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Polar

A 2010 television commercial begins with an image of the Arctic that has become all too familiar: melting ice, large chunks of glacier crashing into the sea, a forlorn-looking polar bear. The commercial continues by following the polar bear as it swims to a woodland area supposedly thousands of kilometres away from its natural habitat. He briefly shelters underneath an overpass, then follows train tracks, momentarily distracted by a colourful butterfly. He watches the brightly lit skyline of a large metropolitan area, encounters urban wildlife – a raccoon – and eventually ends up on a suburban street where a professionally dressed man is about to get into his car. The polar bear rears up on its hind legs to hug the perplexed man. While the two embrace, the voice-over steps in to introduce the audience to the Nissan LEAF, a 100 per cent electric car: ‘Innovation for the planet’ (Nissan 2010).

The commercial works on many levels: it neatly greenwashes what is essentially a polluting industry, anthropomorphizes an animal that is generally shy of humans – and often deadly when it is not – and taps into familiar images of polar landscapes. Of course, polar bears are no strangers to advertising. Coca-Cola, for instance, has been using polar bears in their ads since 1922. According to the maker of a 1997 commercial, the company uses polar bears because they are ‘innocent, fun and [reflect] the best attributes we like to call “human” ... The bears are cute, mischievous, playful and filled with fun’ (Ryan 2012: par. 10). In the twenty-first century, polar bears are more than just innocent or fun. They have become the poster boys of the drama of climate change in which, as Sara Wheeler puts it, the Arctic is the lead player (2009: 4). Especially in advertising and environmental campaigns, the bears are a ‘visual cliché’ (Emmerson 2011: 151). ‘Their fate’, Charles Emmerson writes, ‘is an emotive issue, used by some to raise awareness about the consequences

of climate change and by others to imply that global warming is a matter of aesthetics' (2011: 151). In commercials such as that for the Nissan LEAF, polar bears add a sense of environmental awareness that may be positively interpreted by the viewer, but that is fundamentally misleading.

The melting poles are one of the most dominant images of climate crisis in the twenty-first century: while the poles are often seen as the last wildernesses of the world, they also function as symbolic canaries in the mine of climate change: 'The role of climate change canaries is ... to render global warming visible, to provide a sequence of what Kevin DeLuca has called "image events": easily recognised iconic scenes, such as crumbling icecaps or dried-up riverbeds, which stand for wider issues' (Hamblyn 2009: 231). Or, in the words of Robert Harriss, 'the Arctic of the early 21st century is a living laboratory for experiencing unprecedented, large-scale changes in land, ocean, ecosystem, and atmospheric environments' (2012: 4). The Arctic is 'nature's front line' (Emmerson 2011: 167). Indeed, of all the environments around the world, the Arctic is most severely affected – and it has been the focal point of crisis for decades. It was, Wheeler notes, 'the front line of the Cold War, with both sides pouring money into long-range nuclear bomber installations' (2009: 6). There's something about the Arctic, she concludes, that 'attracts millennial anxiety' (2009: 6). While often overshadowed by reports of the melting of the sea ice in the Arctic, Antarctica is also affected by climate crisis. Although the warming affecting the Arctic does not have the same severe consequences for Antarctica, the region became an early and powerful symbol of global climate crisis with the discovery of the ozone hole in 1985. At the same time, the Antarctic Treaty, ratified in 1961 and extended since, means that Antarctica's environment is better protected than that of the Arctic. Its distance and remoteness mean that Antarctica wasn't sighted until the eighteenth century, although stories about it had circulated for centuries. Most importantly, Antarctica has, unlike the Arctic, never been permanently populated.¹ Though different environments in some ways, the Arctic and Antarctica consequently hold some of the same meanings both historically and in the twenty-first century, and I discuss them as such. Both the North and South Pole have always held the appeal of the final frontier, emptiness and wilderness – to which the past decades have added the image of the poles as indicators of and most direct witnesses to climate crisis.

As I show in this chapter, throughout history the Arctic and Antarctic have functioned as nexus points in the British imagination where ideas of empire, identity and nature come together with climate crisis discourse and environmentalism. Through their engagement with polar space and the depiction of human nature in this space, the postmillennial novels I discuss in this chapter position polar landscapes as the symbolic and literal embodiments of climate crisis. Their engagement with the poles is rooted in a typically British tradition of polar narratives that continues to shape twenty-first-century experiences and narratives of the poles. In the next section, I briefly sketch this tradition, especially as it is reflected in the literary imagination. The majority of the chapter focuses on experiences of the polar landscape, through a discussion of space in the second section and exploration and environmentalism in the third. Polar narratives, such as Jeremy Page's *The Collector of Lost Things* (2013), Rebecca Hunt's *Everland* (2014) and Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016), are characterized by a refusal to see landscapes as places of positive belonging, and rather hold on to a familiar perception of these environments as hostile, alien and unknowable. In this concern with space, the chapter continues the discussion on space and place, topological and projective locations from the previous chapter. Polar spaces are historically and in the twenty-first century also typically presented as spaces of conquest and loss, making imperialist nostalgia central to experiences of the North and South Pole.

Imagining the poles

A video accompanying Ludovico Einaudi's 'Elegy for the Arctic' (2016) shows him playing his composition on a pontoon, just large enough for him and a black Steinway piano. In the background, a glacier is melting. Right before Einaudi begins to play, a loud crashing noise is heard as more cracks appear in the ice. All through the composition, the sound of the waves and the water suggest the sound of melting ice. In a kind of pathetic fallacy, large pieces of ice splash into the sea halfway through Einaudi's performance. Einaudi briefly looks up, but continues to play. Filmed in front of the Wahlenbergreen glacier near Svalbard (Norway), 'Elegy for the Arctic' was composed and performed in 2016 by Einaudi for the Greenpeace campaign 'Save the Arctic' that aims to

make the Arctic a natural sanctuary. Nine years earlier, the British artist Katie Paterson created her own Arctic elegy by installing a microphone in Vatnajökull (Iceland) (Paterson 2007). Using a special telephone number, visitors to a gallery could phone in and listen to the glacier. They heard a slow dripping and crackling sound that becomes particularly eerie when the listener realizes they are hearing, as one journalist anthropomorphized it, the glacier's 'death throes' (Kennedy 2007: par. 1). In a similar fashion, the organization Cape Farewell, founded in 2001, combines art and environmentalism by taking artists and scientists to the Arctic. These expeditions have become famous through Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* (2010), in which the highly sceptical protagonist joins one of these – much like McEwan did himself.

Not since the Victorian period have the poles spoken so much to the cultural imagination.² In the mid-nineteenth century, the Arctic – and the vogue for polar narratives – even inspired Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens to write their play *The Frozen Deep* (1856). The direct inspiration for the amateur production was a report about the lost Franklin expedition. John Franklin had left to traverse the north-west passage with two ships in 1845 – and nothing was heard from them again. The loss of the ships and crew was a huge blow to British polar exploration. Almost worse than the loss of the ships and the men, however, were reports that emerged in 1854 that signs of cannibalism had been reported by Inuit who found the corpses of some of the crew. The British public was shocked. Collins and Dickens used *The Frozen Deep* to portray a heroic picture of British polar exploration and to slander the Inuit. Exploration, the play suggested, was a noble, Christian endeavour, of which a barbaric practice such as cannibalism wasn't part.³ The currency of the Arctic in the Victorian imagination also shows in Dickens's 1854 novel *Hard Times*, in which one character pulling her chair away from the warmth of the fire inspires another to say, 'Don't go to the North Pole, ma'am!' (1988: 139). The novel's villain, James Harthouse, is described as not so much 'designedly bad', but rather 'indifferent and purposeless' (1988: 139). The narrator concludes this observation with a reference all too familiar to a Victorian audience familiar with the treacherous nature of icebergs – which had crushed the ships of many British polar explorers, or had set them adrift. Harthouse's indifference is likened to icebergs: 'It is the drifting icebergs setting with any current anywhere, that wreck the ships' (1988: 207). Even before the nineteenth century, writing about the Arctic and

Antarctica was popular – at least since, Sarah Moss suggests, ‘the expansion of English print culture in the eighteenth century and probably long before that’ (2006: 24). For Celtic monks in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Arctic was the ultimate place for retreat and reflection: both a Land of the Blessed and the home of the antichrist (Lopez 2014: 17; Officer and Page 2012: 23). In John Donne’s 1613 poem ‘Eclogue’ the test of true passion is whether it can melt the ice of the North Pole: whether ‘the passage of the west or east would thaw’ (1613: l. 115). Until the late Renaissance, the search for a passage across the North Pole that the speaker of Donne’s poem refers to contributed to the idea of the Arctic as a mysterious place: ‘[f]or the European mind, the North continued to be, mythologically, the place from where dangerous people and noisy gods swept south and, at the same time equally mythologically, a kind of promised land, a place where fortunes were to be made and national destinies resolved’ (Officer and Page 2012: 28). Antarctica was long held to be even more mysterious and its first sightings were particularly exciting to explorers, scientists and artists. Cook’s sightings of Antarctica in the 1770s influenced Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798). Once the cursed ship in the poem sails southwards, the crew faces an icy landscape: ‘And ice, mast-high, came floating by,/As green as emerald. ... The ice was here, the ice was there,/The ice was all around:/It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,/Like noises in a swound!’ (2012: ll. 53–54; 59–62). Polar journeys provided a particularly rich language and imagery to the Romantics. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) Robert Walton describes the sublime experience of being ‘surrounded by mountains of ice which admit of no escape and threaten every moment to crush my vessel’ (1994: 205), a situation that he finds both pleasurable and threatening.

The Franklin disaster in the mid-nineteenth century spelled the end of the British glory age of polar explorations. Yet, enthusiasm for the poles – both in terms of journeys as well as the cultural imagination – was revived in the early twentieth century with the race for the South Pole. Robert Falcon Scott’s failed attempt to be the first to reach the South Pole – the Norwegian Roald Amundsen beat him to it – created a new vogue of polar narratives. Scott explicitly shaped the cultural afterlife of his fatal expedition. He left behind a diary, published in 1913, as well as other papers describing his journey. When his grave was discovered in 1912, a ‘message to the public’ was retrieved.

Addressing the world at large, Scott wrote: ‘Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale’ (2008: 422). In the years leading up to the First World War, such sentiments fuelled a climate already rife with heroism, masculinity and nationalism. Over the following decades, Scott’s quest for the South Pole was referenced in many artistic works, from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) to A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). In Woolf’s novel Mr Ramsay frames his intellectual pursuits in terms of a bleak and harsh polar journey that he struggles through. He is said to have qualities ‘that in a desolate expedition across the icy solitudes of the Polar region would have made him the leader’ (Woolf 2000: 40). The heroism that Woolf gently mocks in *To the Lighthouse* resurfaced in children’s literature. Polar stories became popular for children because of the adventure, but they also passed on shared values and codes that were seen as typically English. The moralism and nationalism that early twentieth-century polar narratives were steeped in inspired authors such as A. A. Milne to satirize Arctic and Antarctic exploration.⁴ In a 1926 story, neither Winnie-the-Pooh nor Christopher Robin are quite clear what the North Pole is: “It’s just a thing you discover,” said Christopher Robin carelessly, not being quite sure himself’ (Milne 1992: 101). Quite in line with confusion about the exact place of the North Pole, Pooh and his friends are confused about what this pole exactly looks like. When along the way Pooh picks up a stick – a pole – he becomes the North Pole’s discoverer. True to form, a message is attached to the pole – perhaps a play on the message Amundsen left behind for Scott on the South Pole – saying: ‘NorTH PoLE/DISCOvERED By/PooH/PooH FouND IT’ (Milne 2002: 116). The expedition that Christopher Robin, Pooh and their friends go on is, of course, deliberately ridiculous.⁵

J. M. Barrie drew a deliberate link between his creation Peter Pan and the Scott expedition when, in a 1922 lecture, he described Scott and his men as emerging ‘out of the white immensities *always young*’ (Moss 2006: 200, my emphasis) – just as Peter Pan and his Lost Boys never grow old. Peter Pan’s announcement that ‘to die will be an awfully big adventure’ is read by Moss as an echo of Titus Oates’s suicide during the expedition. Oates’s act, and especially his famous last words, ‘I may be some time’, were summed up by

Scott as 'the act of a brave man and an English gentleman' (Moss 2006: 220). 'It is easy', Moss suggests, 'to see Scott's men as Peter Pan's Lost Boys, escaping to a simple world where boys make all the rules' (2006: 220).⁶ The lost boys of Scott's expedition gain especial poignancy with the loss of millions of young men in the First World War shortly after his journey. Indeed, the dimension that the First World War adds to early twentieth-century polar exploration resurfaces in the journey Ernest Shackleton undertook across Antarctica in 1914–1915. Despite harsh and treacherous circumstances, he managed to rescue his men, only for them to be sent to the front upon their return to Britain (Moss 2009: 23). By the early twentieth century, polar exploration had lost much of the glory that it held before. As Moss suggests, Shackleton's expedition in 1914–1915 was the last of the 'Age of Heroism' (2006: 23). Short of fame or nationalistic heroism, none of the explorers or nations involved expected to find any benefits in 'bagging' a pole. Instead it had become 'an exercise in public relations that seemed to have little to do with the starvation and frostbite on the ground' (Moss 2006: 19).

The spirit of early twentieth-century Antarctic expeditions was rekindled in 2012 and 2015 with the centenaries of the Scott and Shackleton expeditions. The commemoration of these events led to the publication of numerous works of fiction and non-fiction, the organization of museum exhibits and even a recreation of Shackleton's earlier journey to the pole by his descendants. In the cultural imagination, the centenaries came to be tied in with the significance of the poles as places where climate crisis is becoming rapidly very visible. As sites of climate crisis, the Arctic and Antarctic tend to attract fictional scientists. In *Anthropocene Fictions*, Trexler remarks on the popularity of polar fictions that take scientists as their main characters. Novels such as Brian Freemantle's *Ice Age* (2002), Jean McNeil's *Ice Lovers* (2003) and Sarah Andrews's *In Cold Pursuit* (2007) all 'use mysterious deaths [in the scientific community] to create an inquiry into the motives connected to global warming' (Trexler 2015: 80). Climate crisis adds an additional layer to the already thick and complex narrative of polar exploration. As such polar narratives become spaces of past, present and future, reminiscent of a glory age of British polar exploration, and pointing not only to a changed position of Britain in the world, but also to a time in which the poles have become of unsurpassed significance.

Narratives of exploration: Nation and nature

For the Victorians, their explorations of the north were part of the same tradition as the journeys that established the British Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Spufford 1996: 164). Their polar pursuits hence functioned as a consolidation of an empire stretching back several centuries. Postmillennial British polar novels are involved in a similar return to an earlier age by explicitly setting novels in the glory days of British polar expeditions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. To put it differently, like Victorian polar narratives, contemporary polar novels participate in a reconfiguration of the past through the lens of the present, and the present through the lens of the past. While for the Victorians framing their own journeys in terms of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discovery was also a matter of legitimizing the expansion of the British Empire, the nationalistic dimension is problematized rather than legitimized in contemporary novels. As explicitly addressed in *Everland*, exploring in the name of the British flag has become distasteful and suspect, and expeditions now take place supposedly solely under the banner of science. Of course, the notion of a post-imperial age is undermined by international disputes over who owns which parts of the Arctic and Antarctic and the numerous national research stations in both regions.⁷

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, nationalism has once again become an important topic in British politics and culture. The move towards post-nationalism and hybridity that Dominic Head predicted in the early 2000s (Head 2002: 118) seems to have been replaced by increased nationalism, insularity and an emphasis on cultural difference. Terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe, economic crisis, migration and the rise of right-wing parties across Europe have contributed to a sense of nationalism in many European countries. In Britain, the situation is further complicated by the ongoing debate on Britain's role in the world since the Second World War. On the one hand, this has led to the so-called special relationship with the United States and support for its military actions. On the other, as demonstrated by the June 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, British nationalism is leading to far-reaching insularity.⁸ Polar narratives provide a productive space in which these kinds of ideas and tensions of nationhood and identity are played out. In early twenty-first-century novels,

conceptions of identity dovetail with, and spill over into, concerns about the climate crisis so visible at the poles. Especially in *The Collector of Lost Things* and *The North Water*, nationalistic discourse is explicitly placed next and in contrast to the environmental destruction that exploration brings, thereby questioning the role past and present imperialism play in environmental degradation. Historical fiction is a particularly apt genre to explore such issues of identity and perhaps unsurprisingly the genre has flourished over the past decades. The rise of historical fiction, Suzanne Keen remarks, coincides with 'a booming heritage industry's focus on a positive, marketable past capable of inspiring patriotism and attracting tourists' (2006: 169). Novels such as *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water* can be said to reveal 'a form of literary nationalism that cuts across serious and popular genres to interrogate the uses of the past in a postimperial age' (Keen 2006: 176). The past, these works suggest, is not only something to be celebrated, but should be questioned and used as a lens through which to explore the present. The environmental dimension of historical novels, however, has been largely absent from literary scholarship to date. Instead, many critics have analysed historical novels primarily against the background of postmodern conceptions of history. Novels such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) are explicitly concerned with blurring the lines between fact and fiction, history and novels. As Dana Shiller argues, 'these historical novels take a revisionist approach to the past, borrowing from postmodern historiography to explore how present circumstances shape historical narrative, and yet they are also indebted to earlier cultural attitudes toward history' (1997: par. 5). Shiller terms these kinds of novels 'neo-Victorian fiction', a concept that overlaps to a large extent with Linda Hutcheon's term 'historiographic metafiction'. Historiographic metafiction is, she proposes, 'both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages' (1988: 5). The works' awareness of history and fiction as human constructs results in a 'rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past' (1988: 5), for instance through the discovery of unknown documents or by foregrounding previously neglected gender or race perspectives. In the early twenty-first century, Peter Boxall argues, novels such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) continue to respond to the historiographic metafiction of the late twentieth

century (2013: 40). Twenty-first-century works do not ‘fold history into fiction’ but instead open up ‘a difficult gap between fiction and history’ (2013: 67). Although I would certainly term the three novels that I am concerned with in this chapter revisionist, I would neither call them ‘neo-Victorian’ or ‘historical metafiction,’ nor class them as examples of the kinds of novels that Boxall identifies. None of the three polar novels explicitly engages with blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, for instance, nor are they ‘intensely self-reflexive,’ to use Hutcheon’s phrase. If anything, *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water* take postmodern debates about history and historical fiction as a given. Without being explicit about it, they employ the past to hold up a mirror to the present, and at the same time have a revisionist attitude towards the historical period with which they are concerned. In this sense, my argument in this chapter develops in opposition to Trexler’s in his brief discussion of polar novels. Many of these fictions, he proposes, ‘struggle to connect to wider implications of climate change around the world, as well as the causes that might still be addressed’ (2015: 82). The problem that these novels face, he argues, ‘seems to be embedded in the literary history of Anglo-American polar explorations, which paints the landscape as a vast, empty wasteland fit for adventure’ (2015: 82). Yet, as I show in this section, it is precisely this historical background and the perceptions of the polar landscape it propagates that foreground the contemporary significance of and issues in the Arctic and Antarctic. The characters of *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water* are not just, as Baucom puts it, ‘summarizing types of a particular moment or historical situation’ (2015: 154)⁹ – they use the past to critique the present.

The Collector of Lost Things, *Everland* and *The North Water* reframe nineteenth-century ideas about human–nature relationships. Quite literally, *The Collector of Lost Things* even revises environmental history by bringing back to life the Great Auk, a species that has been extinct since 1844, a year before the novel is set (BirdLife International 2012). In most cases, though, environmental revision means foregrounding the parallels between eighteenth and nineteenth-century exploration and contemporary environmentalism, as I discuss below. Although over the past years eco-historicist approaches have become more common,¹⁰ historical fiction has frequently been seen as antithetical to the ecocritical project. Some ecocritics fear that focusing on

historical texts leads to an avoidance of contemporary environmental crisis or, as Clark argues, find them wholly unsuitable in reflecting the environmental crisis currently unfolding.¹¹ Yet, as my discussion demonstrates, historical fictions can be made productive in a time of climate crisis. Indeed, past experiences and traditions may allow us to imagine – and create – the future. As Kate Soper suggests, reflecting on past experiences can ‘stimulate desire for a future that will be at once less environmentally destructive’ (2011: 24). I’d argue that especially through their historical context, polar narratives hold up a mirror to contemporary environmentalism and provide a deeper understanding of the role that the poles play in twenty-first-century climate crisis discourse. As such, historical setting is not antithetical to contemporary climate crisis, but rather foregrounds the practices that have led to today’s crisis.

Given my emphasis on the polar landscape as a canvas for historical and contemporary human–nature relations, my focus will be on space in this chapter. At the poles, time loses its meaning, making space a much more important dimension: ‘The meaning of time ... diminishes the farther north one goes, until it is virtually irrelevant: because the meridians (longitude circles) converge at the Pole, so do the time zones’ (Officer and Page 2012: 3). A similar observation is made by the narrator of *Everland*: ‘The natural metabolism of time was suspended in Antarctica’ (Hunt 2014: 82). At the same time, the historical setting of many contemporary polar fictions makes time an important element as well. Indeed, considerations of time explicitly inform my discussion of the novels in the next section in which I focus on the parallels between past and present that these works create. Nonetheless, my main emphasis, especially in this section, is on space: space made the Arctic and Antarctica so attractive for explorers who saw in the white, seemingly perfect landscape a perfect *tabula rasa*. Closer to Britain, populated and with a slightly milder climate, the Arctic more frequently serves as a canvas for imperialist dreams: basically a frozen desert, unpopulated and remote and inaccessible for centuries, the Antarctic carries far fewer of these projections. Through its emphasis on space, this chapter forms a counterpart to Chapter 3, in which I make space central to my discussion of the narrative of urban nature. In that chapter, I explore the concept of space in terms of topological locations and projective locations. Topological locations are described according to their

geometric properties, and are invariable – David Herman uses the example of inside a box being the same no matter how you look at it (2002: 280). ‘In front of the box’, however, depends on your perspective. Hence, the perspective shapes the value and interpretation of a projective location. As William Frawley suggests, projective locations ‘rely on a framework *projected by the viewer*’ (1992: 262, original emphasis). In my discussion of urban space, I extended the narratological concepts of topological and projective locations through the concepts of space and place familiar to ecocritics. A projective location, I argue in Chapter 3, may function as a place as it has become familiar and has accrued and is shaped by value and meaning. In the urban landscape, a sense of positive belonging is significant in connecting characters to urban nature. In *Clay*, for instance, TJ’s intimate knowledge of the park makes him feel a sense of positive belonging that he doesn’t experience at home. The core of my discussion of polar spaces, however, is that polar narratives deliberately negate such a sense of belonging. From both a narratological and an ecocritical standpoint, the dynamic played out in polar narratives is counterintuitive. Although value – a marker of projective locations – is assigned to the landscape, this is typically a negative value, rather than the positive values generally associated with place. The sense of belonging and connection inherent to the concept of place is consequently denied. Place, British polar narratives such as those depicted in the novels suggest, may be a negative experience, and fictional characters and historical explorers describe a sense of negative belonging. While they have intimately come to know the polar environment and have immersed themselves in it, these acts hold none of the positive connotations attributed to place-attachment by ecocritics and environmental thinkers. From a narratological standpoint, the polar narrative demonstrates that the meanings and values central to projective locations need not emerge in direct relation to a location – as Herman’s example of in front of a tree suggests – but may be a consequence of preconceived notions about a landscape such as ideas about nationalism, gender and nature.

The British polar narrative depicts the landscape as harsh and alien because this legitimizes the project of exploration as well as that of environmentalism, both of which are framed as a struggle, though with different adversaries. The refusal to become more familiar with the polar landscape surfaces in Victorian and earlier British explorations as much as it does in postmillennial novels.

Interestingly, the perception and experience of polar landscapes as harsh, deadly and nearly insurmountable is a particularly British narrative. The British were, as Frances Spufford suggests, 'uniquely unprepared' (1996: 5) for polar exploration – even though, or because, they frequently carried immense amounts of materials with them.¹² Being so uniquely unprepared reinforced an already existing idea about polar landscapes as empty, senseless, cruel and hostile – and made the explorers look even more heroic and masculine.

In *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water* the weather functions as a powerful symbol for the inhospitality of polar circumstances. Both *The Collector of Lost Things* (Page) and *The North Water* (McGuire) are set in the nineteenth century. McGuire's novel tells the story of a young doctor, Patrick Sumner, who joins a whaling expedition. Aboard the ship he is faced with the cruelty of the hunt and his fellow crew members. Indeed a parallel is suggested between the brutality of the first mate and the decimation of the whaling population. In *The Collector of Lost Things*, Eliot Saxby, a young naturalist, joins a ship full of hunters determined to kill as many Arctic animals as possible. During the journey, he too – like Sumner in *The North Water* – is faced with cruel practices and a violent crew. He also experiences a personal crisis when he thinks he recognizes the only woman on board as his former lover. In both novels fog is a dominant weather feature symbolizing the alienating circumstances in the Arctic. The whaling ship *The Volunteer*, on which *The North Water* is set, sails through 'fog and sleet and bitter wind, days without ease or let-up, when the sea and sky melt together into a damp weft of roiling and impermeable greyness' (McGuire 2016: 49). The characters aboard the ship in *The Collector of Lost Things* have a similar experience: '[t]he further north we sailed, the thicker the weather became. Fogs descended, as if the top of the world was hidden in clouds and vapours. Through the mist, curtains of stinging rain swept across the sea, drenching the decks in a matter of seconds' (Page 2013: 61). The alienation of the polar landscape is compounded by mirages common to the poles. In *Everland* in 1913, '[t]he landscape was hallucinating itself ... Each iceberg was roofed by a phantom image which rose and slurred into immense hourglass forms' (Hunt 2014: 87). Another recurring element in the novels is the first sighting of ice, typically preceded by an experienced captain pointing out the smell of ice to the novice explorers. The emotionally unstable narrator of *The Collector of Lost Things*

interprets the ice – and the Arctic as a whole – time and again as not only a hostile place, but a frightening place. When first seeing the polar ice he describes it as ‘a sudden unexpected whiteness as hard and flat as quartz. It was the ice sheet, that stretched out for a thousand miles beyond, but which looked from this angle as thin as paper... The worlds of ocean and ice were meeting in a frontier of rage, as if the Earth has torn in two along a line’ (Page 2013: 108). The Arctic, he decides, is ‘a place, if there ever was a place, where you could disappear’ (Page 2013: 108). To the main character of *The North Water*, the ice is similarly weird, albeit less frightening. He too, though, draws heavily on language reminiscent of the sublime, at which the description of the endless and somewhat frightening ice sheet in *The Collector of Lost Things* also points. The first iceberg in *The North Water* is ‘immense, chimneyed, wing-gouged, sliding eastwards like an albinistic butte unmoored from the desert floor. The berg is moving at a brisk walking pace and as it moves, its nearest edge grinds against the floe and spits up house-sized rafts of ice, like swarf from the jaws of a lathe’ (McGuire 2016: 197). This description is typical of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imaginations of the polar landscape, which drew heavily on the sublime. Spufford describes the significance of the sublime to polar exploration by referring to a photograph of the Barne glacier taken during the Scott expedition. The glacier, he suggests, ‘is already sublime, sublime in and of itself. Like a perpetual flood, upreared and then frozen into place, the glacier asserts a huge, swallowing indifference to the efforts of travellers’ (Spufford 1996: 37). The sublime, of course, is not only characterized by grandeur and fear, but also by being a spectacle: something perceived by someone, without that person coming to harm. The sublime, in other words, does not require engagement – it is indifferent to humans, and functions largely as a projection for the human imagination. As such, the concept’s centrality to polar narratives ties in with my argument about polar spaces never becoming places of positive belonging. A landscape can only be sublime if a true sense of belonging, or place, is not established.

Both *The North Water* and *The Collector of Lost Things* are informed by the sublime in their descriptions of Victorian journeys to the North Pole. In *Everland*, however, the sublime response to the landscape turns into disgust. Hunt’s novel has the most contemporary setting of the three novels – and it is the only one of the three to be set on Antarctica, rather than in the Arctic. It

goes back and forth between a 1913 narrative and one set in 2012. In 1913 three British men set out to explore a part of Antarctica that they name Everland. From the beginning the expedition seems ill-fated. Napps, Millett-Bass and Dinners don't get along very well and they face increasingly bad weather. Napps and Millett-Bass eventually make the decision to leave the injured Dinners behind in his tent. At the end of the narrative, however, it is Dinners who is found, more dead than alive, and the other two who don't survive. In many ways the expedition at least initially fits the mould of the traditional polar narrative: the explorers are sponsored by over eighty British companies keen to associate their business with polar exploration, the men are explicitly concerned with proving their masculinity and a sense of nationalism pervades the discovery of a previously uncharted part of the Antarctic. As the captain of the ship that brings Napps, Millett-Bass and Dinners to Everland tells them: 'We're here to advance science for the British flag by exploring uncharted territory across the Antarctic continent' (Hunt 2014: 13). The landscape they encounter, however, has none of the sublime characteristics that Victorian polar narratives popularized. Once the men approach Everland, they see an island that is neither awe-inspiring nor beautiful. The narrator's description deliberately diminishes any grandness that Everland possesses:

Everland appeared as a black-and-white-striped molehill in the distance, its profile dominated by the squat peak of its volcano. Snow banks had lined the island's dark terrain with thick vertical bands which ran down from the higher slopes to the beaches. A glacier lay across the volcano's shoulder like a crumpled stole, and filled the waters ringing the shore with splintered ice.

(Hunt 2014: 16)

Once they've arrived, at least one member of the group – Millett-Bass – becomes convinced that Everland is not only unappealing, but deliberately evil. Everland, he says, 'is bad luck' (Hunt 2014: 67). As circumstances worsen, he becomes even more convinced of this: 'He had wild theories about the island having malign powers. He could sense some sort of evilness, he said' (Hunt 2014: 219). Millett-Bass's belief is, of course, a projection. Landscapes are indifferent to humans. Yet, his claim, as deluded as it may seem, is also an inherent part of the polar narrative that *Everland* presents. By emphasizing the struggle between humans and the landscape, in which the landscape becomes

an almost human adversary, the idea of Antarctica as a hostile space can persist. As long as the landscape is not seen for what it is – an indifferent space – connection cannot happen and only negative place belonging ensues, not the positive kind. It is, of course, precisely the absence of positive belonging that environmental thinkers often suggest leads to environmental destruction.

In the 2012 narrative as well, Everland is hardly sublime. The narrator provides a rather factual description, positioning the island as a topological location:

Everland's interior was mostly impassable slate-like terrain that sloped up into the seven-hundred-foot-high peak of Antarctica's smallest volcano, which was live, but had no record of ever erupting. The island had two colonies, an Adélie penguin colony in a bay at the southern end, and a fur seal colony at the northern cove where the *Joseph Evelyn* was preserved in situ by the Antarctic Heritage Trust as a site of cultural importance.

(Hunt 2014: 10)

To Brix, one of the three scientists involved in the expedition commemorating the 1913 journey, Everland is not a topological location. She is disappointed when she first sees it. The novel suggests that her disappointment is the consequence of the island not confirming to the images of sublime Antarctica that she is familiar with: 'It had none of the remote splendour she'd expected. Instead the Antarctic presented her with a rubble moonscape that had all the charm of a builders' yard' (Hunt 2014: 21). Everland focalized through Brix is 'silent and life-less, and brutally unimpressive. More than bleak, it was ugly' (Hunt 2014: 21). Brix's descriptions describe a projective location, coloured by the meanings and value she brings to bear on it. It is also a location that never becomes a place of positive belonging. Indeed, as far as Brix experiences any sense of belonging it is of the decisively negative kind. Brix's values keep her from establishing a positive relationship of place, which ends up informing her entire stay in Everland. She jeopardizes the expedition by getting lost and is generally believed to be unsuited to the project as a whole. Incidentally, the most experienced explorer of the group, Decker, sees the landscape quite differently. Indeed, the passages focalized through him do not emphasize alienation, hostility, or ugliness, but rather commonplace-ness. The fact that he is the exception reinforces the typical connotation of polar landscapes as

projective locations that rarely become positive places. While polar narratives tend to negate the landscape from becoming a positive place, Decker's repeated visits to Antarctica have nonetheless made it so: 'Unlike Brix, to whom everything about Antarctica was exotic and strange, it was all familiar to him. Everything was commonplace in its own habitat, and after twenty years of Antarctic research, penguins and glaciers were no more astounding for him to witness than cows or trees' (Hunt 2014: 156). Once the landscape has become a (common)place, the novel suggests, the sublime layer of the landscape falls away, as does the kind of hostility that Brix experienced. At that point, the landscape can be seen for what it really is, rather than as a canvas for ideas about nature, nationhood and struggle. Decker is the only one amongst the characters in *Everland* who feels a positive sense of belonging to the landscape. For him, the landscape has become a projective location and a place in a more traditional sense: not a result of preconceptions, but rather a consequence of values and meanings originating from the landscape itself.

Eventually, the 2012 expedition nearly goes wrong when Brix goes missing and the team is trapped on the island due to bad weather conditions. While the parallels between the two storylines abound, as I also discuss in the next section, all three explorers in 2012 make it home alive. In both narratives, though, as in *The North Water* and *The Collector of Lost Things*, the polar environment is depicted as a harsh and frequently downright alienating place. Polar environments are no doubt tough on anyone not used to them. Yet, unlike the British, Nordic explorers were much better equipped to deal with polar circumstances. They learned from the Inuit, for whom the landscape was most likely familiar and not alienating. Rather than taking ponies or pulling sledges themselves, for example, Nordic explorers used dogs, built snow houses and wore fur clothing. For the British this was not a matter of simply not knowing what equipment would be most useful – it was a matter of nationalist pride *not* to follow the ways of the indigenous population. Responses to the 'loss' of the South Pole, when the Norwegian explorer Amundsen reached it before Scott, are telling in this respect. The British blamed Amundsen for 'poor sportsmanship' and argued that no 'gentleman explorer' would act as he did (Officer and Page 2012: 155). If Scott had used dogs – as Amundsen did – rather than crew members to pull the sledges he would probably have survived. But for Scott this was not a practicality, but rather the right – British – way of

conducting an exploration. For him, 'no journey made with dogs can approach the fine conception' of men facing the struggle of their own (qtd on Officer and Page 2012: 155). Using crew members rather than dogs would be a 'conquest more nobly and splendidly won' (qtd on Officer and Page 2012: 155). Engaging with the landscape, then, is an expression of nationalist and imperialist politics, and the environment itself becomes a canvas for these politics. Nordic engagement with the poles was, of course, shaped by politics and nationalism as well. In his book *Northern Mists* – described by Emmerson as an example of 'national self-aggrandisement' (2011: 21) – the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen emphasizes his country's accomplishments (Emmerson 2011: 21). Yet, whereas for the British nationalism and politics turned the poles into an alien and inhospitable landscape, Norwegians in particular translated their nationalism into positive perceptions of the poles. Rather than a hostile, harsh environment, inimical to human life, for many Nordic travellers the Arctic and Antarctica were a spiritual home. Nansen explicitly did not experience the Arctic as depicted by many British polar narratives:

Now we are in the very midst of what the prophets would have us dread so much. The ice is pressing and packing round us with a noise like thunder. It is piling itself up into long walls, and heaps high enough to reach a good way up the Fram's [his ship] rigging; in fact, it is trying its very utmost to grind the Fram into powder. But here we sit quite tranquil, not even going up to look at all the hurly-burly, but just chatting and laughing, as usual.

(qtd on Moss 2006: 71)

In British narratives, both historical and contemporary, being beset by ice is generally interpreted negatively. In *The Collector of Lost Things*, Saxby describes the Arctic as nightmarish and deceiving: 'It's a wilderness that can encircle you, remove your perception, and dull your mind' (Page 2013: 269). Scott likewise described days on Antarctica when 'a sense of oppression is inevitable' (2008: 324), and in his journals characterized the South Pole as 'an awful place and terrible enough for us to have laboured to it without the reward of priority' (2008: 376) – suggesting an ambivalence reminiscent of the sublime, in which 'awful' is both awe-inspiring and horrible.

In *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water*, then, the characters come to experience the danger of the polar landscape, in which travel

takes days and weeks longer than anticipated, in which snow blocks the eyes, and in which optical illusions make it very difficult to tell distances. Although the novels are largely set in the past, the landscapes in these novels should not only be seen as symbolic for the present environmental crisis, but may also help us think about the future. Like the polar landscapes, the landscapes of the future are likely to be unlike those we are used to: warmer and wetter in some places, colder and snowier in others, and drier in yet other areas of the world. The world will increasingly become a world in which, as Moss writes about the poles, '[i]n practical ways as much as in the imagination ... none of the usual rules apply' (2006: 1). In a twenty-first-century setting, then, the Arctic and Antarctica become a canvas for discourses of climate crisis, both present and future. From spaces in which nationalism and masculinity could be tested, the poles have come to not only symbolize a rapidly changing world but have come to be at the frontline of climate crisis. In quite a different way than has been the case over the past few centuries, the Arctic and Antarctica now even threaten 'to harm *us*, for the icebergs and glaciers that were once thought of as stagnant are now considered to be living entities of their own, with a metabolism of their own, and could break off into oceans and irreparably flood major cities' (McGavin 2013: 59, original emphasis). This changing dynamic – from exploration to environmentalism to threat – is reflected in the novels especially through the implicit and explicit parallels they draw between exploration in the past and environmentalism and climate crisis in the present.

Narratives of extinction: Discovery and environmentalism

The historical context of polar narratives, especially in those novels in which the past is placed next to contemporary settings, foregrounds connections that would otherwise remain invisible or oblique. In *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water*, this juxtaposition is explored especially in the ways in which contemporary environmentalism echoes some of the issues surrounding historical exploration and collecting. The concept of imperialist nostalgia – the longing for that which one has destroyed – plays a significant role in all three novels. Indeed, I'd argue that this feeling is so central to exploration and environmentalism that it is one of the elements that demonstrates how

the two are marks on a continuum, rather than opposites. This continuum stretches from the earliest Western engagements and explorations of the Arctic and Antarctica to contemporary environmentalism and awareness of climate crisis at the poles. While exploration and environmentalism do often have opposing aims – killing versus protecting, for instance – both point to a similar relation between humans and their non-human environment as especially the extinction narrative in *The Collector of Lost Things* demonstrates. In order to highlight this continuum, the three novels create parallels between past and present: sometimes very explicit – as in *Everland* – and sometimes much more subtle.

In *Everland*, the story of a 1913 expedition is told side-by-side with exploration of the same terrain in 2012. At the beginning of the novel, these two storylines are neatly alternated: the first chapter is set in 1913, the second in 2012, the third in 1913 and so on. As circumstances in 1913 and 2012 worsen, however, this neat pattern becomes more erratic, through which the novel's form reflects how things are falling apart in both stories. At times, the two storylines spill over into each other: chapter 6, for instance, describes the tent of the expedition members in 1913, and chapter 7 begins with a reference to the tent in the 2012 journey. In similar fashion, chapter 25 describes a blizzard in 1913, and is wedged in between two 2012 chapters which are also set during a blizzard. In these instances, *Everland* reflects the kind of conflated temporal constructions that Brian Richardson identifies in postmodern novels. In such texts, 'different temporal zones fail to remain distinct, and slide or spill into one another. As the story segments run into each other, so do their respective temporalities' (Richardson 2002: 50–51). This technique foregrounds the connections between different temporal zones, which in the case of *Everland* results in a link between exploration and environmentalism, between past and present engagements with the Antarctic landscape. Connections between the two stories are not only made on the level of the overarching novel, but also are noted by the characters. In 2012 the past literally comes to the surface when Decker, Brix and Jess find a pineapple tin left behind by the men in 1913 (Hunt 2014: 56). They also come across the expedition flag with the motto *tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis* – times change and we change with them. Brix even literally comes face-to-face with the past when she finds Napps's body in

a cave, preserved by the ice and embedded in the ice-lined wall – a direct echo of the discovery of John Torrington's body, exhumed 140 years after he died during the Franklin expedition. Parallels of a different kind can be discerned in *The Collector of Lost Things* and *The North Water*, even though these don't consist of a double narrative like *Everland* does and are wholly set in the past. Rather, connections between past and present are made through descriptions of exploration that depict and foreshadow extinction and environmental crisis.

Page's *The Collector of Lost Things* and McGuire's *The North Water* are both narratives of exploration. They are also narratives of extinction – the first sentence of Page's novel even is '[p]erhaps I would be too late to save them [the Great Auks]' (Page 2013: 1). Saxby is on the search for the Great Auk, a bird that has been extinct since 1844, a year before the novel is set. A group of collectors has bet on whether the bird really is extinct and are paying Saxby to find out. He soon comes to abhor life aboard the ship: the crew's aim is to hunt and kill as many animals as possible, as ruthlessly as possible. Even though Saxby believes himself to be a good guy amongst all the brutality – and readers may be tempted to think so as well – the novel complicates this. The ship's captain challenges Saxby one night by telling him that his job as a collector is no different from his as a hunter:

You, sir, are a collector. You are paid by the very same museums that have demanded this wretched bird for their display cabinets. In my world this bird is a lousy meal of greasy meat. It is your world that has placed a price upon its head. I suggest you take note of that, and your responsibility within it.

(Page 2013: 160–161)¹³

When against the odds Saxby finds a tiny colony of Great Auks, these are immediately killed by the crew. One bird escapes and Saxby hides her aboard the ship. In the discovery of half a dozen Great Auks, environmentalism, hunting and extinction come together. Saxby sees this discovery as a new opportunity for the species, as an almost magical reversal of extinction (Page 2013: 152). To the captain, though, their rarity and incalculable value justifies killing the birds. When Saxby tells him that he is making an extinction, the captain retorts that he is making money and the birds are drowned by the crew (Page 2013: 159). Eventually Saxby, the Great Auk and her egg disembark on

the Scottish island of Barra, where he aims to foster a new colony of the birds. A similar case of reversed extinction – in which an extinct species is discovered to have survived – takes place in *Everland*. The 1913 expedition spot a group of fur seals, believed to have been extinct for years. Napps and Millet-Bass argue about whether or not to kill them. To Napps, ‘the idea of hammering out the last few surviving fur seals on earth seemed like an act of unspeakable evil’, but Millet-Bass pragmatically suggests that ‘you also couldn’t inflict damage on something which had already been destroyed’ (Page 2013: 98). While they do kill the seals in the end, a small pocket of the population survives, and the scientists in 2012 observe that numbers have revived.

Exploration, hunting and extinction are also tied together in *The North Water*, set largely aboard a whaling ship. Sumner has joined in the belief that it will provide him with a place to lie low, having been discharged from the British army in India after a scandal. He looks forward to catching up on his classics and making some sketches of Arctic flora and fauna, but instead is plunged headfirst into the brutality of the hunt. Like in *The Collector of Lost Things* the ship’s crew doesn’t only hunt whales, but also other animals. Though whales and seals are immediately taken apart, polar bears are carefully skinned in order to be mounted. A live polar bear might be worth even more than a dead one, as the characters in *The North Water* discuss: one of the crew knows someone at a zoo who will pay twenty pounds for a polar bear cub. In McGuire’s novel the contemporary connotation of polar bears I discussed at the beginning of the chapter is foreshadowed. In the nineteenth century the bears were similarly symbols of the Arctic and human relationships with the landscape. Indeed, the symbolic meaning of the animals goes back centuries. Barry Lopez writes that for Europeans the polar bear was ‘a symbol of the implacable indifference of an inhospitable landscape’ (2014: 113), and that hunting them became the ‘sort of amusement’ people expected on an Arctic journey (2014: 111). Until the Russians banned the hunting of the bears in the mid-1950s, around 1,300 polar bears were killed annually (Lopez 2014: 80). As embodiments of the Arctic, exploration and crisis, polar bears also show the changing sensibilities regarding hunting and extinction. Originally a ghostly presence, they became a nuisance to explorers and finally a symbol of environmental crisis (Lopez 2014: 113). The polar bear has, as Lopez puts it, become ‘a vaguely noble creature, wandering in a desolate landscape, saddled

with melancholy thoughts' (2014: 113), as depicted in the Nissan commercial and in numerous environmental campaigns.

Just how closely related exploration and environmentalism can be is shown in *The Collector of Lost Things* when Saxby ceases to be an explorer and collector and becomes an environmentalist. Of the three novels I discuss in this chapter, this novel best illustrates the shifting sensibilities towards exploration and hunting that Lopez remarks on in relation to the polar bear. As the novel progresses, Saxby becomes increasingly convinced of the harm he and others are doing to the Arctic and comes to see it as a place of extinction. Every creature in the Arctic is 'fit for murder', he concludes, and '[s]laughter was everywhere' (Page 2013: 171). It is through Saxby's growing environmentalism that the novel establishes a parallel between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. Up until the nineteenth century, whalers, sealers and pastime hunters like the ones on Saxby's ship perceived the Arctic Ocean as seemingly inexhaustible. Yet, by the 1820s, the overfishing of whales had become a problem and after the high point of British Arctic whaling in 1823, the industry began to unravel. Set in 1845, the crew in *The Collector of Lost Things* aren't too concerned yet about the finitude of Arctic species. Saxby, the budding environmentalist, however, realizes that 'the Arctic Ocean was a larder with apparently infinite resources, yet it was clear the Arctic was not infinitely replenished' (Page 2013: 308). Similar environmental knowledge is expressed in *The North Water*. Initially the ship's captain does not believe that whales are slowly being hunted to extinction. Instead he holds on to the popular notion that the whales had travelled further north and that beyond the ice there was an ice-free Arctic Ocean where they swam (McGuire 2016: 103). The ship's owner, however, has come to the conclusion that the whaling business is no longer profitable: 'We *killed* them all ... It was tremendous while it lasted and magnificently profitable too. We had twenty-five fucking good years' (McGuire 2016: 33, original emphasis). In both novels, then, a parallel between the past and the present is created through an awakening sense of environmentalism, or at least extinction, felt by some of the characters. At the same time, reading the novels with hindsight makes these predictions of extinction prophetic and turns the historical narrative into a foreshadowing of the extensive environmental crisis we currently experience.

Reading with hindsight also reveals how historical setting can serve as a mirror to contemporary practices of extinction. Overfishing, for example, is a nineteenth-century problem as much as it is a twenty-first-century problem. *The Collector of Lost Things* is most explicit in holding up this mirror. Once he's rescued the only remaining Great Auk and has settled on Barra, Saxby reflects on his initial discovery of the bird. The scene of reversed extinction when he discovered the Auks and the renewed extinction when almost all of the birds were killed changed his outlook on life – and humankind. Looking back on it he realizes that 'this scene, of man's destruction, of his heartlessness, would inevitably be repeated time and time again, across the decades and centuries with all the world's creatures. Man will murder whales and seals in their thousands, he will pluck the birds from their rocks and shoot them from the sky' (Page 2013: 369). The contemporary reader can only agree with Saxby's conclusions knowing that hundreds of thousands of species have gone extinct since the mid-nineteenth century.

Yet, parallels between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries and between exploration and environmentalism go beyond prophecy or recognizing connections between extinctions. In both historical novels and contemporary circumstances, and in both exploration and environmentalism, the value attributed to a species lies in its rarity. In that sense, Saxby's collecting, and later environmentalism, is indeed much closer to the captain's hunting than the former feels comfortable with. Even collectors such as Saxby would at times kill animals so that they could be displayed. Collecting and exploration are, as much as environmentalism, concerned with the post-mortem quality of a species, a concern with what has been lost, or is about to be lost. This concern with loss and value is shared by exploration and environmentalism. A degree of imperialist nostalgia is at the heart of both – and of historical and contemporary polar narratives. Renato Rosaldo uses the concept of imperialist nostalgia to describe the specific type of nostalgia in which people mourn the thing they have destroyed, be it the innocence of a colonized people or nature (1989: *passim*). Many contemporary conceptions of nature are framed by loss: the loss of the rainforest, the loss of the polar ice, the loss of natural darkness and the loss of the polar bear floating away on an ice shoal. Paradoxically, this 'post-mortem quality' of nature may be exactly what appeals to many people (Soper 1995: 195–196). In the case of the Great Auk, it being alive or extinct

matters to Saxby's employers because they have made a bet on it. For Saxby, himself, the value of the bird is not just monetary, but lies in the fact that it would present man with 'a reminder of what he has done' (Page 2013: 91) – it has become a symbol of environmental destruction. The crew of the whaling ship in *The North Water* similarly feels a kind of imperialist nostalgia when it comes to the whales, even though for them this is largely inspired by the profit they're missing out on. In *The Collector of Lost Things* Saxby even feels a kind of proto-imperialist nostalgia when he realizes that before the whaling ships reach them, 'these magnificent creatures [are] oblivious of our presence' (Page 2013: 201).

The animals' obliviousness, their innocence and unspoiledness, as it were, is a significant part of imperialist nostalgia, but also of historical and contemporary conceptions of the wild. Saxby's proto-imperialist nostalgia echoes William Cronon's wilderness paradox, which I also discuss in the previous chapter. 'The place where we are,' Cronon suggests, 'is the place where nature is not' (1995: 81). This paradox is central to engagements with the poles and polar narratives rely on it in order to make the polar landscape seem inhospitable and polar explorers heroic. As such, polar exploration is a continual search for the wild – only to lose it once it is reached. Similarly, environmentalism is faced with trying to find a balance between preserving the wild, and at the same time interfering with it in attempts to preserve it. The concern for the wild is hence another way in which environmentalism echoes practices of exploration. Richard Davis emphasizes the parallels between exploration and environmentalism when he traces the development of exploration narratives in the twentieth century. Before the First World War, he suggests, exploration narratives were 'characterized by a desire to dominate the wilderness, to assert the unquestioned supremacy of the human will over undomesticated nature' (Davis 1981: 85). In the course of the twentieth century, this idea shifts from the desire to find 'a relatively simple enjoyment of the natural world' in the mid-twentieth century, to a belief more familiar to contemporary engagements with nature in which 'the explorer seeks out unspoiled regions for what he can learn from them' (Davis 1981: 85). Yet, environmental concern may easily spill over into tourism – as the fact that nearly half a million ecotourists visited Antarctica in 2015–2016 demonstrates (International Association for Antarctic Tour Operators 2016: n.p.). Travelling

to Antarctica, or other remote regions, even in the name of environmentalism, becomes an extension of the explorers' search for the wild.¹⁴ Not even the experienced researcher Decker in *Everland* is immune to this. He compares Everland to another tourist destination, the Franz Josef glacier in New Zealand and proposes that: 'The Franz Josef glacier was somewhere between a celebrity and a zoo exhibit, with its own merchandise of printed mugs and tea towels, postcards and calendars. It was tame and pimped, unlike the glacier on Everland, which Decker classified as wild, and therefore much more authentic' (Hunt 2014: 226). The question, of course, is when polar spaces like Everland will cease to be 'wild' and 'authentic', and when Decker's ideas about these areas have become just another example of imperialist nostalgia.

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The juxtaposition of the empty, wild landscape of the poles and their destruction by humans is precisely how postmillennial fictions like *The Collector of Lost Things*, *Everland* and *The North Water* – though set in the past – capture contemporary human relationships with nature, vacillating between a desire for the wild, a desire to possess the wild and, subsequently, a mourning for the wild that no longer is. Symbolically as well as literally, the Arctic and Antarctic are nodes in which past and present environmental circumstances, nation and exploration, environmentalism and climate crisis come together. Polar narratives do not only depict historical or contemporary polar settings, but also play on the fear of the world becoming as extreme and unpredictable as the poles have long been to most Westerners. As well as being some of the most poignant contemporary symbols for climate crisis, the physical realities of the Arctic and Antarctica open up an imaginative space to think through the changes wrought by climate crisis. The Arctic in particular functions as a kind of synecdoche for the human condition in a time of climate crisis, as Graham Huggan suggests: 'the uncertain future of the Arctic holds equally uncertain clues about mankind's future on the planet' (2016: 79). For narratives and literature, the challenge lies in identifying not only the Arctic and Antarctic as symbols of climate crisis, but also in describing human engagements with these environments, both as typical for human–nature relations in general, as well as unique to these regions.

While my discussion of the role of narratives in Chapter 1 demonstrates the extent to which depictions of climate crisis are always narrated and are

far from transparent, this chapter foregrounds the discourses that we bring to bear on environments. The Arctic and Antarctica are unique as spaces that are – historically and today – thick with projections and discourses about nature, nationalism and identity, and are at the same time at the frontline of the largest challenges facing humanity. For ecocriticism, polar narratives emphasize the need for the field to engage with ‘white’ as well as the ‘green’ spaces it has traditionally focused on – a development that is slowly getting underway.¹⁵ Historical fictions may be especially productive as they emphasize how historical spaces and settings may hold up a mirror to contemporary circumstances and beliefs. On many levels, then, polar landscapes and the narratives surrounding them are the quintessential climate crisis spaces. Perhaps even more than the environmental collapse, pastoral and urban narratives, polar narratives quite literally embody the awareness of climate crisis that haunts contemporary ideas about nature.