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Hope Echoes: Learning an Extinct Birdsong

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Goeda avond allemal!

“Learn first to listen”

I have had many mentors in learning an extinct bird language. The U.S. poet W.S. Merwin has been key. “Learn first to listen,” he writes, in his poem “Learning a Dead Language.” And, remember what others before you have saved. Eventually you may come “to hear what never/ Has fallen silent.” This hearing is a strange sort of hope. By helping save what is precious in oneself, this hope can transform hearers into those who help in saving others, or help in healing, in Merwin’s words, “the things that one loves, while there is still time.”

The time is past for Huia, large crow-sized black-and-white birds with orange wattles endemic to Aotearoa/New Zealand. By the early twentieth century, Huia were extinct due to complex human causes, post-European colonization, including new predators, habitat loss, overhunting for stunning tail feathers, to sell commercially. Yet an encounter with unusual song traces reveals the birds are not completely gone. Sound is movement, the vibration of matter. In connection with beings, including human ones, sounds can breed powerful affect, even blurring distinctions between life and death. The sonic remains of Huia, haunting vibrations, replay breathlessness with the vigor of breath.

I first heard these stirring sonic remains of Huia in Cornell’s Macaulay Library of digitized sounds. I wondered what extinct birdsongs might be archived, so I cross-listed the IUCN Red List with the library’s holdings. I found audible relicts of five officially extinct bird-kinds. Unlike the other four, huia had disappeared before the advent of field recording. Their aural vestiges thus were not of their actual voices. They were a long-remembered imitation by a former Huia ear-witness, an old Māori forest

expert named Henare Hamana. In 1948, Hamana had whistled huia calls—which, in his tradition, had been performed to lure birds to snares, sometimes to eat, mostly for feathers for sacred uses. Hamana whistled the calls he remembered into a studio microphone. This was at the invitation of a local Pākehā (Māori for “white settler”), a historian named Tony Batley. Batley also narrated the original Huia imitation soundtrack, thus shaping a historic, ready-made tale.

But replaying this moving bird-human composite also generates fresh impressions. Machine technologies allow listeners to re-embodiment and share voices of the past in their own stories, in their own tones. I have found, surprisingly, that carrying around the present absence of this remnant remembered and so saved inside me helps dispel loneliness amid grave losses. At the same time, it arouses a conflict of longing. Similarly, New Zealand poet Hinemoana Baker writes [in response to the recording]: “I try to resist//I want to tug/something out...” [“Huia, 1950s in *Matuhi|Needle*]. In turn, the huia imitation recording’s complex echoes—from birds from man from machine—are a demanding society. The echoes tug at listeners, as if expecting something of us.

What is it, then, that we listeners want? Where are sources worthy of our confidence? What, reciprocally, is demanded of us, and where do these insistent claims originate?

Let’s listen to part of the 1948 recording [from very last part of narration to fade out just before 4.00, or out at 3.38 could also work]: ¹ <https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/16209>

Hearing #Resistance

In “Learning a Dead Language” Merwin says to “be still.” The dead tongue “will not come to you of itself, nor would you/ Of yourself master it.” It might be “imparted,” though not seized. There is mystery in this, a realm for imagination. Resonantly, poet Baker writes, “I try to resist.” She tries to oppose her desire to take. To *not* take, to keep from stealing, is to refuse domination. Baker continues, “the radio voice says/*believed to be extinct*.” Believed to be extinct. Something in the dead voices makes

us less certain. Possibility opens. The silence--unquiet inside us--rises up. An audibly immanent hope reaches toward something better that hasn't happened...yet (Bloch).

Not all hopes are of equal merit. There is a globally dominating culture with a shared hope that is narcissistic. This kind of hope is as annihilating as it is one-dimensional. [Let me say here, I define *hope* as a mix-and-match partnership between faiths (in what or whom?) and desires (for what or whom?). While, by *culture* I mean shared ideas about how society shall do things. These things include, fundamentally how to interact with “land and its life” (Worster).] The culture of dishonorable hope I am referring to, then, shares confidence in and desire for a single thing—the good of only its own human consumers, especially its already wealthiest and supremely white ones, by ransacking Earth. In a world of interdependencies, this so-called “good” breeds a Pyrrhic victory manifest in “Anthropocene” illness. The symptoms include climate change intersecting with precipitous extinction rates and violently muted BIPOC. In a deep sense, extinctions mean losses of kinds of beings along with co-evolved interrelations, including of languages, including sonic links among Huia and Māori.

These complex consequences can feel distant and overwhelming. The Huia-Human-machine soundtrack itself is a colonized construction bearing huge troubles, yet, paradoxically, the strange hope saved in it helps counteract tyranny. To release its music, I listen to an edited version of the whistling without the English-language narration, while knowing the narrator's original text still shapes the songs' phrasings, as they play and replay in a loop. Huia echoes co-create intimate sound havens for facing painful things while also raising more positive questions: What re/generative flourishing might yet spin out?

Let's listen to the music of Huia echoes replay [0.0-fade 1.00 to 1.07]:

https://merwinconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/HuiaEchoesLoopCornellTrack_1.wav

Practicing to Whistle

Merwin writes, “order helps you remember.” Listening to Huia echoes led to listening everywhere I could for pieces and patterns of strange hope. What might Huia echoes, replaying, make salient in places foreign to its voices? What might this help in remembering? Huia echoes became a travel companion. I made new recordings of Huia echoes, as the core figure (Schaefer), interacting within local, physical soundscapes—ranging globally—from New York’s St. John’s Cathedral to Deadhorse, Alaska, to sites in Western Europe and Asia. Each listening event evokes feelings while linking into a host of associative stories--evolutionary, ecological, historical, and mythological ones, and so on.

Listening, and listening again moved me to learn what might remain—not only of Huia language, but also of the human voices remembering the songs in their native haunts. Who were this Tony Batley, and, especially invisible, this Māori expert Henare Hamana. Finally, this journey delivered me to Aotearoa New Zealand face-to-face with the land, its taonga or treasures, and whānau family members of both Tony Batley and Henare Hamana.

The arc of my unfolding project follows this often uncanny odyssey to these islands organized in a series of reflections—each upon a unique soundscape recording of Huia echoes. Each intimate listening event is an experiment in remembering a link with a globally interconnected hope—a strange saved and saving hope—resistant to domination—a hope that never has fallen silent.

So, here I find myself—at the end—as Toby Salmon led me to his uncle Henare Hamana’s grave. There I stood—scarcely able to believe it—praying with his Māori and Pākehā relatives—themselves possibly healing severed and lost connections. Together we tramped through the Ruahine Mountains—the very same where Hamana heard one of the last in-the-flesh huia sing. Sitting on a beech log above Maropea Stream, in a zenith moment, I recorded Huia echoes replaying while a tiny tītiti pounamu or rifleman perched near my head. The high frequencies of these birds’ calls can reach beyond human hearing range. [So, listen carefully for this voice.] Toby smiled: “Maybe it was Henare visiting.” As we returned to walking, I heard a huia whistle behind me. It was Toby practicing his uncle’s imitation.

Again, let's listen, now in the Ruahines:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c5MARRzdKB3wvtKfAwrSWpd5t9Y11MF_/view