Animal Encounters and Ecological Anxiety in W. G. Sebald

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Throughout his works, the narrators of W. G. Sebald embody a millennial perspective that encompasses and ties together concerns about human and non-human degradation and destruction of the environment, such as climate change. Both the future and the past of the narrators and of the environments in which they are placed fall within such a perspective. This focus on the environment has not escaped studies of Sebald's oeuvre. Axel Goodbody, for example, reads Sebald's works as a hybrid form that unites life writing (including both biographical and autobiographical overtones) and nature writing. His reading of Sebald understands place as a catalyst for biographical and historical thinking. Most importantly, Goodbody sees the environment as vulnerable, suggesting that "nature participates in a victimhood paralleling that of the Jews." (Goodbody 343) This emphasis on the victimization of the environment is echoed in Anna Fuchs's study of landscape painting and nature in Sebald. She argues that Sebald's narrator almost invariably connects images of nature with meditations on historical destruction. (Fuchs, "Representations of Nature" 129–130) It is useful to note that Fuchs focuses principally on the categories of landscape and nature, both of which are predicated on human subjectivity. For something to be called a landscape, it must be *framed* in some way, whether literally as in the frame around a canvas or more figuratively, by the gaze of a human subject. The fraught concept of 'nature,' for its part, exists apart from human meddling, but in actuality is negatively identified by its contrast with 'culture,' or the cumulative traces of everything humans have done to the environment.[1] In considering the human perspec-

[1] Fuchs's use of the word nature retains some romantic overtones of wildness and purity, but these are tempered by her attention to humans' interventions. Rather than extol nature as some longed-for ideal, Fuchs uses the word nature to insist on the agency of the physical environment to act alongside and against humans. In my discussion, I use the word environment as a neutral descriptor of the physical surroundings constructed in and by the text. It encompasses both 'natural' and built environments. In this

tives required for thinking of environment in these terms, it is useful to remember the viewing subject and ontological agency implied by the presence of a frame, whether literal or metaphorical. According to Cary Wolfe, "Framing decides what we recognize and what we don't, what counts and what doesn't; and it also determines the consequences of falling outside the frame (in the case at hand, outside the frame as 'animal,' as '*zoë*,' as 'bare life')." (Wolfe, *Before the Law* 6) Fuchs's analysis is useful in its insistence on the material agency of the environment, its "radical autonomy," and its indifference to humanity in Sebald's writing: "Nature does not feature here as a cultivated space that stores the traces of human intervention and encroachment; instead, it is depicted as an autonomous and threatening power which is completely indifferent to humanity." (Fuchs, "Representations of Nature" 134) Although Fuchs and some other Sebald scholars do recognize the agency of the environment, that agency is usually ascribed to nature, an entity that seems to exist entirely separate from culture and which is also frequently depicted as a victim of human abuses. While the environment no doubt suffers from the destructive acts of humans, perpetuating the stark division between human and other - between culture and nature - is unproductive for a reading of Sebald.

Rather than focusing only on the ways in which the physical environment is subjugated or instrumentalised by humans, examining the relationship between human and non-human animals in Sebald may offer a more nuanced approach to dealing with the ravages of humanity on the environment. Colin Riordan moves toward an understanding of the environment in Sebald that comes closer to material ecocriticism, arguing that "What is at issue [in Sebald] is not so much the extent to which we value nature, but the reverse: that nature has no need whatever to value us. Indeed, despite our subjective

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context nature refers to the material world beyond the human, but does not imagine it as untouched. As Lawrence Buell argues, "nature still has value as a relative term, in the sense that (say) icebergs are more 'natural' than statues […] even though the former may have broken off from glaciers as a consequence of anthropogenically induced global warming and the latter may be constructed entirely from 'natural' substances like granite." (Buell 143)

position which draws us inexorably to deny the evidence, the question of our value in nature is a meaningless one." (Riordan 50) However, in making this argument, Riordan focuses on the human characters, both historical and imagined, that people Sebald's *After Nature's* landscape. I suggest that we might read Sebald in a way that, as Riordan suggests, does decentre the human in questions of environmental value, but by focusing on the *other-than-human* in the narratives. Pippa Marland uses a material ecocritical approach to understand the scrap metal and detritus left behind at the military installation of Orford Ness, described in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. She advocates not for a disregard of the human in favour of the other-than-human, but instead for an "ongoing humanism within ecocriticism that incorporates an understanding of our immersion in and dependence upon the nonhuman world […], but also reserves a place for the continuing and specific investigation of the human animal and its affective sensorium." (Marland 125) For Marland, this is most clearly seen through the affective agency of things to create emotional states and impact human subjectivity.

This hybrid approach to thinking environmental agency alongside human agency is what I hope to do by reading non-human animals alongside humans, attending to the materiality of the animals present in the texts discussed and acknowledging the affects these provoke in their human counterparts. A variety of animals, both alive and dead, appear in Sebald's texts. In many encounters with the other-than-human, Sebald's narrators are unchallenged sovereign subjects observing objects put on view, thus reifying the difference between human subject and animal-as-object. In some cases, however, that relationship breaks down and challenges our received understandings of the dichotomies between nature and culture and self and other.

The animals in Sebald's texts are material presences, traces, or voids that draw the narrator's and the reader's gaze to the evidence of violence done against the environment. Given the forceful perspectives of Sebald's unnamed narrators and the texts' persistent invitation to seek the author in the narrative, it is tempting to leave the human in his pre-Copernican position of power and privilege. Yet to do so fails to acknowledge the actual independent existence of the animal (and other) presences in Sebald's text. In this essay, I argue

that Sebald's narrators rebel against anthropocentrism: rather than seeing them as passive objects, the narrators' attention to animals' material presence belies a concern not only for human history and the narrators' individual experiences, but also for the present-day environment on its own terms. The ecological anxiety one detects in many descriptions of the environment is doubly present in the animal encounters in these texts. It may be useful to think this term "ecological anxiety" broadly, not only meaning fear for the health of the physical environment, but also a longing to, as E.M. Forster wrote, "only connect" with the other materialities and agencies surrounding and interpenetrating the narrators. (Forster 214)

In challenging or reversing the relationship between the human subject and the objectified other-than-human, it is essential to decentre the human. This requires a conceptual shift: rather than only recognizing humans as agents influencing the environment around us and understanding the environment merely with regard to human concerns, one must recognize other-than-human agencies, ranging from the capabilities and resistance offered by metal and stone to the destructive force of storms and earthquakes, while also allowing for non-human animal agency.

In her foundational work of new materialism, *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett issues the challenge of regarding all matter as possessing agency while, in the other direction, recognizing our own materiality. (Bennett) This is reminiscent of philosopher Gernot Böhme's theory of atmosphere, in which he suggests that the environment pushes back against the person experiencing it. (Böhme) Recognizing this atmospheric agency requires an understanding of the body as porous. This conception distinguishes Böhme's understanding of experienced environment from a more conventional conception that preserves the distinction between the human subject and the environment as object. Böhme sees the problem of environmental degradation as the catalyst that brings humans back in touch with their *Leiblichkeit*:[2]

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[2] Gernot Böhme argues for the reinstatement of a physicality that goes beyond the mere physical body and restores a kind of physical experience that is "radically porous." This kind of physicality is more readily visible in the

> That which we call the environmental problem is primarily a problem of human embodiedness. It only becomes urgent because we finally feel the effects of the changes we make in external nature on our own bodies. [...] It is through the environmental problem that we are confronted with our embodiedness in a new way.[3]

Böhme's insistence on recognizing the materiality both of the human body and the environment's effect on it is in line with Bennett's two-way conceptual shift. In addition to recognizing the materiality of our and other bodies, she argues for "Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle." (Bennett 6) This power arises from both organic and inorganic matter, encompassing, certainly, human power, but expanding the notion of agency to include all matter. [4] (Bennett 4)

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distinction between the German terms *Körper* and *Leib*. Kate Rigby explains this distinction: "[*Körper*] refers to the body as physical object: this is the body you "have"; the body you "use" to type with, for instance; the body that contains the kind of heart that you "take" to the cardiologist when it is ailing. [*Leib*] is something altogether different: it is the body that, ineluctably, you "are"; the body that aches when you have typed too long; the body that incorporates the kind of heart that "skips a beat" when you catch sight of your lover. Unlike your *Körper*, your *Leib* lacks clear physical boundaries, expanding and contracting by turns, flowing out into the circumambient space, mingling with other entities, or recoiling in the face of something frightening or repugnant." The experience of *Leiblichkeit* that Böhme advocates unites, in a way, the human subject with the object of her corporeal body. (Rigby 142)

[3] My translation. "Was wir das Umweltproblem nennen, ist primär ein Problem der menschlichen Leiblichkeit. Es wird überhaupt nur drängend, weil wir letztlich die Veränderungen, die wir in der äußeren Natur anrichten, am eigenen Leib spüren.[...] Durch das Umweltproblem sind wir in neuer Weise auf unsere Leiblichkeit gestoßen." (Böhme 14)

[4] According to Bennett, things have the power to influence the course of events, to preserve or obscure the historical record, and to "provoke affects" in human subjects. These other-than-human agencies are essentially amoral: drawing on Latour's concept of the actant, Bennett emphasizes the non-reliance of action on intention. For other-than-human actants, what matters is not intention or morality, but only action. The ultimate goal of Bennett's

However, recognizing agencies beyond ourselves requires a direct challenge to several binaries that we humans hold dear: first, if humans interact with and are composed of vital matter, then a strict boundary between inside and outside cannot hold.[5] (Morton 29) With this challenge to interiority and exteriority comes a challenge to the concepts of self and other, which in environmental discourse usually takes the form of Nature as conceived as opposite and alternative to Culture.[6] But most importantly, the dissolution of the physical boundaries around and of the self also chips away at a most basic understanding of perspective: if there is no inside and no outside, if there is no Other separate from myself, then what does it mean to be a subject and can there still be such a thing as an object? This is a challenge to our ontological superiority, granting subjecthood to categories of things and matter that heretofore have resided comfortably in the realm of objects for humans to observe, act upon, and instrumentalise. The ontological gulf between human subject and other-than-human object is always at issue in encounters between human and animal. These encounters may cause the gulf to widen, defensively - in cases where animals are instrumentalised for their meat, skins or other products – or as a result of the inscrutability of animal action.[7] On the other hand, some encounters with animals have the

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project is to change humans' perception of the other-than-human world around them in such a way as to inspire changes in behaviour: recognizing the non-human actants in constituting the world is, Bennett argues, a radical democratizing gesture and necessary to "enable wiser interventions into that ecology."

[5] Timothy Morton refers to this as the "intimate entanglement" between all things.

[6] The blurring of the boundaries between interiority and exteriority and Böhme's idea of bodily porousness is reminiscent of Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality. In *Bodily Natures* Alaimo studies narratives of cancer, radiation and other kinds of toxicity to suggest that it is essential to conceive of bodies as intersecting and interpenetrating as a way of dealing with environmental threats and their resulting bodily harm. (Alaimo)

[7] A central question in debates around animal rights and human (mis)treatment of animals is in what, precisely, the difference between human and animal consists. In his study of biopolitics and the animal rights debate, Cary Wolfe summarizes some of the most common interpretations

opposite effect: in cases where a dog companion seems to empathize or possibly even communicate, or where an animal is regarded as either a worthy adversary or a valued ally. More interesting than those extremes, however, are the border cases where human subjectivity is challenged, loses focus, or is redirected at the human herself.[8] (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 15, 21) In Sebald's texts, many of the human-animal interactions reside in this border territory. What seem at first to be metaphors or projection screens for the human

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of the difference between non-human animals and humans: "in Aristotle that opposition, like the right to have rights, is grounded in the human being's capacity for speech and language […] At this juncture, of course, we might question the relevance of speech for determining the rights-holding subject by means of Jeremy Bentham's famous observation […] that the fundamental question here is not, 'can they reason?,' or 'can they talk?,' but 'can they suffer?'"(Wolfe, *Before the Law* 7–8) Attempts like these to draw a logically reasoned line between animality and humanity are also in the background of J. M. Coetzee's 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University. Coetzee's fictional avatar, novelist Elizabeth Costello, is fundamentally sceptical of reason, saying that it leads us to believe "that man is godlike, animals thinglike," thus justifying our instrumentalisation of and violence toward non-human animals.

[8] Barbara Smuts writes about these kinds of encounters in terms of "intersubjectivity," where members of different species treat one another "as persons." This, she argues, "has nothing to do with whether or not we attribute human characteristics to them. It has to do, instead with recognizing that they are social subjects, like us, whose idiosyncratic, subjective experience of us plays the same role in their relations with us that our subjective experience of them plays in our relations with them." (Smuts 118) Here Haraway's understanding of companion species may be helpful. It draws on the biological process of symbiogenesis, by which genetic material 'infects' other genetic material and the cooperation between the two constitutes a new species. (15) She expands this evolutionary argument to apply to species as a whole and argues for the development of positive knowledge that is not based on the opposition of self and other, nature and culture, subject and object. (21) This kind of positive knowledge gives rise to a relationship between companion species that results in the idea of "becoming with" – species that mutually constitute one another and in which the divide between nature and culture dissolves, leaving something she terms *natureculture*.

subject's psychological state become with time and engagement subjects unto themselves, animals observing humans rather than the other way around.

Framing the Other

In W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the first-person narrator encounters a quail in a pen on the grounds of Somerleyton Hall, a stately home in the Suffolk countryside. This quail, "evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage and shaking its head every time it was about to turn, as if it could not comprehend how it had got into this hopeless fix."[9] (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 36) Critics frequently understand the quail's apparent dementia and despair as a mirror for the narrator's troubled mind – in fact, many of the animal presences in Sebald's works are taken as extensions, expressions, or projections of the human condition, an approach to understanding them that situates the human squarely in the centre of the universe. According to these interpretations, this quail is put on display, as if in a museum: the bird is framed by its cage and invites the viewer to look at it before moving on to the next cage. Perhaps more importantly, the quail is not only an object for observation, but is a representative of an instrumentalised species: quail are among the birds available for hunting on the estate.

Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* features another example of animals on display and taken as metaphor for human experience. In this passage, the narrator visits the Antwerp zoo just before meeting the eponymous protagonist of the novel and sees a raccoon on display among the other nocturnal animals:

> The only animal which has remained lingering in my memory is the raccoon. I watched it for a long time as it sat beside a little stream with a seri-

[9] All English quotations come from the published translations unless otherwise noted. The original text is cited in footnotes throughout. "offenbar in einem Zustand der Demenz – in einem fort am rechten Seitengitter ihres Käfigs auf und ab lief und jedesmal, bevor sie kehrtmachte, den Kopf schüttelte, als begreife sie nicht, wie sie in diese aussichtslose Lage geraten sei." (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 50)

ous expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond a reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own.[10] (Sebald, *Austerlitz Tr. Bell* 4)

This passage highlights a number of attributes that are typical of a zoo exhibit: first, the raccoon's enclosure is a microcosm or a simulacrum of a larger, real-world habitat and, second, a reminder of the animal's captivity.[11] The raccoon is clearly displaced, living in an approximation of its native North American forest habitat, an ocean away from its origin. In a scene reminiscent of Michel Foucault's vision of panopticism, the raccoon is constantly observed by its human visitors and, like a picture in a museum, is framed by the window into its habitat. This establishes a clear subject-object relationship that gives the illusion of interaction, but in fact thwarts connection, while affirming the supremacy of the raccoon's human captors: the very architecture of its simulated habitat reinforces the notion

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[10] "Wirklich gegenwärtig geblieben ist mir eigentlich nur der Waschbär, den ich lange beobachtete, wie er mit ernstem Gesicht bei einem Bächlein saß und immer wieder denselben Apfelschnitz wusch, als hoffe er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinausgehende Waschen entkommen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war." (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 10–11)

[11] When thinking of zoos in Sebald, it is essential to consider the description of zoo animals dying in the bombing of Berlin. Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hanissa reads Sebald's horror at the death of the animals as evidence that Sebald wanted to "avoid an anthropocentric perspective on history," but ironically then makes an anthropocentric argument based on this fact. He suggests that these animal deaths must be acknowledged because they are "helpless and their entire existence depends on human intervention" and "they are metonymies for the destruction of the paradisiacal harmony of creation which reminds us that humans are responsible for this loss." Schmidt-Hanissa's original point is well taken – Sebald does attempt to dignify animal death instead of focusing primarily on the human cost of the war. However, to suggest that the animals are only significant because of their reliance on humans and their symbolic value fails to acknowledge their materiality or allow for a truly decentred human perspective. (Schmidt-Hanissa 32)

that the raccoon's subjectivity is disregarded in favour of that of the human gaze.

In "Why look at animals?" John Berger analyses the history of zoos and the spaces found there to understand the relationship between animals and humans. He refers to the early zoos (founded in the 18th and 19th centuries) as "another kind of museum" and an "endorsement of modern colonial power." (Berger 21) Zoos purported to be a place of learning, where one could "study the natural life of animals even in such unnatural conditions." (Berger 21) Berger criticizes zoos on the basis of the kind of observational experience they provide:

> A zoo is a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied. In principle, each cage is a frame round the animal inside it. Visitors visit the zoo to look at animals. […] Yet in the zoo the view is always wrong. Like an image out of focus. […] However you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bars, less than a foot from you, looking outwards in the public direction, you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal; and all the concentration you can muster will never be enough to centralize it. (Berger 23–24)

Berger is primarily concerned with spaces in which animals are put on display. These mediated encounters between humans and *living* animals are dissatisfying to the human subject because of the way in which captive animals do not return the human gaze and because of the way in which the zoo structurally enforces an anthropocentric perspective; the animals are stripped of their subjecthood and reduced only to objects for humans to look at. Berger goes on to suggest that the reason zoos tend to be disappointing or unsettling for human visitors is that "nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. […] They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention. […] Looking at each animal, the unaccompanied zoo visitor is alone." (Berger 28) The disappointment of the zoo is, then, that the visitor comes seeking an encounter or interaction with the animals on display, but their presence is largely disregarded and the animals, removed from their natural habitat and other members of their spe-

cies, are marginalized to the point that they lose any individualism or subjecthood. In *Austerlitz*, the narrator expresses the kind of disappointment Berger describes as a result of his stubbornly anthropocentric subjectivity. This unsettling encounter becomes the filter through which he meets and thinks about the character Austerlitz: although the narrator can only encounter the raccoon in the nocturama through a human frame of reference, he regards Austerlitz through his memory of the raccoon. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 12) The narrator regards Austerlitz as an exotic other much like the raccoon, with the difference that resonances in their experiences (a preoccupation with architecture and vision, repeated coincidental meetings) eventually allow the narrator to attend to Austerlitz's subjectivity. Over the course of the novel, Austerlitz's story almost entirely eclipses the perspective of the narrator, although he never returns the narrator's 'gaze.' Austerlitz retains some alterity while gaining his own subjecthood in the eyes of the narrator.

This insistence on the importance of the animals' gaze for human interaction with them is echoed in Sebald's description of the animals in the nocturama. The raccoon does not acknowledge the presence of the narrator, instead making a futile attempt to escape its confinement. Here the narrator clearly gives in to an anthropomorphic impulse: rather than assume the raccoon's actions are typical of the species or consider any animal motivation behind them, he projects human emotions onto the animal. However, this attempt to empathize or project emotion has the opposite effect: by projecting human desires onto the animal, the narrator further marginalizes the raccoon and even more radically centralizes the human experience.

The other animals in the nocturama are similarly described as mirrors or projection screens for human qualities, an effect which is heightened by the narrator comparing their gaze to the "fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking."[12] (Sebald, *Austerlitz Tr. Bell* 5) This passage recalls

[12] "unverwandt forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen

the unreturned gaze described by Berger, but with a difference. Here, the animals' gaze seems to be projected onto human subjects, not only through description but by the juxtaposition of photos of those animal eyes with photos of human eyes (namely those belonging to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jan Tripp).[13] (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 11) These images are disembodied, cropped to focus only on the enormous eyes of an owl and a nocturnal mammal and those of the humans. That these photos focus only on the gazes of the human and other-than-human animals seems to equalize their statuses, but the physical difference between the eyes reinforces the alterity of the animals: their eyes are huge and, although perhaps probing, definitely not human. This reminder of the animals' difference despite the narrator's projection onto them of human characteristics underscores the narrator's subjectivity and the objectification of the animals. This eliminates the possibility of interaction with the non-human animal others and reasserts the centrality of human subjectivity.

The Animal Stares Back

A different kind of discomfort is conjured by the appearance of dead animals in Sebald's works, particularly the taxidermied remains of birds and bears. In order to think through the narratives conjured by and built around these taxidermy specimens, it is useful to consider the cultural history and affective function of taxidermy. Coming to prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, taxidermy "assumed the role of referent for a distant nature functioning as the still and silent token for the exotic and marvellous life forms that inhabited faraway lands – worlds admired and treasured as much as mystified and misunderstood." (Aloi 27) Rachel Poliquin's *The Breathless Zoo* interrogates taxidermy's role in "expos[ing] the de-

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Denkens versuchen, das Dunkel zu durchdringen, das uns umgibt." (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 10–11)

[13] The reference to Wittgenstein is significant in light of his statement that, "if a lion could talk, we could not understand him." (Kenny 205) Wolfe takes up Wittgenstein's reference to the silent lion, situating him among other thinkers who focus on animals' capacity for language. (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 44–94)

sires and daydreams surrounding human relationships with and within the natural world" (Poliquin 6) and illuminates the cultural context out of which it is possible to account for the taxidermy specimens in Sebald.

The core and strength of Poliquin's argument is an insistence on the materiality of the animals' bodies on display in homes, castles, and museums. The central characteristic of taxidermy is its ability to turn a living creature into an "object-like thing that requires periodic dusting." (Poliquin 38) Poliquin argues that taxidermied animals are not metaphorical presences or "mere verisimilitude." They are not only representations of the animal in question, they also have power on account of several characteristics: taxidermy mounts are authentic, reminding the viewer of the real death required for their existence; they suggest "whole organicism" and yet are uncanny; and viewing mounted animals creates a strange temporality. Animals mounted as if alive freeze time in the way that photographs do, but their three-dimensionality and actual materiality allow the viewer to be in the presence of the animal rather than just viewing a representation of it. (Poliquin 107–108)

Poliquin also grapples at length with the actual nature of taxidermy displays, focusing on natural historical collections, hunting trophies, and anthropomorphic taxidermy, among others. Although displays like the natural history dioramas seen in museums around the world are inspired in part by the desire to appreciate and educate their audience on the beauty of nature, they are necessarily (and literally) a manipulation of nature. But at the same time, she argues, they are not wholly artifice:

> The animals have been made to play a role; they have been shot, skinned, and reanimated, surely. But the animal continues to exert the visceral force of its presence. Without the authenticity of the organic material, the diorama loses all its potency. The animals offer the illusion of immediacy, a transparent window onto nature, an unmediated "truth" quite simply because animals are animals. Yet this truth of form rests crucially on artistic intention. That is, through science, chemicals, and art, the taxidermist always strives to create as near an image of living animals as possible. The reasoning is circular but highlights the fact that taxidermy is neither not nature nor not art: it is a bit of both and neither. By straddling the nature-

culture opposition, taxidermy obliterates (or at least renders uninteresting) any division between the aesthetics of nature and the aesthetics of art. (Poliquin 107)

It is this last characteristic of taxidermy that is most crucial for an examination of taxidermy in Sebald. While the animal bodies on display are actually a product of nature, their appearance, posture, and continued existence untouched by decay are purely products of culture. This duality explodes the notion of a clear nature-culture divide: these dead animals have been made into things and yet retain something of their vitality. These "wholly lifeless" animal-things represent both an excellent example and complication of Jane Bennett's idea of thing-power: where there seems to be passive matter there is in fact vitality and affective agency. Certainly the animals in question had agency in life, but they also have agency in death.

The descriptions of and encounters with taxidermy in Sebald follow the circularity described by Poliquin: they reproduce narratives of hunting and ancestry and complicate the relationship between viewer and viewed. Early in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator encounters a stuffed polar bear at Somerleyton Hall: "In the entrance hall stands a more than three-meter-tall stuffed polar bear. It looks like a sorrowful ghost with its yellowish and moth-eaten coat."[14] This polar bear-turned-thing is long dead and showing its age by the time Sebald's narrator encounters it. One of a matched pair displayed symmetrically in Somerleyton's entrance hall, this bear was killed, preserved, and brought back to England among dozens of other animals from an arctic expedition undertaken by Sir Savile Crossley in 1897, one of many hunting and collecting trips he undertook.[15] Posed and preserved as if in battle, the bears stand guard on either side of the main entrance to the house, in a wood-

[14] My translation. "In der Eingangshalle steht ein mehr als drei Meter großer ausgestopfter Eisbär. Wie ein gramgebeugtes Gespenst schaut er aus in seinem gelblichen, von den Motten zerfressenen Fell." (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 49)

[15] This expedition is documented along with images of the polar bear hunt and the pair of polar bears in situ at Somerleyton. (Wilson and Snæbjörnsdóttir)

panelled room featuring a great deal of animal imagery and material traces.

Alongside the two vertically-mounted polar bears, four tiger skins, a carved wooden elephant from Sri Lanka, images of owls, boars' heads, hunting dogs, a hippopotamus skull, and – just through the doorway near the grand staircase – a mounted Himalayan brown bear shape any visitor's first impressions of Somerleyton and its proprietors.[16] The carved wooden figures of boars' heads and stained-glass game birds in the domed ceiling announce Somerleyton as a noble hunting retreat, while the taxidermy specimens announce the prowess of the estate's proprietors. According to Poliquin, old houses filled with hunting trophies have the power to demonstrate the noble birth of the current owner by implicitly reminding the visitor that for generations the family has been privileged enough to hunt on private land. (Poliquin 158) While Somerleyton certainly belongs to this tradition of hunting retreats and country houses, the specimens on display, particularly in the entrance hall, testify to an individual characteristic of the owner, namely his identity as hunter and explorer of exotic lands.

In the late nineteenth century the decimation of predator populations in Europe, increased ease of travel, and more sophisticated taxidermy techniques encouraged hunters to travel to far-flung places in order to bring back imperialistic trophies demonstrating the "hunter-explorer's sense of verve, vigour, and reputation."[17] It is clear that

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[16] I observed this arrangement of furnishings and specimens on a visit to Somerleyton Hall in August, 2016. The atmosphere of a hunting retreat is made very clear by the permanent decorations in the woodwork and stained glass – but the mounts and relics are certainly moveable and appear to be frequently repositioned, including for weddings and other events – the Instagram account for Somerleyton Hall occasionally shows bridal party members posing with the polar bear or the Himalayan brown bear. In these images, the bears are often wearing hats or holding bouquets for the occasion.

[17] This is one of the narratives that Poliquin focuses on in discussing the example of Schloss Matzen in Austria, which was purchased in 1873 by the mother of William Adolph Baillie-Grohman. Baillie-Grohman filled the castle with his own hunting trophies, rather than relying on historical, inher-

the trophies collected by Sir Savile Crossley around the turn of the twentieth century fit this mould: his hunting expeditions took him all over the world, as evidenced by the skins, skull, and mounted polar bears that greet his visitors. To enter Somerleyton through the front door is to be notified immediately that this house is a place that celebrates hunting as evidence of the owner's privilege, physical prowess, and exotic experience. Taken another way, the animal imagery and material presence of dead animals suggest that Somerleyton is a place that glorifies animal death and participates in colonialism.

These overtones can hardly have escaped Sebald's narrator - he repeatedly refers to Somerleyton in terms that underscore its exoticism and alignment with colonialism. His description of the polar bear focuses less on its power, its symmetry with its twin, or the connotations of its presence in the entry hall, than on its individual materiality. After all, the narrator's description of the polar bear is brief but suggests a gaze that lingers on the bear. Its moth-eaten and yellowing skin are testament to its age and what the narrator describes as its stooped appearance expresses an unbearable sadness. The narrator seems to feel what Poliquin refers to as "the burden of looking at these animals, slowly and carefully [in order to] appreciate their forms both as individuals and as members of their species." (Poliquin 220) The narrator's focus on a single bear instead of the pair is evidence of his desire to dignify the bear as an individual.

Another characteristic of the narrator's gaze in this instance is that, unlike in the description of the quail or the Antwerp zoo in *Austerlitz* where the narrator focused on the animals' surroundings and actions, it is arrested by the materiality of the bear. Poliquin describes the gaze humans use to look at taxidermy in terms that are reminiscent of the "fingery eyes" Haraway describes as a hybrid haptic-optic sense: "We know instinctively what cracked, century-old skin will feel like. It is the feel of time itself traced in organic matter."[18]

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ited mounted heads to prove his legacy. His "traditional theatre of status, origins, and authority […] with a twist" is evidence of what Poliquin calls "a romantic culture of imperialistic hunting." (Poliquin 160–161)

[18] Haraway deploys the term "fingery eyes" in describing human looking at a moss-covered stump that resembles a dog. She borrows the term from Eva Hayward. (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 5, 304)

(Poliquin 219) Aloi argues that visible signs of aging in taxidermy specimens further change the viewer's perception of the animal as object:

> Slight marks, broken legs and ruined wings signify the passing of time and the work of decay where bacteria, parasites and oxidation obliterate the utopian perfection expected of the specimen. The body in question thus acquires an identity and is acknowledged as something not fixed but in flux. It reveals a personal story of some description, one that clashes with the anonymity required of the specimen." (Aloi 36–37)

This materiality – the imagined touch coupled with vision – holds the narrator's gaze: he is confronted with the material trace of a human's violent imperial urge and is overcome by sadness at the indignity of the individual polar bear being forced to persist beyond its natural life and out of its natural habitat. As a result of his attention to the bear's materiality, the narrator is decentred, not appearing any more as the subject of his own narrative. Instead the polar bear-thing becomes the grammatical subject of the sentence and the verb used to describe its appearance - *ausschauen* - can also be read as active. Not only does the bear *appear* yellowed and moth eaten - signs of decay that confer some individuality on the anonymous specimen, as Aloi suggests - , but he also *looks out* at the narrator. This apparent reversal of the relationship between subject and object marks an attempt on the part of the narrator to allow some other-than-human element to speak for itself, rather than to project his own assumptions onto it.

In *Austerlitz*, the reader sees two different kinds of animal appearances resident at Andromeda Lodge: flourishing, live, exotic birds and their taxidermied forebears. Andromeda Lodge is described as a kind of magical place, perpetually peaceful and Edenic, with a microclimate that enables plants and animals from warmer climates to thrive there. The feeling that the lodge is a retreat is doubled when Austerlitz refers to it as the boys' *Ferienasyl* – vacation refuge – implying that the house serves as a retreat from otherwise inhospitable spaces.

Andromeda Lodge echoes in some ways Berger's understanding of the zoo as museum or research station because of the omnipresence of botanical and biological specimens in every part of the house: in every room, Austerlitz found

> some kind of cabinet of natural curiosities [...]: cases with multiple drawers, some of them glass-fronted, where the roundish eggs of parrots were arranged in their hundreds; collections of shells, minerals, beetles, and butterflies; slowworms, adders, and lizards preserved in formaldehyde; snail shells and sea urchins, crabs and shrimps, and large herbaria containing leaves, flowers, and grasses.[19] (Sebald, *Austerlitz Tr. Bell* 83)

This chaotic list of natural specimens resembles a catalogue of a natural history museum. As I have suggested, the lodge had metamorphosed into such a "space" – a cabinet of curiosities - following the friendship between one of the previous owners of the estate and Charles Darwin.[20] (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 127) These specimens, like the hunting trophies seen in Somerleyton also prove the estate's pedigree, in this case demonstrating the scientific character of the estate rather than its privilege and prowess. This estate does not glory in animal death and the specimens do not preserve the moment of killing or the narrative of the hunt. Instead, they preserve the individuals of a species in order to understand the species as a whole. According to Poliquin, this kind of collection, frequently found in museums and

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[19] irgendein Naturalienkabinett, Kästen mit zahlreichen, zum Teil verglasten Schubladen, in denen die ziemlich kugeligen Eier der Papageien zu Hunderten aufrangiert waren, Muschel-, Mineralien-, Käfer- und Schmetterlingssammlungen, in Formaldehyd eingelegte Blindschleichen, Nattern und Echsen, Schneckenhäuser und Seesterne, Krebse und Krabben und große Herbarien mit Baumblättern, Blüten und Gräsern. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 126)

[20] The tradition of the cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer* is clearly at work here. As Aloi notes, this kind of collection also has religious overtones, being reminiscent of a reliquary and performing a function of "aristocratic […] self-mythologisation." The specimen in such a collection "is invested with an aura produced by deterritorialisation. It is when the object is decontextualised from its natural setting that it opens itself to multiple significations, as it can form new connections from which alternative meanings develop." (Aloi 31)

study collections, attempts to bring order and create a species standard, useful for classification and comparative study: "Order confers a democratic sameness to the animals: none is more important or more exceptional than any other." (Poliquin 125) The power of order in a natural historical collection goes even further: a zoological specimen, according to Aloi, is entirely a thing of zoological reference. Technically, this is called the 'holotype': a physical example used to formally describe the species it represents. As a species representative, the holotype is anonymous, and it is in its utter perfection that we find the confirmation of its universal anonymity. (Aloi 35)

Unlike the earlier encounter with the raccoon and other animals in the nocturama, where the narrator directly described the zoo, Andromeda Lodge is multiply mediated. The unnamed narrator recalls Austerlitz's description of the lodge and its human and other-than-human residents. The main animal residents of the estate are a large number of live cockatoos. They are described as the exotic element of the estate and thrive there, but are decidedly removed from their native habitat, living in sherry casks in the estate's orangery. (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 122–123) Like the description of the raccoon or the quail, Austerlitz's description of the cockatoos and their habitat pays special attention to their surroundings and their actions, but it does not treat any of them as individual or material. Austerlitz's lack of attention to the birds' individuality or materiality, instead regarding them as a collective or species representatives means that they do not exist on their own terms, but instead are subjected to an anthropocentric gaze. They are described as similar to humans in many ways: "They cleared their throats before beginning to converse in their own cockatoo language, they showed themselves alert, scheming, mischievous and sly, deceitful, malicious, vindictive and quarrelsome."[21] (Sebald, *Austerlitz Tr. Bell* 81) The first sentence of this description seems as if it takes the cockatoos as cockatoos – their sighs and sneezes are, after all, purely physiological phenomena. However, as Austerlitz carries on, he ascribes to them desires, attitudes, and af-

[21] "Sie räusperten sich, ehe sie anfingen, in ihrer Kakadusprache zu reden, sie zeigten sich aufmerksam, berechend, verschmitzt und verschlagen, falsch, boshaft, rach- und händelsüchtig." (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 124)

fects – even language – that are human characteristics. This anthropomorphism is compounded by his description of them as "a mirror of human society"[22]

While visiting Andromeda Lodge, Austerlitz discovers among the collections a number of preserved birds, presumably formerly alive on the estate. These dead birds, clearly meant as objects of observation in life and study in death, are an example of the cataloguing impulse at work in the cabinets of specimens. In the Andromeda Lodge collection were many dead cockatoos along with other kinds of exotic and domestic birds that had been collected by an earlier owner of the estate. Among these dead birds, one stood out as the most beautiful. This specimen's label is described as

> Jaco, Ps. erithacus L. He came from the Congo and had reached the great age of sixty-six in his Welsh exile […] he had been very tame and trusting, was a quick learner, chattered away to himself and others, could whistle entire songs and had composed some too, but best of all he liked to mimic the voices of children and to have them teach him new words.[…] He was about nine inches long, and as his name suggests had ash-gray plumage, as well as a carmine tail, a black beak, and a pale face that you might have thought was marked by deep grief.[23] (Sebald, *Austerlitz Tr. Bell* 83)

This specimen label cum epitaph illustrates the hybrid nature of the collection: not only are the bird's provenance, size, and appearance noted (as would be appropriate to a scientific collection), but the details of his life, habits, likes and dislikes, and his age at death memo-

[22] My translation. "ein Spiegel der menschlichen Sozietät." (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 124)

[23] "Jaco, Ps. Erithacus L. Er stammte aus dem Kongo und hatte in seinem walisischen Exil, wie es auf dem ihm beigegebenen Nachruf hieß, das hohe Alter von sechsundsechzig Jahren erreicht. Er sei […] überaus zahm und zutraulich gewesen, habe leicht gelernt, vielerlei mit sich selbst und anderen gesprochen, ganze Lieder gepfiffen und teilweise auch komponiert, am liebsten aber die Stimmen der Kinder nachgeahmt und von diesen sich unterrichten lassen. […] Er war zirka neun Zoll groß und hatte, seinem Namen entsprechend, ein aschgraues Gefieder, außerdem einen karminroten Schwanz, einen schwarzen Schnabel und ein weißliches, wie man denken konnte, von tiefer Trauer gezeichnetes Gesicht." (Sebald, *Austerlitz* 125)

rialize him as an individual, rather than recording his life as scientific data. Jaco the parrot is preserved as an individual as well as seemingly the only representative of his species, interred in a cardboard box as a beloved pet, but also as a scientific specimen. The habits described could be read as romantic anthropomorphism, but may also be understood as simply an accurate accounting of a domesticated bird's behaviour, both exposed and receptive to human behaviour. Austerlitz's description, the label on the bird's box, and the narrator's recounting of Austerlitz's narrative all take the bird at face value, attending to its materiality and respecting its individuality. As a result, the relationship between Austerlitz and the bird - according to Austerlitz - is empathetic, as if they were equals. Here we do not see a repetition of the subject-object relationship exhibited by the narrator looking at the raccoon. Although the parrot is preserved to fulfil humans' "desire to possess and revisit" (Poliquin 13) it after death, its display does not strip away the bird's subjecthood. Here also, language conveys activity and authenticity: in a passage that is otherwise replete with subjunctives, the description of Jaco the parrot adopts the indicative mood, emphasizing that the description is factual. This underscores the notion of the bird as individual, as subject, and as authentic. Not only is the parrot the most beautiful of the birds, the description of its individuality and the affection suggested by the label's eulogy gesture toward a kind of magnetism. The bird, like the polar bear in *The Rings of Saturn*, demands attention and holds our gaze and, ultimately, an encounter with it is more fulfilling than the zoo visit described earlier in the novel. Just as the polar bear at Somerleyton "looks out" at the narrator, the description of Jaco as an individual allows him to exist as a subject and, thus, to shape Austerlitz's development. The bird, with its many connections to Austerlitz's mysterious biography, seems to exist as Austerlitz's "significant other." (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 27) The two are co-constitutive in precisely the way that Haraway describes the concept of "naturalcultural dancing." As Poliquin argues: "In spite of the death, skinning, dismemberment, and refashioning, the animal form holds. The eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back." (Poliquin 41) Where the live, anonymous zoo animal cannot return the viewer's gaze, the companion species turned taxidermy specimen – alt-

hough dead – can and does. This allows for a prolonged material encounter with the alterity of the other-than-human world, restoring its subjecthood and, thus, shifting the human away from the centre.

"Eine lautlose Katastophe"

Sebald's challenge to the subject-object dichotomy is evidence of his environmental anxiety. While material ecocriticism's insistence on the entanglements of nature and culture may have optimistic outcomes – namely attention to and respect for the other-than-human leading to better care for the environment – in Sebald, it is a symptom of apocalypticism. Although this theme is present throughout his works, Sebald's book-length poem *After Nature* may contain the clearest expression of his apocalyptic environmental thinking and his indictment of human disregard for the value of nature.[24]

In the final section of the poem, especially, Sebald's dense allusiveness and sometimes obscure meanings about the environment gain some clarity and coalesce in an indictment of industry and a call to action on behalf of the environment. In the last section of the poem, the speaker returns to Manchester, describing in great detail the destruction wrought upon the city by industry. Instead of depicting it in its heyday, the text focuses on Manchester as a bleak post-industrial ruin, the factories having closed and left behind polluted water and wrecked infrastructure. In his study of history and nature in Sebald, Gunther Pakendorf characterizes this image of Manchester as an "already extinct world" ("bereits abgestorben[e] Welt") and draws another parallel between the degradation of the environment and the Holocaust as the "end of history" ("Ende der Geschichte.")

[24] This work is also composed of images and allusions that closely resemble the networks that characterize much of Sebald's other work, particularly *The Rings of Saturn*. These connections, according to Colin Riordan, are emblematic of Sebald's approach to studying history through connections and allusions, but are also symptomatic of a kind of ecological thinking: "Sebald's narrative techniques which rely on connections […] have as an inevitable consequence the effect that the natural world, which is the ultimate context, becomes a central object of textual inquiry." (Riordan 46)

(Pakendorf 99) This is a typical reading of environment against history in Sebald: many critics find parallels between catastrophes of all kinds, regarding descriptions of pollution and mass extinction as allegorical representations of human catastrophe. However, this reading runs the risk of marginalizing Sebald's insistence on the damage done to the environment itself: if environmental degradation is only useful as allegory, then the human still resides at the centre of, and separate from all questions related to the environment. My goal is not to minimize the horror or importance of the Holocaust, of course, but, rather, to suggest that neither catastrophe need stand for the other. Instead, I argue that by levelling the hierarchical difference between human disaster and environmental disaster and by displacing an anthropocentric perspective, we can restore dignity to the other-than-human victims of human action while still recognizing the violence done by humans to other humans.

This passage in *After Nature* illustrates the force with which Sebald insists on industry's role in the death of nature – not a controversial position in 1995, when the poem was written – but also shows an unexpected subtlety in characterizing the city of Manchester. The city, hailed by British Prime Minister Disraeli as "The most wonderful city of modern times / a celestial Jerusalem / whose significance only philosophy / could gauge. [...],"[25] (Sebald, *After Nature* 97) is now dead, devoid of the bustling crowds that previously manned the numerous factories in the city. The unnatural colours that used to be present in the now-dead rivers of Manchester "azure-blue, carmine-red and glaucous green" are an image of Manchester's memory of better times.[26] (Sebald, *After Nature* 98) This characterization of the colourful water seems at first to be genuinely nostalgic,

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[25] "die wundervollste Stadt der Neuzeit […] / ein himmlisches Jerusalem, / dessen Bedeutung allein die Philosophie / zu ermessen vermöge. […]" (Sebald, *Nach der Natur* 83)

[26] "azurblau, / karminrot und giftig grün" (Sebald, *Nach der Natur* 83–84) A better translation of "giftig grün" would be "poisonous green," although it would require sacrificing the alliteration. Glaucous, with its connotation of dust and dull colour captures something of the decay in Manchester's environment, but does not accurately capture the colour or the toxicity implied by the word "giftig."

but becomes sinister in the lines that follow. The salt and ashes that the water carried toward the sea are clearly signs of the staggering pollution caused when the factories dumped their by-products into the water. Vibrant as it may have appeared, the colourful water was the result of pollution. Instead of the world that has "died out," as Pakendorf suggests, this is a world that has been *killed*. The concentrated images of pollution also draw attention to animal life: the speaker imagines hearing "the murmur / of the million fold proliferating molluscs, wood lice and leeches."[27] (Sebald, *After Nature* 113) Seemingly paradoxically, species like these molluscs, isopods, and leeches thrive in polluted water due to the smaller number of predators and changes in the pH level of the water. Descriptions like these de-romanticize the 'natural' landscape, stripping the post-industrial city of nostalgia, and blending nature with the products of culture. As such it presents Sebald's view of what the world will resemble literally "after nature."

The proliferation of molluscs in the polluted waters of Manchester has an analogous, although opposite, image in *The Rings of Saturn*. There, the narrator discusses, at length, the herring fisheries that provided work and livelihood for the Norfolk coast in earlier times. Among other details of the fishes' lives, the narrator points out the extreme fertility of herring, calling the enormous "herring harvest" of bygone days "the terrible sight of Nature suffocating on its own surfeit."[28] (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 55) Due to the multiple uses to which the fish can be put, the herring fishery becomes an industry which, despite the herrings' exceptional reproductive rate, could lead to the complete extinction of the species if left unchecked. These meditations on human instrumentalisation of the fish are interrupted by the justification that the fish were protected by their physiology from the "fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher an-

[27] "das Murmeln / der millionenfach sich vermehrenden Muscheln, /Asseln und Egel." (Sebald, *Nach der Natur* 96–97)
[28] "das erschreckende Bild einer in ihrem eigenen Überfluß erstickenden Natur." (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 72)

imals in their death throes."[29] (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 57) This justification for the killing (euphemistically described as harvesting) and experimentation on billions of herring annually is predicated on the herring's ontological inferiority. This implicit criticism becomes explicit with the assertion, "But the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels."[30] (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 57) This concession to the unknowability of the herrings' feelings at first seems to only refer to their capacity to feel pain (a reference to Jeremy Bentham's foundational thought that animals rights ought to based on their capacity to suffer). (Bentham 311) But in fact the use of the word "Gefühle" has a more holistic implication, suggesting that not only physical pain, but also emotion and perhaps subjectivity are at issue here. The narrator concedes that, as Broglio puts it, "we do not have the conceptual schema to make sense of the subjective facts of this other creature nor to comprehend its 'internal world.'" (Broglio 62) This single line suggests that perhaps herring are capable of feeling fear and pain and leaves open the possibility that, although the narrator fails to regard any particular herring as an individual, instead generally treating herring as a collective, they, too, could be subjects. Perhaps, therefore, humans ought not to be regarded as the sole actants that matter. It is also essential to note that the narrator has no access to even a 'representative' herring. Where the narrator has access to the stuffed polar bear at Somerleyton or, in *Austerlitz*, the preserved bird-specimens at Andromeda Lodge, here he only has the memory of the herring. Their large-scale destruction by humans results not only in the loss of their material presence, but also the possibility of even imagining their interiority or subjectivity.

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[29] "die Empfindung der Angst und der Schmerzen, die beim Todeskampf durch die Körper und die Seelen der höher ausgebildeten Tiere gehen." (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 75)

[30] "Doch in Wahrheit wissen wir nichts von den Gefühlen des Herrings." (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 75) It is tempting to wonder whether Sebald were inspired by Chauang-tzu and Hui-tzu's discussion about the feelings of fish, where the latter asks the former "You not being a fish yourself, […] how can you possibly know in what consists the pleasure of fishes?" (Chuang Chou, quoted in Doniger 103)

This passage is also the occasion for perhaps the most controversial juxtaposition of allusion in all of Sebald's works. The photograph of heaps of dead herring is followed soon after by a photograph of human corpses lying in the woods near Buchenwald.[31] While much has been made of this juxtaposition in Sebald scholarship, most analyses do not adequately consider the materiality of the herring or the narrator's attempt to encounter the herring as material agents and not just as metaphorical stand-ins for the Holocaust's victims or the ever-present ravages of history. My reading focuses on the way in which the narrator in fact attempts to allow for the possibility of herring subjectivity.[32]

The startling effect of juxtaposing mass murder with overfishing (like the episode depicting the process of extracting silk from silk-

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[31] This juxtaposition is frequently the object of study. Blumenthal-Barby sees *Die Ringe des Saturn* as an attempt at reconstructing the voices that have been silenced by history. This constitutes a critique of temporal historicism and creates in the narrator a radical identification with the victims of history. The narrator seems to identify with the herrings in a similar way that he identifies with Michael Hamburger and, on a larger scale, all the victims of European anti-Semitism. Bernstein regards *Die Ringe des Saturn* as a melancholy aesthetic project that interrogates the "violent unknowing" caused by trauma and argues for the necessity of art in dealing with it. See: (Blumenthal-Barby) and (Bernstein)

[32] The analogy that is frequently drawn between the Holocaust and industrial farming and slaughtering is always provocative. Adorno takes up the question of animal ethics and the Holocaust in several of his works in order to "highlight[…] the inhumanity of humans." (Gerhardt 160) Coetzee takes up this controversy in *The Lives of Animals* when the novelist Elizabeth Costello claims that, "By treating fellow human beings, beings created in the image of God, like beasts, they had themselves become beasts." (Coetzee 21) Her straightforward although admittedly "tasteless" analogy causes one member of her audience to refuse further contact with her, saying "If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead." (Coetzee 50) Calarco points out that such a rejection of the analogy "on the grounds that such comparisons denigrate human suffering" is actually situated in kinds of humanism that value human life over animal life. (Calarco 111–112) Cary Wolfe also criticizes the unreflective use of this analogy. (Wolfe, *Before the Law* 45)

worm cocoons and other related passages in *The Rings of Saturn*) makes a forceful statement about human responsibility for the demise of the natural environment.[33] This is the point of departure for some studies of the image of the herring. For example, in an argument that resonates with material ecocriticism, Summers-Bremner reads this same moment in the text as a reversal of the traditional environmental gaze – instead of the human regarding the environment, the human becomes the object of the environment's gaze. (See Summers-Bremner 310) Anne Fuchs recognizes the environmentalist critique inherent in this image:

> Sebald's daring juxtaposition of the story of the herring and the corpses of Buchenwald underlines the common denominator of both stories of destruction: a cold and objectified biopolitics which disregards the value of life by

[33] The shock of the juxtaposition between heaps of dead herrings and the masses of dead in the Holocaust originates from the proximity of the two images in the text, but it resonates when one examines some of the language used in describing the fish. For example, herrings are called "this restless wonderer of the seas" ("de[r] ruhelose[…] Wanderer des Meeres,") which is reminiscent of the anti-Semitic characterization of Jews as eternally wandering or homeless. (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 54; Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 71) In addition, after a catch the herring are loaded into "Güterwagen der Eisenbahn" to be sent off for processing and sale, which is reminiscent of the cattle cars used to transport prisoners during the Holocaust. Furthermore, patches of scales floating on the surface of the water (which is a tell-tale sign of the presence of herring) sometimes look like ashes. (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 73) Also, describing the various experiments conducted to determine the survival potential of herring, the narrator writes "This process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster." (Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 57) ("Eine solche, von unserem Wissensdrang inspirierte Prozedur ist sozusagen die äußerste Zuspitzung der Leidensgeschichte einer ständig von Katastrophen bedrohten Art." (Sebald, *Die Ringe Des Saturn* 75)) This species is prone to disaster, a characterization which is not infrequently applied also to Jews. Finally, in the next sentence, the narrator says that we are all complicit in the slaughter of these fish, a statement which is reminiscent of the phenomenon of collective guilt.

means of a reductive interpretation of nature. (Fuchs, "W. G. Sebald's Painters" 173)

Fuchs argues that this objectification allows humans free rein in exploiting or selectively destroying nature. But while these studies take seriously the text's commentary on environmental degradation and even gesture toward the problem of anthropocentrism enabling unchecked instrumentalisation, they do not take seriously the possibility of the herring as subjects. It is precisely this kind of anthropocentrism and destructive human objectification of nature that material ecocriticism seeks to correct. Patrick Murphy's reading of Bakhtin's idea of "Answerability" in *Art and Answerability* suggests that, in the context of the environmental crisis, bidirectional accountability and liability implies a breaking-down of the subject-object dichotomy. Bakhtin further introduces the notion of "transgredience," the idea that an author "must take up a position outside himself, must experience himself on a plane that is different from the one on which we actually experience our own life. … He must become another in relation to himself." (Bakhtin, quoted in Murphy 156) This radical alienation of the self has the effect of mitigating the author's tendency toward ventriloquism or the well-intentioned objectification necessary when one tries to "'speak for nature' or to let nature speak through oneself as an author." (Murphy 156) The effort on the part of Sebald's narrators to regard animals as individuals and to leave open the possibility of their subjecthood and material agency implies precisely this kind of self-othering. The material eloquence of the polar bear and the parrot, and the narrator's gesture toward the interior life of the herring, are attempts at what Calarco calls "the revolution in language and thought that is needed to come to grips with the issues surrounding animal life." (Calarco 6) By dignifying the other-than-human as a subject in its own right, these instances suggest a recognition of the precarity of animal life in the context of human degradation of the environment. While one might expect the texts to advocate a different, more respectful type of interaction between humans and other-than-human subjects, these moments are tinged with melancholy. The herring are absent because of humans' overfishing and polar bears threaten to become extinct as a result of an-

thropogenic climate change. The encounters with these animals are primarily imbued with melancholy: they instigate a mourning for the loss of these animals with the reader invited to feel responsibility for their irredeemable demise.

Returning to the Somerleyton polar bear and keeping in mind the environmental anxiety present throughout Sebald's works, it only remains to consider the usefulness of studying the relationship between human and non-human animals in the Anthropocene. In the introduction to her book, Rachel Poliquin describes Wilson and Snæbjörnsdóttir's project *anoq: flat out and bluesome*, a collection of photographs and an exhibition of ten taxidermied polar bears.[34] Among the photographs and the polar bears is the very specimen described in *The Rings of Saturn*. As Poliquin argues and as Sebald was surely aware, taxidermied polar bears have ceased in the era of anthropogenic climate change to be the evidence of man's epic struggle with romantic nature, or even to function as scientific specimens for education. Instead, they have become both "an anxious narrative of global warming" (Poliquin 3) and a "souvenir of […] biological commemoration." (Poliquin 218) Looking at the stuffed polar bear with global warming in mind, it ceases to be the evidence

[34] This exhibition has received a great deal of attention since its debut. Aloi and Broglio both regard the polar bears' removal from their 'native' context as a central source of its discomfort. Broglio focuses on the animal's skin "as a surface of contact and resistance" and argues that the standing pose preferred by many 19th century taxidermists represents the ultimate delocation of the bear: "At the same time that the skin is given a vertical (metaphysical) architecture, it is gutted from any animal interior and any animal worlding." (Broglio 73–74) Aloi also situates the uncanniness of the exhibition in the deterritorialisation of the bears: it is only when the bears are removed from their original exhibiting context as educational objects in the museum, extravagant furniture or trophies that the uncanny presence of a multitude of polar bears in one room becomes disconcerting." (Aloi 37–38) It is intriguing that Aloi's reading regards the 'unnatural' habitat of the taxidermied bears as more fitting, while the uncanniness of a group of polar bears comes from a familiarity with live bears' natural solitary behaviour. In this case, the (further) manipulation of the specimens reminds the viewer of their live state while drawing attention to the artificiality of their presence and presentation in the gallery.

of Sir Savile Crossley's virility and adventurousness and is certainly not simply a projection of Sebald's narrator's emotional state. Instead, it becomes noble and sad, one of only a few remnants of its species, frozen in time and persisting beyond its natural life. The narrator's attempt to acknowledge the bear's individuality may ultimately be an attempt to decentre himself as human subject and a subtler way of recognizing the effects of human destructiveness both on the human and other-than-human world. This impulse is in line with what vital materialism argues for: not an inversion of the human-dominated hierarchy of the past, but rather what Bennett refers to as a levelling:

> If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. […] The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. (Bennett 13)

The polar bear may be the stereotypical poster-child for global warming, but it - along with the many other animal subjects in Sebald's texts - also serves as a charismatic Other that may form the bridge between recognizing human worth and the much harder task of recognizing the agency and dignity of other, less relatable matter.

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