thus suggesting the parameters of a kind of calculative grid that could in principle extend itself in all directions across the surface of the earth. Traversing this rectilinear configuration of mechanical tracks, we witness the faint tracework of infinitesimal trails proceeding in a haphazard but determinate direction toward the horizon-line as a kind of counter-inscription that recalls the vestiges that simultaneously appear and disappear in *Caribou Tracks on Wetland*.

Even more overtly than in the latter photograph, however, the identity of the being responsible for the tracks in this photograph is rendered uncertain. While at first glance the photograph might appear to put forth a binary opposition between the rectilinear gridwork of the "human" track and the "natural" meandering of the migratory pathways of animal populations, the title of the photograph deliberately puts any such opposition in question—which are the "known" tracks, which are the "unknown"? Far from indulging a aesthetics of mystery for its own sake, Banerjee is at pains to mark the specific agencies at work in the physical creation of the mechanical lines to which we bear witness in the photograph: "transnational energy companies have for years lobbied the US congress to gain access to the fossil-fuel deposits underlying the Arctic regions of Alaska." The intensifying exploitation of such energy-resources, indexed by the

trails left behind by extraction-equipment in the increasingly soggy tundra of the Arctic, both benefits from and exacerbates the phenomena of climate change. As permafrost and glaciers thaw due to the centuries-long accumulation of greenhouse gases, new deposits of long-frozen energy-resources (especially coal and natural gas) become more easily available for corporate exploitation, thus creating a massively unsustainable feedback-loop between profit-driven resource-extraction and the biospheric life-support systems of the planet. The “ground zero” of such effects is the very Arctic region now being targeted for energy-development, and, more specifically, the politico-ecological networks linking human and nonhuman populations in that region.

Thus, the animal tracks that faintly appear in both *Known and Unknown Tracks* and *Caribous Tracks in Wetland* are not “natural” in any simple sense; though physically created by animals passing over the terrestrial surface of the Arctic, the trajectory of these animals is marked by anthropogenic forces, as indirectly evidenced by the encroaching inundation of the shore line at the top of the photograph and the complex alteration of migratory patterns related to the freezing and thawing of permafrost explained in the caption above. Should these “known and unknown tracks” thus be regarded as a kind of anthropogenic self-portrait? Should the “unknown” dimension of the tracks be assimilated back into the self-consciousness of “humanity”? To reiterate, Banerjee does not aim to create ambiguity as to the immediate cause of the physical marks he documents in the landscape for its own sake; but he puts the immediacy of this causality into question, expanding the scope of responsibility from the specific machines and companies involved in the exploitation of Arctic territories to the broader policy architectures which enable such activities to go forward, the ideological tropes that support such policies, and ultimately the citizenry that has either actively supported or passively acquiesced to the corporate colonization of the Arctic for the purposes of fossil-fuel extraction. The boundaries of the “we” implied by Banerjee’s invocation of “our carbon footprint” are thus deliberately open-ended, implicating any and everyone who views his images, but especially those of us who uncritically partake of and legitimize contemporary fossil-fuel capitalism and the uneven allocation of ecological risk it entails



Figure 5: Subhankar Banerjee, *Gwich'in and the Caribou*—Charlie Swaney and Jimmy John, near Arctic Village, 2007

## 5.

While throughout his work over the past decade Banerjee has used his photographs and their supplementary frames (discursive, institutional, presentational) as a platform from which to amplify the political claims of indigenous peoples unevenly effected by climate change, he has until recently avoided creating figurative images of such groups. This is in part due to reluctance to overtly engage the legacy of so-called “salvage ethnography” running through US landscape photography, in which the visible presence of indigenous people in the landscape is only registered in terms of a melancholic meditation on their inevitable, if tragic, demise with the “progress” of capitalist modernity.

Banerjee is well-informed about the problematic “refusal of covalence” operative in traditional anthropological documentary, in which the “over there” of a so-called remote location is coded as pertaining to the “back then” of a pre-historic temporality set apart from the global modernities of both the artist and audience. In his photographic series *Gwich'in and the Caribou* (2007), for instance, Banerjee scrupulously documents

the hybrid technological apparatus comprising contemporary Gwich'in hunting practice, in which snowmobiles, polar-fleece gear, radio-systems, and rifles cooperate with skinning knives and inherited tracking techniques in killing and preparing Caribou for both economic and cultural purposes. Rather than an idealized harmony with nature, Banerjee foregrounds the sacrificial violence of indigenous people's hunting practices through the chromatic intensity of caribou blood against the snow-covered arctic landscape.

Banerjee considers these portraits, and his photographic project more broadly to involve a displacement of "land as scenery" by what he calls "land-as-home." However, home for Banerjee ceases to be a matter of a spatially bounded and ontologically grounded place and becomes instead a meditation on the undecidability of the boundaries of the *oikos* and the identity of those who dwell therein; on the one hand, the phrase "land-as-home" insists that we read the landscapes in question as sites of inhabitation for intersecting human and nonhuman populations, rather than either empty wastes or pristine wilderness. On the other hand, Banerjee's phrase also suggests that the polar region in question is "our" home as well. Indeed, the polar ice caps are the fundamental climate-control mechanism of the earth, having served for millennia as a kind of axial balance of the atmospheric, oceanic, and meteorological patterns that made life possible throughout the planet.

Faced with an unprecedented anthropogenic unbalancing of this polar axiality, however, Banerjee's evocation of "land-as-home" does not simply bring together the "here" and the "there" in an all-encompassing global *oikos*, or household. Rather, Banerjee asks us to read planetary ecology in general and the "Near North" in particular in terms of the unhomely, or the uncanny.<sup>15</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on the enigmatic logic of the vestige, referred to above, are echoed in slightly later paper entitled "Uncanny Landscape." According to Nancy, landscape as a modern Western aesthetic genre emerges from a logic of what he calls "depopulation" over and against the "country" as a space of dwelling and cultivation for the figure of the peasant. While marking "the peace of the cloud and the order of the oak, the uncultivated earth on which the deer passes," landscape *qua* genre is marked by a certain "uncanny estrangement [that] occurs in



Figure 6: Subhankar Banerjee, *Storm over Kasegaluk Lagoon, along the Chukchi Sea coast*, 2006

the suspension of presence.” Nancy continues, “this suspension is always a question of passage, or a passing on. A landscape is always a landscape of time, and doubly so: it is a time of year (a season) and a time of day (morning, noon, or evening), as well as a kind of weather [*un temps*] rain or snow, sun or mist. In the presentation of this time ... the present of representation can do nothing other than render infinitely sensible the passing of time, the fleeting instability of what is shown” (Nancy, “Vestige” 94). Among other things, what is “shown” in its fleeting instability is depopulation itself, the voiding of human presence as the condition of landscape—a point echoed by Banerjee in his attention to the complicity of traditional landscape photography with a dialectic of colonial expansion and aesthetic preservation of “untrammelled wilderness.” Thus depopulated, landscape projects itself as a realm of purely natural temporality; but it is nevertheless frozen or suspended into a singular moment by artistic representation, arresting the very temporality to which it would bear witness in its claim to be devoid of human presence. The uncanniness of landscape identified by Nancy in the very origin of the genre—both its originary “depopulation” of the country and its paradox-

ical freezing of natural temporality—is exacerbated by Banerjee throughout his *oeuvre*, but its apogee is arguably the photograph *Storm over Kasegulak Lagoon*.

Like *Caribou Tracks on Wetland* and *Known and Unknown Tracks*, the photograph is taken from an aerial elevation, but nevertheless provides enough perspectival orientation for the establishment of a horizon line *vis-à-vis* some modicum of a landscape. However, in this image, any terrestrial land-mass has all but succumbed to inundation, and the horizon-line between sea and sky has itself begun to dissolve into the faint monochromatic grey of an all-encompassing storm cloud. A few patches and swathes of solid ground appear to persist in the right portion of the image, and some residual resistance between water and land is indicated in a series of faint bands of surf that proceed out into the seascape in an echo of the eroding shoreline. As they curve around the shoreline and down into bottom section of the photograph, these surf-lines begin to mingle with a smattering of white fragments, some of which cling precariously to the shoreline in the bottom right-hand corner.

The undecidability between the tossing of surf and the clinging of ice might suggest an immemorial seasonal transition; but by now we know to read such climactic phenomena in terms of this irreducible, though still uncertain, relay with anthropogenic processes. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin's remark on Eugene Atget—Banerjee photographs every single inch of the Arctic as if it were the scene of a crime. To reiterate, the culprit of this crime is not identified in any finite way, thus preserving a certain structural anonymity that both implicates and exceeds the specific culpability of capitalist energy developers, their deliberate advocates, and their unwitting accomplices in everyday energy consumption. And, while the victim of such crimes is also in principle indeterminate, Banerjee is emphatic as to who will—and already is—bearing the brunt of such climatological disequilibrium.

In the caption to *Storm over Kasegulak Lagoon*, Banerjee writes:

With climate change the Inupiat people of the Alaskan Arctic Coastal Region in recent years have been experiencing more frequent and severe-intensity storm than anytime before they can remember [M]ore open water open water on the ocean ... combined with severe storms are making traditional hunt-

ing more dangerous. The international scientific community has stated that rising temperatures are altering the Arctic coastline and much larger changes are projected to occur during this century as the result of reduced sea ice, thawing permafrost, and sea-level rise. Thinner less extensive sea-ice creates more open water, allowing stronger wave generation by winds, thus increasing wave-induced erosion along Arctic shores. Sea-level rise and thawing coastal permafrost exacerbate this problem. The village of Shishmaref, located on an island just off the coast of Northern Alaska and inhabited for two thousand years, is now facing the prospect of evacuation.

Combined with this caption, the temporal traces of erosion and dissolution frozen in Banerjee's photograph place Nancy's trope of "depopulation" in a new light; depopulation would thus no longer encompass simply an ideological operation of landscape as an aesthetic practice, but rather, or also, the physical effacement of the life-support systems of indigenous people and the creation of a new biopolitical category of the "climate refugee."<sup>16</sup> Banerjee rearticulates these two senses of depopulation, presenting a landscape apparently devoid of humanity that we cannot help but read in terms of the ever-intensifying dissolution of the very ground upon which communities such as Shishmaref depend for their existence. Banerjee chooses not to picture Shishmaref and its inhabitants directly, but rather to evoke the memory of their potential loss—and resistance to that loss—in advance. Far from the imperial nostalgia of the 19th century frontier-painter George Catlin and early 20th century photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis, who presented indigenous people as melancholic specimens of a "doomed race," Banerjee's depopulated, uncanny landscape acts as a "gesture of address [that] affirms the right to memory of a future survival, a *reste*, where it might otherwise be effaced and its effacement silenced" (Keenan 159).

Such a "right to a memory of future survival," informs the claims of contemporary Inuit activists such as those put forward at Klimaforum09, the nongovernmental counter-summit shadowing the 2009 Copenhagen climate negotiations. If in mainline ecological discourse survival has historically involved a narcissistic appeal to humanity as perpetrator, victim, and savior of the climate crisis—epitomized by the Save Our Selves



Figure 7: “Climate Justice or Chaos?”

campaign associated with the Live Earth concerts and its accompanying *Global Warming Survival Guide*—indigenous activists have recoded survival as a biopolitical rights-claim that seeks redress for the uneven allocation of climate-related vulnerability along already-existing lines of marginality and disenfranchisement.<sup>17</sup> As Banerjee himself puts it during a presentation of his work with Gwich’in activist Sarah James at Klimaforum09, “climate change is a great human rights issue ... right to survival is one of the first rights people should have—access to their food, access to their water—and that’s being seriously threatened up in the Arctic” (Interview with Amy Goodman). The right to survival invoked by Banerjee is irreducible to a question of sheer material resources, for the latter—hunting for instance—are themselves inscribed in specific cultural repertoires, technical practices, and ecological knowledges that make up a kind of ethnomnemonic archive that is itself threatened by climate-related displacements such as that with which Shishmaref is currently undergoing (Sutter). Thus a certain survival of historical memory is inextricable from the survival of living beings. However, historical memory is not only a matter of a cultural tradition in the limited sense; it is also a kind of bear-

ing-witness to the incalculable violence of colonialism as it lives on in the present, making any “tradition” a kind of remnant or survival that must be kept alive by something other than itself.

Such an avowal of the accumulated burdens of colonial and postcolonial history is the starting point for the discourse of climate justice as articulated by indigenous and other activists at Klimaforum09, including three members of a youth delegation from Shishmaref who traveled to Copenhagen as “witnesses to the impact of climate change” (Sutter).

Climate justice demands that any response to climate crisis take into account the historically disproportionate responsibilities for greenhouse emissions on the part of corporations, governments and consumers in the Global North, and the uneven allocation of the environmental costs involved among already-vulnerable communities—including those within the Global North itself.

Climate justice thus entails a kind of reparations program that goes far beyond the calculus of emissions-reduction, calling in addition for substantial financial assistance with systems of mitigation, protection, adaptation, and sustainable, equitable development for those already exposed to catastrophic climate change or who will be exposed to it in the near future.<sup>18</sup> However, climate justice cannot be reduced to a series of specific grievances and proposals, even though the latter are obviously essential to it. Informed by the polyvalent imperative of survival, claims for climate justice also have the power to introduce a kind of disjunction in our sense of time and history analogous to the alteration of environmental cycles and horizons effected by climate change itself. Etymologically, climate is already a matter of “the tendency of incline or drift away from understanding ... what falls from the sky and what falls away from understanding” (Cadava, *Emerson* 4). Climate justice, then, would not entail a simple regulative ideal known in advance that would stabilize horizons and restore a harmonious domestic balance to the planetary *oikos*. Like climate itself, in the radical sense, climate justice would open onto an incalculable future that would nonetheless be structurally haunted by the injustices and violences of the past. Marked by traces, trails, and vestiges of a global ecological history in which the self-destructive activity of “humanity” is put under erasure, Banerjee’s uncanny landscapes speak to a project of climate justice that “carries life beyond present life or actual

being there... not toward death but toward a living-on, namely a trace of which life and death would themselves be traces and traces of traces, a survival whose possibility in advance comes to disjoin or disadjust the identity to itself of the living present" (*Specters of Marx* x).

### Notes

1. Vandana Shiva and J. Banopadhyay, "Science, Environment, and Democratic Rights" (1985). < <http://www.pucl.org/from-archives/Industries-envirn-resettlement/science-envirn.htm>>.
2. The NASA Earth Observatory Glossary defines "anthropogenic" as "Made by people or resulting from human activities. Usually used in the context of emissions that are produced as a result of human activities." <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Glossary/?mode=all>. According to the Merriam-Webster Science Dictionary, anthropogenic means "Caused or influenced by humans. Anthropogenic carbon dioxide is that portion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that is produced directly by human activities, such as the burning of fossil fuels, rather than by such processes as respiration and decay."
3. Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, 64. On climate justice, examined further below, see [www.actforclimatejustice.org](http://www.actforclimatejustice.org), where climate justice is defined as "a vision to dissolve and alleviate the unequal burdens created by climate change. As a form of environmental justice, climate justice is the fair treatment of all people and freedom from discrimination with the creation of policies and projects that address climate change and the systems that create climate change and perpetuate discrimination." On the centrality of this concept to the mobilizations in Copenhagen coalescing around the KlimaForum09 countersummit ([klimaforum09.org](http://klimaforum09.org)), see Mark Hertsgaard, "A Planetary Movement."
4. Jacques Derrida, cited in Eduardo Cadava, "Derrida's Futures," 20, 76. This passage is discussed in a similar vein by Judith Butler in "On Never Having Learned How to Live," 27–34. Pheng Cheah discusses this passage in terms of the "untimeliness" of the political in Derrida's work, which is to say, the irreducibility of the political to a self-present ideal of community or sovereignty in "The Untimely Secret of Democracy," in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, 79–80.
5. Among the very few mentions made by Derrida of the question of ecological crisis is in a difficult little text entitled "Economies of the Crisis" (1983), reprinted in *Jacques Derrida, Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*. Announcing a "crisis of crisis"—the withdrawal of any stable horizon that could then fall into crisis to be addressed, ameliorated, or readjusted as such by philosophical or scientific expertise—Derrida writes that "in its turn

in crisis, the concept of crisis would be the signature of a last symptom, the convulsive effort to save a 'world' that we no longer inhabit: no more oikos, economy, ecology, livable site in which we are 'at home'" (70). For Derrida, discourses of crisis "economize" crisis, implicitly setting up the continuity and predictability of non-crisis as the normal state of life. Derrida's point is not of course to ignore or dismiss the actuality of economic or ecological crises, but to situate them within a certain continuity of instability, volatility, or incalculability that would displace any ideal of "being at home," for instance, as the proper state of existence to be restored by an ecological program. Derrida's phrase "livable site" is tantalizing, but he does not pursue it, treating it instead as an example of the metaphysical unity or groundedness that crisis-discourse holds forth as an object of imminent loss or destruction. Later on in the text, Derrida posits a series of questions that are quite germane to the question of critical climate change: "Us?... who is talking about crisis? Who is talking the most about it right now? Where? To whom? In what form? In view of what effects and what interests? By playing on what 'representations'? Who are the individuals, which are the interest groups, the countries that hold forth this discourse of the crisis, hold it forth or hold onto it?" (71).

6. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Appendix: The Setting to Work of Deconstruction," in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. For Spivak, "setting to work" is something that would exceed the "descriptive and/or formalizing practices of the academic or disciplinary calculus. As long as the othering of deconstructive philosophy remains confined to discourses at least accessible to related academic disciplines...it gives rise to useful but restricted debates." Spivak goes on to suggest an encounter between deconstruction and the "marginalized cultural systems" that mark "counterglobalist or alternative development activism." However, she cautions that even in the "rare case that it risks setting itself to work by breaking its frame" by engaging such activism, "[deconstruction] is still not identical with the setting to work of deconstruction outside the formalizing calculus specific to the academic institution" (431). Spivak thus intimates that "deconstruction" is something that occurs in or even as the world, and that deconstruction in the limited academic sense is always already playing catch up to an incalculable world that precedes it. Indeed, a certain deconstruction is already at work in both "anthropogenic" climate change, as well as in the rights-claims for "climate justice" that have recently begun to be made by the "counterglobalist or alternative development activists" invoked by Spivak, for whom climate change has in recent years become a primary site of antagonism. In his own modest way, Banerjee, the photographer under consideration here, has attempted to set his images to work along the lines suggested by Spivak, learning from and collaborating with indigenous activists in a variety of ways.
7. See especially *The Ecological Conscience: Values for Survival*. For an account of the conflict between Malthusian and social-democratic interpretations of the ubiquitous ecological trope of species-survival in the 1960's and 1970's, see

Andrew Feenberg's "The Commoner-Erlich Debate: Environmentalism and the Politics of Survival."

8. Al Gore, "The Moment of Truth," *Vanity Fair*. On anxieties about the self-undermining of humanity by the becoming-autonomous of technical developments that belong to and spring from the evolutionary process of "hominization" itself, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, Part I.).
9. Wolfgang Sachs, "Environment," in Sachs, ed. *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. A similar critique of the term was launched by a young Jean Baudrillard at the 1970 Aspen environmental summit, where he remarked that "what is at stake is not the survival of the human species but the survival of political power" ("The Environmental Witch-Hunt"). For Baudrillard and many others at the time, ecology was seen as a kind humanist smokescreen that functioned to siphon off the antagonistic energies marking the capitalist system in favor of a "global village" harmoniously unified in its quest to preserve itself from its own self-induced crisis.
10. Understood in light of the disjunctive temporality of externalized or automated technical devices, systems, and programs that at once sustain and put at risk the status of the human, Bernard Stiegler marks survival as "the pursuit of life by means other than life." See Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 137. On the constitutive indebtedness on the part of the living to the heteronymous "gift of time"—which includes but is not exhausted by the question of technics—see Cheah, "The Untimely Secret of Democracy," 75–77.
11. See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in Keith Moxey, ed. *Aesthetics, Art History, Visual Studies*. "Visual culture entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked." This premise informs Mitchell's groundbreaking postcolonial genealogy of landscape aesthetics in Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, a book that resonates closely with Banerjee's own critical inhabitation of the traditions of US landscape photography.
12. See Alan Trachtenberg, "Naming the View" in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*, 119–163.
13. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. Cronon's volume contains one of the generative academic treatments of the U.S. environmental justice movement, Giovanna Di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice."
14. For the founding statement of "ecological footprint analysis," see Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, "Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth." The authors describe ecological footprint analysis as "a planning tool that can help translate sustainability concerns into public

action ... it accounts for the flows of energy and matter to and from any defined economy, and converts these into the corresponding land/water are required to support such flows,” 3. Over the past decade, this paradigm has been extended to a calculation of the fossil-fuel usage and corresponding CO<sub>2</sub> emissions involved in specific activities of corporations, governments, and consumers, providing a kind of metric for ecological self-admonishment that in many cases slips over into self-congratulation when this or that activity, policy, or decision is said to have “reduced one’s carbon footprint.” Banerjee’s use of the term both speaks to the necessity of calculating such ecological responsibilities while also pointing beyond it to the incalculable “ground zero” of the hyperaccumulated carbon footprint left by 200 years’ worth of fossil-fuel capitalism on the Arctic region.

15. On the figure of oikos in ecological discourse and the destabilization thereof vis-à-vis figures of ghosts, haunting, and survivals, see my “Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability in New Orleans.” A key point of reference in the latter essay is Mark Wigley’s discussion of what he calls the “violence of the house” in *The Architecture of Deconstruction*.
16. See the Environmental Justice Foundation report “No Place Like Home: Climate Refugees,” <http://www.ejfoundation.org/page563.html>. “Climate change is set to create millions of environmental refugees—people forced from their homes and land—by rising temperatures, sea-level change and extreme weather events. Many will be among our planet’s poorest and most vulnerable people. These will be the first victims of our failure to prevent uncontrolled climate change. People, who without international help and new binding agreements on assistance, will have nowhere to go and no means to survive. EJF’s ‘No Place Like Home’ campaign is dedicated to arguing their case. Putting the call to governments and our political leaders for a new agreement on environmental refugees, guaranteeing them rights and assistance and a fair claim to our shared world EFJ contends that the formal legal definition of refugees needs to be extended to include those affected by climate change.”
17. Live Earth/David de Rothschild, *The Live Earth Global Warming Survival Handbook: 77 Essential Skills to Stop Climate Change—or Live Through It*. The cover of this book features the ubiquitous icon of a polar bear set afloat in a sea of melted ice, in this case buoyed by a life raft. As the most charismatic and photogenic animal of the North pole, the polar bear has functioned as a somewhat insidious object of both aesthetic appreciation and anthropomorphic projection at the expense of historically informed politico-ecological analysis. However, this creature might be rethought with reference to the etymology of the word Arctic, which derives from the Greek word arktos—bear—which was used to refer to the astral constellation ursa major. Rather than a sheer natural life standing apart from humanity, the arktos was

a tropological figure for reading the orientation of the planet via the stars. Starlight, having traveled thousands of light-years from its now-exhausted source, is always a matter of oblivion—but also survival. As Eduardo Cadava puts it, “Like the photograph that presents what is no longer there, starlight names the trace of a celestial body that has long since vanished. The star is always a kind of ruin. That its light is never identical to itself, is never revealed as such, means that it is always inhabited by a certain distance or darkness” (*Words of Light* 30). Of course, ursa major and arktos are both inscribed in a certain European cosmological tradition, making the very name “Arctic” a cipher of colonial expansion and the occultation of indigenous place-naming systems.

18. See the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, “Inuit Call to Global Leaders: Act Now on Climate Change in the Arctic” released November 13, 2008. <http://www.inuitcircumpolar.com/files/uploads/icc-files/PR-2009-11-13-call-to-action.pdf>

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