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"Piecing Together the Extinct Great Auk: Techniques and Charms of Contiguity"

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Extinct as a result of overhunting and habitat loss, the great auk, or garefowl, leads a hidden taxidermied existence in museum storerooms, sheltered from potential further degradation. As an environmental icon, however, the bird inspires a lively political economy of re-creation. Engaging from an anthropological perspective with practices of collecting, representing, and re-creating the great auk, I combine testimonies from Cambridge ornithologist John Wolley's mid-nineteenth-century *Garefowl Books* with contemporary ethnography among taxidermists and model makers in Britain and Belgium to argue that remnants, re-creations, and reenactments of the extinct great auk offer a material substrate from which to grasp a human drive to achieve contiguity with a lost species. Re-creation as a form of attentive reanimation by dedicated experts takes shape both discursively and plastically, predicated on assumptions about natural appearance and behavior that may not reflect evidence from historical records. Animated by what I call techniques of contiguity, reconstructions play a persuasive role in expressing and shaping human perceptions and imaginings of past environmental disaster and future environmental opportunity. Contiguity is achieved, on one hand, through performances of bodily kinship between human practitioners and dead or extinct animals and, on the other, through plays on resonance with specific organic materials, including garefowl remnants in Victorian taxidermied auks and plumage from related seabirds used in contemporary auk reconstructions. The reanimated great auk lives to tell stories of ethographic entanglement and continues, through its presence in museum spaces, to provoke both thought and action in a time of unprecedented numbers of species extinctions. (Text from author's abstract)

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