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Why Look at Taxidermy Animals? Exhibiting, Curating and Mourning the Sixth Mass Extinction Event

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Why Look at Taxidermy Animals? Exhibiting, Curating and Mourning the Sixth Mass Extinction Event

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Notes on Contributor: Dominic O'Key is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Leeds. His current research explores the cultural meanings of the Sixth Extinction in museums, heritage, critical theory and contemporary literature. His writing has appeared in journals such as *parallax* (2019) and *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* (2020), and in books such as *Animal Biography* (Palgrave, 2018), *Texts, Animals, Environments* (Rombach, 2019) and *Literature and Meat Since 1900* (Palgrave, 2019). He is currently writing a monograph about contemporary literature and human-animal relations, due for publication with Bloomsbury in 2021.

Abstract

What role do museums play in elevating the Sixth Mass Extinction Event within public consciousness? How is an increasing awareness of human-made extinctions and global biodiversity loss transforming the representational techniques employed by natural history curators? And what are the prevailing ideologies and emotional registers of contemporary exhibitions about anthropogenic extinctions? This essay answers these questions by analysing recent natural history exhibitions which explore and communicate the Sixth Extinction through the affects of grief, loss and sadness. By unfolding a tripartite analysis, one which brings together natural history curatorial practices, theoretical critique from critical heritage studies and environmental humanities, *and* anti-institutional activists such as Extinction Rebellion, I make the argument that while these exhibitions have the potential to develop posthumanist practices of curation that disrupt the dominant anthroponormativity of natural history, there remain unresolved questions surrounding their representational reliance on mourning.

Keywords: Natural history; Critical heritage; Extinction; Posthumanism; Taxidermy

Why Look at Taxidermy Animals? Exhibiting, Curating and Mourning the Sixth Mass Extinction Event

Introduction

How to engage in world making across species? How to work toward world making that enhances the lives of others? And how to do all this in the time of extinctions, knowing, as we must, that we are living amidst the ruination of others?

—Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011, 51)

What role do museums play in elevating the Sixth Mass Extinction Event within public consciousness? How is an increasing awareness of human-made extinctions and global biodiversity loss transforming the representational techniques employed by natural history curators? And what are the prevailing ideologies and emotional registers of contemporary exhibitions about anthropogenic extinctions? In Autumn 2019, Bristol Museum in the UK offered a small but noteworthy response to these questions. In ‘Extinction Voices’, the museum re-presented and hence re-imagined its permanent World Wildlife Gallery. Ordinarily, the Gallery presents tens of the museum’s taxidermic specimens in glass display units, offering contextual information such as taxonomic categorisations and dates of donation. But for ‘Extinction Voices’, the museum’s staff – led by senior curator Isla Gladstone – sought to repurpose their existing collections in order to foreground wildlife endangerment. To do so, the museum’s curators carefully shrouded thirty-two of the gallery’s displayed animals in black veils. The shrouded animals were labelled with strung tags stating in bold font whether the corresponding species, metonymically represented by the individual animal on display, is listed as vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered or extinct, according to the IUCN’s Red List (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). As the taxidermy rhino, tiger, giraffe,

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3 chimpanzee, kākāpō and koala became partially obscured from public view, the museum's
4 atmosphere was temporarily transformed. What was once a wildlife gallery that replicated many
5 of the longstanding representational strategies of natural history exhibitions – taxidermy
6 specimens presented in display cases in naturalistic and action poses – now stood as a sombre,
7 contemplative, even funereal space. Through the installation of black veils, Bristol's curators
8 deliberately obscured what Rachel Poliquin has described as taxidermy's 'captured liveliness'
9 (2012, 50), depicting the museum's individual animals as if they were mourning for their
10 species. But they also implicitly called on the exhibition's visitors to mourn with and for
11 endangered and extinct wildlife. In a time of increasing public consciousness about climate
12 change and its interrelation with extinction, 'Extinction Voices' reimagines the kinds of
13 spectacle usually promised by natural history displays.
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23 In recent years, many museums in the global north have variously embraced, allowed,
24 acquiesced to and paid lip service to contemporary demands and debates surrounding
25 decolonisation and climate change (Newell et al. 2017; Giblin et al. 2019). These crucial
26 conversations have been somewhat less prevalent within natural history museums and collections
27 (Das and Lowe 2018), in which 'natural' objects have tended to stand as naturalised and thereby
28 neutralised specimens without a history or politics. Bristol Museum is something of an outlier,
29 then. But that does not mean that it is alone in its curatorial rethinking of the assumed
30 representational strategies of natural history galleries. In fact, there is what we might call a first
31 wave of critical exhibitions on extinction that display extinction not simply as 'natural' history,
32 but as a historical feature of specific social relations and economic modes of production that
33 requires urgent public attention. This includes museums in London, Paris and Cambridge,
34 Massachusetts, that I will be discussing below, as well as others such as the National Museum of
35 Scotland, National Museum of Australia, and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural
36 History. Cognisant of the notion that we are living through the Sixth Extinction, a human- or,
37 better, capitalist-produced mass extinction event which threatens to diminish as much as half of
38 the planet's flora and fauna by this century's end (Barnofsky et al 2011; Kingsford et al 2019;
39 Kolbert 2014), these curatorial interventions exhibit their collections in new ways in order to
40 foreground the specific *anthropogenic* roots of recent and ongoing extinctions.
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3 In this essay, I wish to bring critical heritage studies into conversation with the
4 environmental humanities in order to think about the particular ways in which natural history
5 museums and exhibitions are communicating the Sixth Extinction to their visiting publics. By
6 exploring Bristol Museum's 'Extinction Voices', and by juxtaposing its curatorial decisions with
7 other collections-based exhibitions in the global north, I seek to build two main arguments. First,
8 I will argue that while natural history museums have predominantly trained and reproduced the
9 habitus of anthropocentrism, what Donna Haraway calls 'the fantasy of human exceptionalism'
10 (2008, 11), critical curation about extinction has the potential to unsettle anthropocentrism by
11 fostering an ethic of care, stewardship and responsibility beyond the human. My contention is
12 that the development of more-than-human or *posthumanist* curatorial practices promises not
13 simply to transform the abiding anthroponormative gaze of natural history – a gaze which
14 affirms the norms of human superiority – but to also offer an institutional coming-to-terms-with
15 extinction, in which museums confront their own historic complicities with mass extinction.
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17 Second, I will argue that those galleries and curators that *do* engage with anthropogenic
18 extinction tend to do so mournfully, through the affective register, resonances and rituals of grief
19 and loss. While mourning is a powerful tool for capturing imagination and drawing attention to
20 extinction, I suggest that there remain a number of questions that require further scrutiny: what is
21 at stake, ethically and politically, when extinction is exhibited as a primarily mournful
22 phenomenon? What does it mean to be invited to mourn nonhuman extinctions within natural
23 history spaces? And to what extent might a curatorial reliance on eco-mourning, which positions
24 loss as the most appropriate emotional response to extinction, also generate new problems or
25 limitations that require critical attention? In other words, what is the political unconscious of
26 exhibiting extinction mournfully?
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44 At one level, then, this essay analyses contemporary curatorial practices of exhibiting
45 anthropogenic extinction. In doing so, it traces what limits and possibilities there are for heritage,
46 'as a series of contingent and emergent modes of caring for, valuing, and assuming an ethical
47 stance toward the future' (Harrison 2015, 39), to develop new non-anthropocentric modes of
48 conservation and display. But by asking these questions I also want to stage a broader theoretical
49 intervention into the prevailing cultural meanings of the Sixth Extinction. For it is not just in this
50 first wave of critical natural history exhibitions that extinction is displayed as a fundamentally
51 mournful phenomenon. In the environmental humanities, too, scholars have so overwhelmingly
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3 approached mourning through the lenses of grief, sadness and loss that many recent publications
4 have attempted to reconceive extinction through positivity, joy and irreverence. In the final part
5 of this essay, then, I bring together curatorial and institutional practices, theoretical critique from
6 critical heritage studies and environmental discourses, *and* anti-institutional publics,
7 communities, coalitions and groupings in order to unsettle the apparent oppositions between
8 seriousness and play, mourning and joy, that pervade both museum spaces and scholarly
9 discussions of the Sixth Extinction. At stake in this discussion is nothing less than the
10 relationship between heritage and biodiversity, and thereby a rethinking of the responsibilities of
11 public institutions in a warming world. Anthropogenic extinctions are, as Ashley Dawson puts it,
12 ‘an under-acknowledged form – and cause – of the contemporary environmental crisis’ (2016,
13 9). In order to engage responsibly with ecological collapse, museums must develop new
14 approaches for communicating extinction.
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27 **Why Look at Taxidermy Animals?**

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29 I want to begin by asking: Why look at animals in our ‘time of extinctions’ (Rose et al 2017, 2)?
30 What is at stake in the natural history museum, as a space of traditionally optical engagement,
31 when visiting publics look at the taxidermy specimens of critically endangered or extinct
32 animals? These questions recall the title of John Berger’s influential essay ‘Why Look at
33 Animals?’, a polemic which usefully and provocatively frames any discussion of what it means
34 to see animals. Published in *About Looking* (1980), a collection of essays that continued Berger’s
35 political-aesthetic project of ‘critical seeing’ (Sperling 2018, 189), ‘Why Look at Animals?’ is a
36 touchstone for making sense of how capitalist modernity transforms human-animal relations.
37 From nineteenth-century industrialisations up to the period of late-twentieth-century ‘corporate
38 capitalism’ (2009, 3) from which Berger was writing, capitalist modernity reorganises the social
39 relations between humans and other animals, breaking the social and spiritual community
40 between ‘man and nature’ (Berger 2009, 3). ‘Before this rupture’, Berger writes, ‘animals
41 constituted the first circle of what surrounded man’ (2009, 3), even serving a ‘magical function’
42 within pre-capitalist imaginaries as ‘messengers and promises’ (2009, 4). Yet after this rupture,
43 ‘in the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them’
44 (2009, 11). Yes, Berger writes, animals were slaughtered in older civilisations. But this was
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3 permissible because these communities still regarded animals with an imaginative and animistic
4 generosity. In pre-capitalist life, Berger says, ‘a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with
5 human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets’ (2009, 5). Today, though,
6 because capitalism creates an ‘ecological rift’ (Foster et al. 2010) between humanity and nature,
7 this intimacy has been destroyed. Animals have now been systemically ‘marginalised’ within the
8 ‘theoretical as well as economic’ domains (Berger 2009, 13).
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14 Despite Berger’s insistence on the marginalisation of animals in modernity, he also
15 presents animals’ disappearance as contradictory. As a writer who remained indebted to Marxist
16 dialectics, Berger foregrounds the idea that modern animals find themselves concomitantly
17 extinguished *and* exhibited, destroyed *and* preserved, killed *and* conserved. ‘Everywhere animals
18 disappear’ (2009, 26), but they also paradoxically ‘multiply’ (2009, 14) because they have been
19 commodified, ‘co-opted into the *family* and into the *spectacle*’ (2009, 15). Berger speaks of
20 household pets, animal toys and Beatrix Potter cartoons as symbolic appropriations of animals –
21 as infantile humanisations – that disastrously obscure their nonhumanity, their otherness. If he
22 were writing today, Berger may well argue that the conservation tourist industry and
23 documentary series such as *Planet Earth* similarly fold together family and spectacle in ways
24 that intensify the simultaneous multiplication and marginalisation of animal life. When Berger
25 speaks of animals’ disappearance from human life, then, he is speaking about how capitalism
26 alienates human-nonhuman bonds.
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38 Beginning an essay on museums and the environmental humanities with Berger’s
39 analysis of zoo animals may appear counterintuitive. Indeed, ‘Why Look at Animals?’ does not
40 address natural history collections or museum spaces, nor is it readily cited within the literature
41 of extinction and multispecies studies that I will later address. But Berger’s arguments are
42 nonetheless crucial because they lay the groundwork for a critical understanding of the museum
43 as a product of modernity, that is, as a social institution birthed out of – and to this day still
44 negotiating – the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions between destruction and preservation,
45 extinction and exhibition. Indeed, Berger’s analysis of the modern public zoo, as ‘another kind of
46 museum’ (2009, 21), is especially illuminating in this regard. For Berger, the zoo is a site of
47 inauthentic interspecies encounters that, more than any other public institution, testifies to the
48 disappearance of animal life. Zoos are ‘endorsements of modern colonial power’, he writes, that
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3 capture and display animals as ‘a symbolic representation of the conquest of all distant and
4 exotic lands’ (2009, 21). Because of this, the zoo stands not as a form of ‘compensatory’ (2009,
5 26) apologia to the planet’s dwindling wildlife, but as a ‘demonstration’ of capitalism’s
6 ‘remorseless’ marginalisation of nature (2009, 26). Thus Berger writes that zoo animals
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8 ‘constitute the living monument to their own disappearance’ (2009, 26):
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12 Public zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance
13 of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see
14 them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. (2009, 21)
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18 For Berger, the zoo invites human visitors to encounter living animals face-to-face. Yet these
19 animals are deadened by their physical imprisonment, and appear to visitors as no more than
20 zombified representatives of a declining species, as what Theodor Adorno described as
21 ‘allegories of the specimen or the pair who defy the disaster that befalls the species *qua* species’
22 (2005, 115). This is compounded by the fact that modern zoos claim an ‘independent and civic
23 function’ in society, cultivating an image of themselves as ‘another kind of museum, whose
24 purpose was to further knowledge and public enlightenment’ (2009, 21).
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31 From Berger’s analysis of the zoo, we can develop a critical awareness of the optical
32 regimes of natural history exhibitions, which abide by what Lynn Nyhart calls a ‘dual
33 arrangement’ of spatial organisation, coupling a limited set of displays aimed at the general
34 public with a much larger collection available only to researchers (2009, 200). If zoo animals are
35 the living dead, then taxidermy animals might be described as the lively double dead, having
36 been mastered and revived in death – shaped, contorted, animated and displayed – in such a way
37 that cultivates another form of optical mastery. Jacques Derrida calls this kind of optical
38 sovereignty the ‘autopsic gaze’, as it ‘inspects, sees, looks at’ and altogether ‘neutralises’ the life
39 and force of the animal, transforming an active subject into a passive object (2009, 296).
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41 Elsewhere, Donna Haraway’s foundational essays on the dioramas of the American Museum of
42 Natural History clarify how museums have privileged the eye as the ‘critical organ’ of encounter
43 (1989, 29). The museum’s halls and display units function as visual technologies that inculcate
44 and reward an anthropocentric gaze of patriarchal mastery. Haraway shows how the practice of
45 taxidermy in particular seeks to ‘produce permanence, arrest decay’ (1989, 55), and is driven by
46 a desire ‘to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction (1989, 30).
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3 Taxidermy is not a fixed phenomenon with fixed meanings. As an organised craft and
4 technology of artifice, taxidermy has undergone major transformations across modernity: from
5 the early natural history curiosities of the Wunderkammer, to the building of encyclopaedic
6 collections, to the post-war professionalisation of natural history heritage and an attendant
7 natural sciences shift from taxonomy to ecology, to today's focus on the conservation of species
8 and their habitats (Andrews 2013). If in the past taxidermy pertained to a form of natural
9 authenticity and a myth of pristine nature, today natural history museums have to varying
10 degrees attempted to reclaim authenticity by drawing attention to both the inauthenticity of
11 taxidermy and the entanglement of humans and nature. Despite declining in popularity across the
12 twentieth century, numerous genres of taxidermic practice still abide today, including hunting
13 trophies and rugs, fashion accessories, preserved pets, and cryptozoological specimens. But these
14 distinct styles and articulations are unified, Rachel Poliquin reminds us, by a 'melancholic aura'
15 that is emitted by the 'unsettling fusion of animal form and human longing' (2012, 218). In the
16 museum space, taxidermy animals stand as witnesses to natural history's relationship with
17 anthropogenic extinction: at once a cause and a symptom of species loss, yet also an alarm bell
18 for and bulwark against it. The transforming spectacles of nature developed in natural history
19 museums thus testifies to how interspecies relations have changed in modernity.
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33 'Why Look at Animals?' is a foundational but disputed text. Berger's critique of
34 capitalist alienation helps make sense of the profound changes to interspecies life in modernity.
35 Moreover, the essay offers a powerful reminder that humans and animals live side by side,
36 sharing a planet, and that any attempt to arrest capitalist alienation must include a recovery of
37 human-animal relations. Yet Berger's arguments ultimately rely on an uncritical elevation of pre-
38 capitalist multispecies relations, a fuzzy periodisation of modernity, and euphemistic
39 articulations of 'marginalisation' and 'disappearance' that mystify the bloody putting-to-death of
40 animals in the world's industrialised slaughterhouses. What's more, Berger's argument valorises
41 linguistic signifiers over and above visual ones. As Jonathan Burt puts it, Berger's underlying
42 hypothesis that 'real' animals have been displaced by images of animals leads him to adopt an
43 'anti-imagist' (2005, 206) attitude which abandons the very dialectics of the gaze he seeks to
44 address. Anat Pick, building on Burt's criticisms, adds that Berger's anti-imagist position risks
45 an 'extinctionist impulse that desires the end of images, or even the end of the debased modern
46 animal' (Pick 2015, n.p.). Because Berger rebukes modernity for its appropriation of animal
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3 images, and because he yearns to recover a pre-capitalist human-animal bond, he cannot imagine
4 a future reconciliation of modernity's paradoxical extinction and conservation of nonhuman life.
5 He does not attempt to rescue animal images, nor read them against the grain; the visualised
6 animal is, for him, 'irredeemable' (Berger 2009, 28). Berger's dialectical thought therefore
7 disappears alongside the very animals he describes. As Burt points out, the period of modernity
8 that Berger talks about is also the period in which animals started to become the recipients of
9 welfare and rights in philosophical and political thought, as well as in legislation. Thus
10 modernity's transformation of human-animal relations, even if it entails 'a shift from an
11 integrated relationship to an alienated one between human and animal', also brings about a
12 countervailing force: 'the beginning of the institutionalisation of animal-centred issues' (Burt
13 2005, 212) in welfarist and rights movements.

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15 By bringing together Berger and his critics, we can develop a more complex
16 understanding of looking at taxidermy animals in a time of extinction, one which questions the
17 autopsic and anthropocentric gaze while also cultivating other modes of attentive looking. As
18 Pick puts it, 'the sheer diversity and complexity of animal imagery suggests that modes of
19 looking, seeing, and recognition are possible that reconfigure the connections between visibility
20 and ethics in favour of animals' (2015, n.p.). Berger's polemic, with its focus on ruptures and
21 breaks, forecloses the possibility of seeing animals in modernity. But there are possibilities for
22 human-animal encounters, immanent to modernity, that are worth fostering and fighting for.
23 Some of these opportunities might well be realised within the museum space.

24
25 What, then, are the modes of critical looking and seeing that we might expect from
26 contemporary natural history exhibitions on anthropogenic extinction? Pick's essay analyses
27 surveillance and tracking technologies that render endangered animals permanently visible to
28 human spectators. Under this optical regime of totalising visibility, Pick writes, 'the possibility
29 of *not-seeing* emerges as a more progressive modality of relation to animals', as it foregrounds
30 'the mundane, civic notion of animal privacy that denies human eyes and their technological
31 proxies unlimited access' (Pick 2015, n.p.). Something similar is at play in Bristol Museum's
32 'Extinction Voices'. Although the exhibition's black veils intended to usher in a sombre
33 atmosphere into the museum space, they also obscure the viewer's gaze, thus breaking the very
34 expectations and traditions of sovereign seeing that the museum space so heavily relies upon.

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3 The feminist art historian Griselda Pollock has argued that, in museums, ‘knowing,
4 seeing, visually mastering, leaves the viewer centered and disembodied in a perfect fantasy’
5 (2007, 13). ‘Extinction Voices’, in contrast, offers visitors the opportunity to not-see, thus
6 breaking this fantasy of abstraction. In fact, the exhibition develops a representational strategy of
7 non-representation which makes extinction visible by disrupting the autopsic gaze. By not-seeing
8 the museum’s taxidermy animals, the viewer comes to see extinction all the more clearly. This
9 non-representational tactic, which defamiliarises the museum’s staging of nature by
10 denaturalising taxidermy, is strengthened by its juxtaposition with the rest of the museum, which
11 remained the same. It also invites its visitors to situate themselves within the story of
12 anthropogenic encroachment, displacement, endangerment and extinction. Entering the
13 exhibition, the visitor encounters wall text that reads: ‘One million species are threatened with
14 extinction because of humans – many within decades.’ ‘Look around this gallery. The covered
15 animals are at high to extreme risk of dying out. Some are extinct already. They have no voice
16 for their futures. But we can use ours.’ This frames the visitor not as a disembodied spectator
17 who is disconnected from extinction, but instead as an actor or agent. The animals are veiled, the
18 exhibition implies, because its visitors are all too responsible for nonhuman extinctions.
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31 This curatorial approach contains risks. By placing the burden of mass extinction on the
32 individual visitor, and universalising them as a member of “humanity,” the exhibition
33 problematically obscures the stark differences in scale between, say, the average museum
34 visitor’s levels of consumption and pollution and that of extractive industries and their
35 shareholders, whose impacts and responsibility dwarf that of any individual. Yet the exhibition’s
36 universalising gesture also raises a painful truth: whether the museum’s visitors are responsible
37 or not, they all stand to share or inherit a future planet impoverished by the loss of mass
38 extinction.
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48 **Towards a Posthumanist Museum?**

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51 In recent years, museologists and critical heritage scholars have urged museums to rethink the
52 prevailing assumption that they must remain a supposedly neutral zone of scientific and
53 educational inquiry free from any commitments that may be deemed political. Robert R. Janes,
54 for example, has developed a wide-ranging critique of the sector’s ‘fallacy of authoritative
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3 neutrality' (2009, 59). For him, the contemporary world stands at a crossroads. The prevailing
4 economic ideology of limitless growth has not only produced severe inequalities between and
5 within societies, but has also exacerbated the plight of indigenous peoples and sharpened a major
6 crisis in biodiversity. Museums have an important role to play in the future health of the planet.
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8 As social institutions that are publicly owned, and as spaces with deep organisational histories
9 that 'share a common body of knowledge, theory and methods' (2009, 14), museums are
10 perfectly placed to develop methods and practices for 'advancing the collective good' (2009, 21).
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12 However, the dominant mindset of boards of trustees and individual curators is that museums
13 must protect their 'authority and respect by remaining aloof from activities that entail competing
14 views and values' (2009, 57). The consequence of which is that museums have by and large
15 'eschewed on both moral and practical grounds a broader commitment to the world in which
16 they operate' (2009, 13). But due to privatisations and funding cuts, museums are increasingly
17 run, or at least majority-funded, by corporations who are themselves special interest groups
18 (2009, 59). By committing to "neutrality", museums commit themselves to the status quo, tacitly
19 endorsing the very governments and corporations who drive today's deepening social inequities
20 and biodiversity crises.
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32 For as long as the museum is positioned as a neutral arbiter and communicator of
33 scientific facts, it will be difficult to fully acknowledge the institution's 'delicate, and often
34 unstable, position in wider arrays of social influence, political power, commercial transaction,
35 and cultural controversy' (Cameron 2015, 2). Indeed, this supposed institutional neutrality is
36 rendered nonsensical by the realities of climate collapse and mass extinction, the scale and
37 urgency of which demand new forms of advocacy and risk-taking. In place of authoritative
38 neutrality, then, Janes calls for museums to foster purposeful stewardship (2009, 24), by which
39 he means 'personal and organizational responsibility for the long-term care of public resources'
40 (2009, 27). On first look, 'purposeful stewardship' sounds unobjectionable; which museums do
41 not see themselves as stewards? But the point, Janes argues, is to build a form of committed
42 stewardship that stands against the thoroughgoing erosion of planetary stewardship in recent
43 years, from indigenous language loss to mass nonhuman extinctions. This global decline of
44 stewardship is owed in large part to the dogma of economic growth, as well as to the
45 philosophical dualisms and modes of instrumental realism that construct a norm of human
46 exceptionalism, in which nature exists only 'to serve the interests of human beings, and that we
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3 as humans, have dominion over the plants and animals' (2009, 53). Against the dominant model
4 of anthroponormative capitalism, then, in which nature has been cheapened, yanked into
5 'processes of exchange and profit, denominated and controlled' (Moore and Patel 2018, 48), the
6 museum must now stand as a steward of life liberated from profit.
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11 Museums will never solve these global problems alone. Indeed the sector currently stands
12 in a historically weak position. In the UK context specifically, in the wake of the 2008 financial
13 crash and the ensuing years of austerity economics, museums have seen dramatic cuts to their
14 direct funding (Harvey 2016). A decade of austerity has seen a 40% reduction in local cultural
15 spending (Stevens 2019), and many UK museums have courted wealthy donors in order to
16 'diversify' their income (Neate 2019). A survey of 34 UK museums revealed a 35% decline of
17 natural science curators in the past 10 years (Mulhearn 2013). Even before these years of
18 austerity, Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans questioned the ways in which the museum was
19 facing deep institutional crises: 'What has the museum become? What can the museum be now?
20 What forces are directing its ever-increasing symbolic capital at the same time as it becomes less
21 and less a public forum?' (2007, xxiv). Taking an even longer view, the historical trajectory of
22 the museum can be narrated as a story of rise and fall: 'Museums have evolved through time',
23 Janes writes, 'from the elite collections of imperial dominance, to educational institutions for the
24 public, and now to the museum as "mall"' (2009, 183), at worst an appendage to consumer
25 culture increasingly preoccupied with metrics and vanity architecture. Indeed as museums and
26 natural history collections have come to play a more prominent role in the tourist and leisure
27 industry, 'taxidermy objects have increasingly been used to provide audiences with
28 "experiences" over more traditional and pedagogic encounters with natural science collections'
29 (Andrews 2013, 30). Natural history heritage has itself been absorbed into the consumer
30 ideologies of late capitalism.
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46 Despite these historic shocks to the sector, in fact we might even say *because* of them,
47 museums have been called upon to cultivate what Judith Mastai terms 'a new institutional
48 subjectivity' (quoted in Pollock and Zemans 2007, 30). This is especially pertinent in the context
49 of climate collapse, an event that 'guides us to the very limits of the museum form' and troubles
50 the very 'boundaries of the museum as well as its internal workings, structures and governance
51 processes' (Cameron and Neilson 2015, 5). Steve Lyon and Kai Bosworth, elaborating what this
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3 new institutional subjectivity might look like, propose that it is incumbent on natural history
4 museums especially to ‘act as protectors of shared knowledge in the commons, educating publics
5 about climate change, [while also offering] infrastructural support for grassroots activist
6 organisation’ (2019, 175). Focusing on the ‘Natural History Museum’, a travelling museum
7 created by the New York-based art and activist collective Not An Alternative, Lyon and
8 Bosworth showcase how the NHM’s public programs transform museum practices. By
9 highlighting the social and political character of nature, the NHM connects grassroots social
10 movements to political struggles that centre around environmental injustice. If at their worst
11 museums present climate change as an outcome of individual consumer habits or population
12 growth, then at their best museums would foreground the economic and political forces that
13 hasten environmental destruction, while also welcoming community-led activists within the
14 institution itself.

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Natural history museums are already in a strong position to contribute to the
environmental movement. By connecting ‘movements to museums and museums to movements’,
Lyon and Bosworth write, there can be ‘a growing coalition of museum workers, activist
scientists, and front-line communities in order to lay the foundation for what we term the
museum for the commons’ (2019, 175; their emphasis). The future natural history museum could
thus be an educator, an advocate and an infrastructural hub for necessary environmental struggle.
This would go some way to meeting the task set by Pollock and Zemans, who call for museums
to become a ‘critical site of public debate distinct from the museum as privileged manager or
professionalized administrator of cultural heritage, authorizing selective stories and formalized
pasts’ (2007, xx). Despite cuts, museums still hold the required resources and public trust ‘to
invent a new future for themselves and their communities, or at least help create an image of a
desirable future—the essential first step in its realization. Museums are uniquely positioned to do
so, with their mix of humanism, science, time-depth and societal respect’ (Janes and Sandell
2019, 17).

But if natural history museums are to face the challenges of the twenty-first century then
it will also be important to critically interrogate the very ‘humanism’ that Janes highlights as an
asset. By saying this, I do not mean to bulldoze over a complex history of intellectual thought,
caricaturing humanism as a unified discourse that is equivalent with human exceptionalism. Nor

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3 do I want to suggest that Janes himself adopts an uncritical definition of humanism. In fact, Janes
4 builds his arguments for planetary stewardship on the idea that ‘nature does not belong to us’
5 (2009, 53). Instead, I mean to argue that if natural history museums, as people-focused
6 institutions, continue to see themselves as humanistic institutions, then they must develop forms
7 of engagement that are vigilant about the premises, histories, assumptions and limits of this
8 humanism. Indeed, any humanism worthy of the name should be *posthumanist*, insofar as it
9 interrogates ‘that thing called “the human” with *greater* specificity, *greater* attention’ (Wolfe
10 2010, 120; his emphasis). Posthumanism, according to Cary Wolfe, does not mean leaving
11 behind the human, whether as species or subject. Neither does it seek to abandon the many
12 advances of humanist thought. Rather, it names a mode of critical inquiry which questions the
13 normative subjectivities and ‘fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy’ that have been
14 ‘inherited from humanism itself’ (Wolfe 2010, xv). In other words, posthumanism tackles the
15 contradictions of an Enlightenment humanism forged alongside capitalist and colonial
16 expansion, a tradition which elevated a sense of autonomous personhood while also denigrating
17 many of the planet’s other peoples, both human and nonhuman. My contention, then, is that
18 museums should look to develop posthumanist practices and communities.
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31 What might posthumanism mean for heritage practices? Can we imagine a posthumanist
32 natural history gallery that transforms the anthroponormative gaze, offering visitors the
33 opportunity to look at animals differently? Recently, there have been a growing number of
34 contributions to heritage studies from a broadly posthumanist angle (e.g. Fredengren 2015;
35 Harrison 2015; DeSilvey 2017). The most pertinent intervention for my purposes comes from
36 Colin Sterling, whose carefully argued essay evaluates whether the posthumanities offers
37 ‘analytically insightful and socio-politically transformative’ (2020, 3) avenues for future
38 heritage. Sterling identifies two distinct theoretical positions of posthumanist thought: after
39 humanism, and post-anthropocentrism. He argues that while critical heritage’s attention to
40 gender and race has already fostered powerful critiques of humanism, the question of ‘post-
41 anthropocentrism’ raises significant challenges for heritage conservation, preservation,
42 interpretation and care. To put it simply: how is it possible for heritage, a people-centred field, to
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3 One way of answering this question would be to embrace the so-called new materialist
4 strand of posthumanism and its methodological gambit to dissolve the boundaries between
5 human and nonhuman, thus expanding our sense of 'people'. In an entry on 'posthuman museum
6 practices' (2018, 349) in Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova's glossary of posthumanist terms,
7 Fiona Cameron argues that museum objects are 'actants (vital subjects)' within an entangled
8 world of human and nonhuman agents (2018, 351). Indebted to Bruno Latour, Maneul DeLanda
9 and Jane Bennett, Cameron suggests that posthuman museum practices would foreground how
10 each and every putatively static object is in fact a lively subject composed out of innumerable
11 temporary relations and interdependencies (2018, 351). Cameron concludes that museums can
12 foreground the 'agentic or animated relationships we have to life' by shifting 'social subjectivity
13 from the human to include the non-human world' (2018, 352).
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23 But this diversification of ontological subjectivity flattens out crucial differences and
24 power imbalances. In its rush to hybridise and dissolve the subject/object binary, new
25 materialism ultimately forgets the subject-object continuum, collapsing nature into culture and
26 eliding the advantages of keeping these concepts *analytically* separate. As Colin Sterling makes
27 clear, marshalling the critiques levelled at posthumanism by Kate Soper (2012) and Andreas
28 Malm (2018), new materialism's dissolution of nature and culture into naturecultures forecloses
29 the ability to analytically differentiate and intervene (Sterling 2020, 5). Take, for example,
30 Cameron's principal example of posthuman practices: a charred plastic bucket, displayed in
31 Museums Victoria, which was used to stop the spread of the 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires in
32 Australia. Cameron argues that, as things stand, the museum's presentation of the bucket reduces
33 the item only to its instrumental use, a 'static' object that is merely 'in the service of the human
34 social'. Cameron calls for museums to grant 'agential status' (2018, 349) to the bucket, thereby
35 creating an 'inclusive vision of a shared world [that] has the potential to promote and enhance
36 respect and ethical concern for diversity of both animate and inanimate things' (2018, 352). Yet
37 there is nothing to suggest that assigning subjectivity necessarily leads towards respect and
38 ethical concern. And even if it did, it remains unclear what is really at stake in including this
39 bucket within a world of acting subjects. Does it intensify or displace human responsibility? You
40 cannot resolve entrenched anthroponormativities simply by pretending that all objects are now
41 subjects.
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3 If, then, the new materialist approach comes up short, then how else might posthumanism
4 inform heritage practices? In my view, it is important to return to posthumanism's central
5 provocation, namely its questioning of the very implied 'human' subject who stands at the centre
6 of heritage itself. From here, one can think of a posthumanist framework as bringing about an
7 'ontological and epistemological' shift, dislodging 'a certain hubristic model of heritage as a
8 human-centred project' (Sterling 2020, 3). By critically attenuating the anthropocentrism of
9 heritage, posthumanist museum practices would look to create new ecological communities. I
10 take this term from Mick Smith, who writes that the scale of anthropogenic extinction calls on us
11 to reconsider our sense of community in such a way that situates the human within ecology and
12 folds the ecological into our sense of community. For Smith, such efforts are 'ecologically
13 posthumanist' in that they elucidate 'certain worldly possibilities that emerge from critiques of
14 human exceptionalism and exceptionalism together' (2013, 26).

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17 In sum, posthumanism offers a chance to develop a more-than-human sense of
18 community with new strategies of care, preservation, responsibility, stewardship and display.
19 More specifically, it promotes two immediate priorities for natural history museums in a time of
20 mass extinction: to develop curatorial practices that aim to unsettle and transform the
21 anthroponormative gaze, rather than reproducing it, and to draw attention to the museum itself as
22 a place of extinction – as an institution which still plays a role in the story of the Sixth Mass
23 Extinction. For if we consider natural history museums as active characters in the story of
24 extinction, as public and research institutions which have actively sought out, commissioned and
25 purchased nonhuman animal specimens for collection and exhibition (Poliquin 2012, 219), then
26 we can frame posthumanist natural history as an attempt to confront historic participations in the
27 destruction of nonhuman life. When curators re-present their existing natural history collections
28 in order to tell the story of the Sixth Extinction, they also highlight the specific institutional
29 histories – the people and events – that are inseparable from, and in some instances accountable
30 for, an epoch of heightening biodiversity loss. As a kind of rigorous self-scrutiny, posthumanism
31 promises to reimagine inheritance and stewardship beyond the human, to cultivate new modes of
32 critical seeing between visiting subjects and exhibited objects, and all the while develop reflexive
33 institutional engagements, in which museums work through their own troubling relationships
34 with and responsibilities for anthropogenic extinctions.

Exhibiting, Curating, Mourning

In an essay on eco-melancholia, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands argues that although we are increasingly surrounded by evidence of environmental loss, there are still only a ‘few places in which to experience it *as* loss, to even begin to consider that the diminishment of life that surrounds us on a daily basis is something to be really sad about, and on a personal level’ (2010, 338). It might seem obvious that the museum is one of the few places in which environmental destruction can be experienced as loss. Yet as critical heritage scholars point out, there is nothing simple about the relationship between heritage practices and loss. There is in fact a fundamental tension between the heritage sector’s drive to conserve and prevent loss – its ‘loss aversion’ (Holtorf 2015) – and the fact that it is precisely this prospect of loss, risk and endangerment that helps produce heritage value in the first place (DeSilvey and Harrison 2018). At the same time, because heritage’s preservation practices are often framed as a battle to save objects from present endangerments, the objects themselves can be taken for granted, which thereby obscures their problematic pasts (May 2018). If these pasts are to be meaningfully thought through, then there comes a point at which ‘de-growing’ collections – re-evaluating, redistributing, re-using, reducing, and re-localising objects – is not simply a pragmatic but also an ethical practice (Morgan and Macdonald 2018). Postcolonial critiques of the museum have long argued that it is only by losing or giving up its collections gained through colonial genocides and ecocides that the museum will truly bear witness to and meaningfully work through the losses of colonialism and ecocide. For many critics, no matter how taxidermy specimens are reframed, they still stand as signs of anthropocentric mastery.

This relationship between heritage and loss is becoming even more difficult in a time of environmental change, when the entire notion of conserving for the future, so foundational to heritage, looks more and more unsustainable in a planet ravaged by declining biodiversity and rising temperatures and sea levels. In light of these profound challenges to heritage, Caitlin DeSilvey and Rodney Harrison call on natural and cultural institutions to accept the ‘inevitability of loss’, to rethink loss as a form of change, and to thereby develop new understandings of loss as ‘potentially generative and emancipatory, facilitating the emergence of new values, attachments and forms of significance’ (2020, 3). Museum exhibitions, as the frontlines of the

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3 institution's engagement with the public, certainly offer the space to experience extinction as a
4 personal and collective loss. How, then, can museums embrace the potentiality of loss without
5 also depicting extinction as inevitable? How can exhibitions provide a space for the public to
6 encounter extinction as an ongoing loss, but also as one that can – and should – be mitigated?
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8 The sheer heterogeneity of the global natural history community prevents a single, unifying
9 theory. But even so, it is striking how contemporary curatorial efforts to communicate mass
10 extinction are united in their representational reliance on mourning. In this section, then, I wish
11 to pay closer attention to 'Extinction Voices' and situate it within a wider context, a nascent
12 first wave of critical exhibitions about the Sixth Extinction. By comparing its representational
13 strategies with two other exhibitions on extinction, I will show how the exhibition develops a
14 dynamic between mourning and action which attempts to represent and counter the loss of
15 extinction. Doing this will not only allow us to see how mourning is presented as a route towards
16 environmental care, but will also frame the question of whether Bristol Museum's 'Extinction
17 Voices' can be thought of as an example of posthumanist museum curation. Throughout, my aim
18 is to ask to what extent the curation of eco-mourning opens up new ways of engaging with
19 extinction.
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31 As an inexpensive and neatly executed curatorial effort in a museum outside of London,
32 and one that generated national press attention too (Morss 2019), 'Extinction Voices' offers a
33 visually arresting example of how museums can re-present their permanent collections in order
34 to respond to the Sixth Extinction. It shows how local museums, working on tight budgets and
35 within the context of deep funding cuts, can curate their extant large collections in order to
36 intervene in topics surrounding climate change. At the same time, it is a case study in how
37 exhibitions and heritage practices are being formulated in response to global scientific reports
38 and local community accountability. For in their promotional materials for the exhibition,
39 Bristol's curators write that the exhibition was prompted by two institutional encounters which
40 brought home the urgency of anthropogenic extinction. First, museum staff read the
41 Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services' (IPBES) 2019 Global
42 Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. A major report conducted by a
43 multidisciplinary panel, it concludes that one million species are currently threatened with
44 extinction, and therefore that 'biodiversity – the diversity within species, between species and of
45 ecosystems – is declining faster than at any time in human history' (IPBES 2019, 10). Second,
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3 Bristol Museum also received letters from thirty-one local school children, who asked that the
4 museum explain to its visitors the colonial history behind its taxidermy tiger. Every taxidermy
5 animal is the outcome of a complex story of human-animal relations. As Donna Haraway writes,
6 ‘behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and
7 social interactions among people and other animals’ (1989, 27). Bristol’s tiger is no exception,
8 one of thirty-nine tigers shot by George V’s hunting party in India in 1911. ‘Extinction Voices’
9 therefore responds to specialist biodiversity reports on the one side and situated community
10 questions on the other by turning inward, towards its own extant collections. In doing so, the
11 exhibition forges a link between mass extinction and the imperial histories and ideologies of the
12 museum itself, thus confronting Bristol Museum’s own historic participation in anthropogenic
13 extinction. ‘Extinction Voices’ thus utilises historical collections in order to shape new narratives
14 and engage with the difficult legacies surrounding taxidermy in the first place.
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25 As I noted above, Bristol Museum is just one of a small number of museum institutions
26 in the global north – either natural history museums or museums with natural history collections
27 – that have harnessed the tones and motifs of loss in order to exhibit anthropogenic extinction.
28 Take, for example, the Room of Endangered and Extinct Species (La Salle des Espèces
29 Menacées et des Espèces Disparues) at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. Here,
30 the museum utilises a low-light that stands in marked contrast to brightly illuminated and lively
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The Room of Endangered and Extinct Species houses around 260 animal and plant
species, the majority of which have buckled under the acute pressure of decades of hunting and
habitat loss. Some animals, such as Schomburgk’s deer, the great auk, and the Mauritian flying
fox, are exhibited as whole specimens. Others, like the Kangaroo Island emu, are only presented
as incomplete skeletons. The half-formed emu thus stands in physical testimony to the
fragmentation and irreplaceable losses of extinction.

Elsewhere, Christina Seely’s exhibition ‘Next of Kin: Seeing Extinction Through the
Artist’s Lens’ adopted similar visual methods. Installed at the Harvard Museum of Natural
History in Winter 2016, the exhibition displayed glass cabinets of disembodied skulls and horns

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3 taken from the university's Comparative Zoology archives, all again shadowed by deliberately
4 low lighting. The centrepiece of this exhibition, though, was Seely's 30x40 inch light box
5 portraits of endangered species, including a sable antelope, Siberian tiger, maned wolf, pig-tailed
6 macaque, and mountain anoa. Seely's ten daguerrotype portraits transform in response to
7 ambient light. In the controlled ambience of the exhibition, the large scale kinetic portraits depict
8 the animals' faces with a sharp intensity, their eyes gazing directly at the viewer. But as visitors
9 enter and leave the gallery, momentarily flooding the space with natural light, the pictured – or
10 better, captured – animals slowly fade to white, appearing only as ghostly traces that are barely
11 perceptible. The viewer is powerless to stop the animals fading into nothing, but the portraits
12 nonetheless implicate the spectator in the animal's disappearance: once the animal is little more
13 than a trace, the mirrored glass comes to reflect the outline of the human visitor who stands
14 before it. Because the visitor's image eventually replaces that of the animal, Seely's portraits
15 centre in order to then decentre their spectators. Seely's exhibition gives visitors a space to
16 encounter the gaze of animals while also reflecting on their own positionality and responsibility
17 as these animals disappear.

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30 The biologist E. O. Wilson describes our current epoch as the 'Age of Loneliness' (2002,
31 77). This a doubled loneliness, Wilson implies, at once gesturing to the nonhuman species that
32 are increasingly becoming the 'last' of their kind and to the human communities who stand to
33 inhabit a planet depleted of biodiversity. As the late Deborah Bird Rose puts it, we are entering
34 'a new era of solitude, one marked [...] by the actual loss of co-evolved life. As Earth others
35 depart, never to return, we face a diminishing and impoverished world, and equally, we face
36 new, agonizingly lonely, questions about the meaning of our existence' (2011, 10). Seeley's light
37 box portraits, Paris's Room of Endangered and Extinct Species and Bristol's 'Extinction Voices'
38 can be understood as three curated responses to this 'Age of Loneliness'. Collectively, they
39 deploy the emotional register of grief and loss in order to transform the gallery and exhibition
40 space into a kind of funeral for extinct animals.

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49 Yet what makes 'Extinction Voices' different from these other exhibitions is its
50 representation of mourning as a fundamentally *dynamic* process, that is, as a pathway that leads
51 towards action. The exhibition's wall displays, for instance, inform visitors about the global
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3 impacts of pollution, habitat loss, poaching and climate change on wild animal populations. They
4 also call upon on visitors to act:
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7 Can you imagine a world without these animals? One million species are threatened with
8 extinction, because of humans. Many will be lost within decades. Look around this gallery. The
9 covered animals are at high to extreme risk of dying out. Some are extinct already. They have no
10 voice for their futures. But we can use ours.
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14 In this passage, 'Extinction Voices' mobilises an affective dyad comprising of the reactive and
15 the proactive. By this I mean that the exhibition calls on its visitors to do the work of mourning:
16 to experience grief and loss, and to then transform these sentiments into a form of action,
17 imagined here in the metaphor of the 'voice'. The assumption that the exhibition makes is that,
18 by eliciting the former, it can open up the possibility for the latter. Written notes, pinned to the
19 gallery's walls, communicated not only a sense of sadness at the vanishing natural world, but
20 also expressed anonymous demands and ideas: 'stop global warming', 'SAVE ANIMALS!!!',
21 'don't burn forests', 'part of the problem > part of the solution', 'no plastic go vegy' [sic].
22 Although other exhibitions have been solely preoccupied with the loss of extinction, Bristol's
23 curators position mourning as the first half of a story towards action. They welcome and
24 incorporate more explicitly politicised messages within the exhibition itself.
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34 Within the environmental humanities, much has been made of this dialectic between
35 mourning and action, grief and possibility. Indeed, the emerging literature in extinction studies
36 has foregrounded how an understanding of loss is generative for cultivating future environmental
37 care. In *Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age* (2019), for example, Dolly Jørgensen argues
38 that 'we need to recognise that feelings of loss can motivate past and future environmental
39 action' (2019, 11). Focusing on reintroduction, rewilding and de-extinction initiatives, Jørgensen
40 tells a story of how emotions serve as the primary motivations for recovering lost animals. For
41 Jørgensen, recent efforts to recover and restore nature are fundamentally 'nostalgic practices'
42 that rely on discourses of longing and belonging in order to justify 'future-oriented action' (2019,
43 4). In *Flight Ways* (2014), Thom van Dooren develops a theory of mourning extinctions through
44 his encounters with the Hawaiian crow, the most endangered corvid species on the planet.
45 Hawaiian crows are now extinct in the wild, made up of only around one hundred birds in
46 captivity, and are widely thought to mourn and sing for one another in death. For van Dooren, to
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3 mourn these crows, indeed mourn *with* them, is to undo ‘any pretense toward exceptionalism,
4 instead drawing us into an awareness of the multispecies continuities and connectivities that
5 make life possible for everyone.’ (van Dooren 2014, 126). Van Dooren thus suggests that by
6 mourning the Hawaiian crow we also mourn ‘the loss of a world that *includes us*’, grieving ‘the
7 countless deaths that constitute this time of extinctions’ (2014, 18).
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12 By bringing this environmental humanities literature into contact with critical heritage
13 studies, and by remembering the claims of posthumanism, we can articulate the potential of an
14 exhibition such as ‘Extinction Voices’. First, the exhibition’s strategic non-representation
15 disrupts the assumed subject-object relations of the anthroponormative gaze, thereby offering an
16 opportunity for critically seeing mass extinction. Second, the exhibition’s accompanying text
17 reveals the imperial histories of extinction and, in doing so, situates the museum *within* the story
18 of colonial mastery. And third, the exhibition tasks its publics with imagining a ‘world without
19 these animals’ in order to ‘voice’ their resistance to such a world. By prompting visitors to grieve
20 for a worse future, the curators seek to empower their publics to speak up, and speak now, for a
21 better one. Although the exhibition’s political imagination is individualised and vague – as I will
22 show below – its intervention into climate change and extinction appears to break with the
23 fallacy of neutrality and takes on active responsibility for fostering environmental thought.
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36 **Beyond mourning?**

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38 My aim in this article has been to examine how civil society organisations such as natural history
39 museums are changing their curatorial practices in a time of increasing public knowledge about
40 anthropogenic species extinctions. By turning to ‘Extinction Voices’, and juxtaposing its
41 emphasis on loss with other examples of exhibitions and galleries on extinction, I have shown
42 how mourning is tasked with producing action. In this regard, Bristol Museum conceives of
43 mourning as a form of affective labour, as what Sigmund Freud once theorised as *Trauerarbeit*
44 (1957, 244) – literally grief-work, the work or working-through of grief. The grief-work of
45 Bristol Museum’s ‘Extinction Voices’ recasts the natural history gallery as a public space for
46 nonhuman remembrance in which visitors are invited to grieve for their animal neighbours. Such
47 grieving, the exhibition implies, will also spur future environmental concern, care, and
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3 intervention. To put this in a more Freudian register: by mourning these animals, the visitor
4 cathects to the planet.
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7 To conclude, though, I want to reconsider the question of mourning and its relationship
8 with the current mass extinction event. For is the predominant focus on grief and loss quite as
9 powerful, as effective, or as necessary as these exhibitions and scholars imply? Do these
10 emotions really produce future action? Which other emotional registers and responses are out
11 there, ready to be drawn from and mobilised both within the museum space and in the
12 scholarship on extinction? And what does all of this mean for curatorial practices in this current
13 moment of extinction and climate collapse? I ask these questions because, within the
14 environmental humanities, eco-mourning is currently being called into question for its putatively
15 backward-looking, nostalgic impulses, as well as for its hegemonic stranglehold over
16 environmental discourses.
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25 Two books will guide us towards a critique of eco-mourning: Ursula K. Heise's
26 *Imagination Extinction* (2016) and Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism* (2019). First, Heise
27 argues that extinction must be approached with affirmation and complexity rather than the kinds
28 of negation and reduction which she sees as being closely linked to eco-mourning. Heise is
29 concerned with how environmental discourses narrate similar 'stories of decline [which] seek to
30 mobilise readers' emotions through the lament, melancholy and mourning' (2016, 34). Heise
31 notes that verbal and visual representations of endangered species are dominated by elegiac
32 modes that remain enraptured by the 'aura of "the last"' (2016, 72). Yet there are other
33 environmental discourses, she argues, that push beyond eco-mourning towards 'a more
34 affirmative vision of our biological future' (2016, 13). For Heise, forms such as the database, the
35 list and the catalogue, represented by the IUCN Red List, offer an aesthetic-scientific possibility
36 to 'desentimentalise' extinction (2016, 76). Desentimentalising extinction would help move
37 environmental discourse beyond its preoccupation with eco-mourning, and in doing so shift
38 attention from the elegiac focus on charismatic endlings towards a more complex understanding
39 of the scale of mass extinction.
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51 Seymour shares Heise's suspicion of eco-mourning. But she even doubts the efficacy of
52 database aesthetics to escape the trappings of environmental discourse, as she posits that the use
53 of scientific graphs and data, commonly associated with top-down, expert knowledge, risk a
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3 didactic and instrumentalised standpoint (2019, 46). *Bad Environmentalism* begins from the
4 position that environmentalism is dominated by valences of sincerity and seriousness that
5 oscillate between eco-pessimism and -optimism. Environmentalism, defined here as ‘a
6 description of nature, as a social movement, and as a code of behavioural imperatives’ (Jaquette
7 Ray 2013, 11), is pervaded by ‘despair and hope, gloom/doom and optimism [that] are often
8 merely different sides of the same coin, a coin that represents humans’ desire for certainty’
9 (Seymour 2019, 4). Seymour sets out to critique the dominant structure of feeling of
10 contemporary environmental discourse as it is practiced by environmental activists,
11 environmentally-themed artworks, nature writers and ecocritics alike. Seymour’s point is that
12 future environmental movements, artworks, writing and criticism must embrace alternative
13 structures of feeling. These other forms of environmental affects, the book’s titular ‘bad
14 environmentalisms’, include so-called inappropriate and improper responses to climate change
15 such as ‘irreverence, ambivalence, camp, frivolity, indecorum, awkwardness, sardonicism,
16 perversity, playfulness, and glee’ (2019, 4).
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28 But what is at stake in shifting environmental responses and conversations towards these
29 ‘dissident, often-denigrated’ (Seymour 2019, 6) sensibilities? First and foremost, Seymour
30 proposes a corrective to the longstanding and ‘basic environmentalist assumptions: that
31 reverence is required for ethical relations to the nonhuman, that knowledge is key to fighting
32 problems like climate change’ (2019, 5) – hence Seymour’s difference from Heise, whose
33 analysis places more faith in scientific discourses’ in counteracting the elegiac consciousness of
34 environmentalism. The texts that Seymour analyses across her book all ‘do’ environmentalism
35 without loving nature. For her, Sherman Alexie’s short stories, the MTV Jackass-style nature
36 show *Wild Boyz* (2003–06) and Isabella Rossellini’s *Green Porno* (2008) utilise aesthetics which
37 transform conventional understandings of how to represent nature. Also at stake in the book’s
38 argument is a queer intervention into the heteronormativity of environmentalism. If
39 environmentalism’s sincerity and seriousness are profoundly *straight*, then Seymour turns to the
40 writing of Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz in order to call for camp and
41 play. The major question of Seymour’s book thus becomes: ‘how might reclaiming gaiety and
42 other contrarian modes enable us to create new modes of resistance, new forms of community,
43 and new opportunities for inquiry into environmental crisis’ (2019, 24)?
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These interventions demand critical thinking about the role played by museum exhibitions and natural history collections in actively shaping the story of the Sixth Extinction for visiting publics. Even if *Imagining Extinction* and *Bad Environmentalism* do not focus on museums and heritage practices, and even if Seymour's analysis neglects the relationship between climate change and species extinctions, both texts provoke reflection on the potentially inhibiting by-products of current mournful attachments to extinction: a nostalgic and ahistorical vision of a previously pristine wilderness now long gone, a romantic reverence for nature which elides its fundamental ambivalence towards us, a preoccupation with charismatic animals instead of the so-called uncharismatic, "ugly" or "boring" species, all of which is laden with an overriding negativity that militates against the very idea that eco-mourning is a process of working-through.

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As my case studies make clear, contemporary curatorial practices surrounding anthropogenic extinction tend to couple a preexisting scientific emphasis on the 'facts' of extinction with an overtly emotive standpoint that oscillates between despair and hope. 'Extinction Voices' exhibition is a case in point, insofar as it attempts to imbue its existing galleries with an urgent emotional and political message, repurposing permanent collections for a new climate, and therefore communicating extinction within the bounds of sincerity, seriousness and straightness. Following Heise and Seymour, we might therefore question whether 'Extinction Voices' ultimately challenges or reproduces the cultural meanings of extinction. On the one hand, does the exhibition's sole use of taxidermy specimens buy into the iconography of flagship and charismatic species, thereby eliding the invertebrates whose extinction is already too 'quiet' (Eisenhauer 2019)? If we pin our imagination of extinction to an individual animal, then do we fail to see species as 'vast intergenerational lineages', as Thom van Dooren puts it (2014, 12), thus obscuring all the lives, lifeways and interspecies relations that have already been lost to the world? On the other, does the exhibition's indexical function, which ultimately conceives of each animal as a stand-in for its species, risk eliding the particularity of *this* animal in *this* space and *its* specific history that brought it to Bristol's collections? The exhibition tells the story of its tiger, but what of the other animals on display? And, undergirding all of this, what sort of environmentalism is implied by this mourning ritual? Does the mourning veil itself imply a process of acceptance and moving on? But do we want to move on from these extinctions? What does it mean that it is the taxidermy animals themselves, not the human visitors, who are

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3 made to wear veils? Finally, although the exhibition asks us to imagine a world without these
4 animals, does it prompt any personal or collective imagination of a future in which these animals
5 survive, or even flourish? While the exhibition's mission statement momentarily conjures a 'we'
6 who could 'use' their voice, the exhibition does not offer any possibility for a collective voicing,
7 let alone gesture to how such a voicing might be organised and utilised outside of the museum
8 space.
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14 Similar questions might be directed at another recent example of museums exhibiting
15 anthropogenic extinction: the London Natural History Museum's (NHM) unveiling of 'Hope' the
16 blue whale. The museum purchased the whale's 4.5-tonne skeleton in 1891 after the whale
17 beached on the coast of the harbour town of Wexford, Ireland. The whale, then nameless, was
18 taken into the NHM's collections before being displayed in the mammals gallery in 1934. For
19 over eighty years, the whale remained in the same place. But in 2017, the museum named the
20 whale – Hope – and remounted its 25.2-metre long skeleton in Hintze Hall, thus replacing
21 'Dippy' the diplodocus as the museum's icon and major focal point of its largest public gallery.
22 In a press release, the NHM styles 'Hope' as 'a symbol of humanity's power to shape a
23 sustainable future. Blue whales were hunted to the brink of extinction in the twentieth century,
24 but were also one of the first species that humans decided to save on a global scale' (NHM
25 2017). By re-presenting the whale skeleton, the NHM seeks to draw attention to 'humanity's'
26 role in shaping species extinctions for better and for worse. In a recent article in the *Science*
27 *Museum Group Journal*, Pandora Syperrek and Sarah Wade write that Hope not only 'tells a tale
28 of a species ruthlessly hunted for financial gain and saved from extinction by international
29 cooperation via a whaling moratorium', but also symbolises the NHM's commitment to
30 engaging the public in ecological issues (2020, n.p.).
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44 Yet the limits and contradictions of this curatorial statement were thrown into relief when
45 Extinction Rebellion (XR) targeted NHM as a key site of their summer protests in 2019. On
46 Earth Day, XR members flooded the exhibition hall and staged a collective die-in directly
47 underneath 'Hope'. In their article on 'Hope', Syperrek and Wade claim XR's die-in as a protest
48 against the Sixth Extinction. This is true. But what they do not write is that this was also a protest
49 against the NHM itself. Syperrek and Wade attempt to incorporate XR's action into a narrative of
50 how museums like the NHM are facing the extinction crisis. However, XR intentionally chose
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3 the NHM as a site of struggle because the museum was publicly advocating for sustainability
4 while also hosting closed-door awards dinners for the Petroleum Group of the Geological
5 Society. XR arrived at the NHM with three demands: 1) to cancel a formal awards dinner they
6 were hosting for the Petroleum Group of the Geological Society, 2) to declare a climate
7 emergency, and 3) to cut any and all ties with the fossil fuel industry. On their website, XR write
8 that ‘The Natural History Museum must be a pioneer in taking positive action in the midst of our
9 climate and ecological emergency. Instead they are taking money from and bolstering the very
10 industry doing the most to make our living world natural history’ (Lowe 2019). The die-in, as an
11 organised lying-down and politicised occupation of public space, is a common tactic of non-
12 violent civil disobedience movements, and environmental activists have utilised the die-in since
13 at least the 1970s (Ross 2015). For XR, the die-in served as a performative critique of the
14 museum’s fossil-fuel ties. By staging the die-in underneath the blue whale skeleton, XR revealed
15 that ‘Hope’ is at best at odds with the NHM’s stated institutional commitments to a sustainable
16 future, or at worst a form of deliberate institutional and curatorial greenwashing. The die-in
17 declares that as long as the NHM continues to invest in the fossil fuel industry, there is no hope
18 for mitigating the Sixth Extinction.
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31 My point here is not to exalt XR. In fact, I agree with the criticisms levelled against the
32 group that their abiding political philosophy of ‘beyond politics’ leaves them without a robust
33 understanding of the coloniality of ecological crisis (Rosenow 2019) nor a structural critique of
34 the police (Wretched of the Earth 2019). XR is increasingly stratified, and many local and global
35 groups have developed a level of autonomy that allows them to break with the dominant
36 institutional positions of XR UK. Nevertheless, XR’s underlying approach means that that its
37 formulation of a ‘just transition’ away from carbon insufficiently addresses the immense
38 redistribution of wealth needed to contest, adapt to, or mitigate the uneven impacts of ecological
39 collapse, and its stated ‘theory of change’ – namely, mass arrests in order to choke the state’s
40 legal and police infrastructure – is built on shaky social science research (Berglund 2019) and an
41 uncritically colour-blind understanding of police interactions that actively endangers people of
42 colour.
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53 Even so, I want to end by suggesting that XR’s die-in at the NHM simultaneously calls
54 into question the debates about posthumanist museum practices within critical heritage studies
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3 *and* the debates about eco-mourning and environmental affects within the environmental
4 humanities. Although XR conceived of their action as purely a critique of the NHM's ties to
5 fossil fuel companies, and although the group tends to focus on human rather than nonhuman
6 extinction, the die-in still resonates beyond its own intended ends. It illuminates, for instance, the
7 apparent gulf between natural history representations of anthropogenic extinction and
8 meaningful environmental action. Its anti-institutionality creates a productive tension between
9 curation and public engagement. It also shows how eco-mourning and joyful play need not be
10 opposed with one another. In other words, by reading the die-in closely and in juxtaposing with
11 the natural history museum as an institution, we can think more critically about the role of
12 museums in a time of climate change and mass extinction. It is not enough, the die-in reveals, for
13 museums to simply exhibit or represent the Sixth Extinction without also leveraging their
14 institutional resources to help prevent it. As Lyon and Bosworth put it, museums must also 'sign
15 open letters, endorse movements and campaigns, and form broad coalitions within and beyond
16 the museum sector. They can host community meetings and operate as meeting spaces for
17 activists, organise training sessions and consultations, stage prop-building workshops before
18 demonstrations, and host panel discussions and film screenings on pressing contemporary issues
19 with thought-leaders in environmental justice and science for the common good' (2019, 181).
20 They can also divest from fossil fuel-intensive industries. Moreover, the die-in is a public ritual
21 that holds elegy and play in a generative contradiction. Those who collectively organised and
22 participated in the die-in did not jettison mourning in favour of frivolity. In fact, a die-in is
23 nothing other than an act of public mourning *infused* with play and performance. Contemporary
24 eco-street movements like XR make strategic use of performance, play, camp, ritual and
25 ceremony in their own struggles against environmental devastation. By turning to this moment of
26 activist insurgency, then, we begin to deepen the questions regarding representational and
27 exhibitionary practices in contemporary museums while also complicating the environmental
28 humanities' dissensus concerning the dominant affects of environmentalist discourses. The die-in
29 mounts a challenge to museum investment portfolios *and* questions the apparent oppositions
30 between seriousness and joy.

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Protest movements have long been animated by this generative juxtaposition between
loss and action, grieving and anger, melancholia and spectacle. XR's public die-in at the NHM
was not a spontaneous display of public sorrow. It was, rather, a strategically organised,

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3 mediatised and theatrical show. It was a spectacle that occupied and thus claimed the museum as
4 a key site of public struggle for the planet's future. A die-in, then, underscores the urgent need
5 for a broader coalition of museums and movements in our time of extinction. It challenges
6 natural history museums to develop new posthumanist practices of representation in concert with
7 political commitments to stewardship and conservation. The die-in, thought of finally as its own
8 form of exhibition, also counters prevailing ideas of the museum exhibition itself. Indeed the
9 Latin etymology of exhibition means 'to hold out'. A collective die-in underneath a whale
10 skeleton is, then, a public holding-out for environmental justice.
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