

# Huia Echoes

*Julianne Lutz Warren*

There is nothing for you to say. You must / Learn first to listen . . . / And,  
though you may not yet understand, to remember.

W. S. Merwin, “Learning a Dead Language” (2005)

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the huia-trapper // whistles the song / I try to resist // I want to tug /  
something out of him // the radio voice says / *believed to be extinct*

Hinemoana Baker, “Huia, 1950s” (2004)

## The Object

This chapter’s object—which embodies the Anthropocene—is an aural relic. This relic is the recording of a human imitation of extinct birdsong, which I am calling “Huia Echoes.” “Huia Echoes” is a dramatic chorus for our age, and beyond (plate 4).

## Prelude: First Encounter

A few years ago, I was searching the audio archives of the Macaulay Library of the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology for recordings of living birds to accompany a talk on “Remembering Nature as Hope.” In the process, I incidentally

came across the call of an ivory-billed woodpecker. I knew that this bird kind of the southeastern United States and Cuba was likely recently extinct. I caught my breath when I heard this vanished voice. My awareness roused, I made a list of the avian species listed as extinct by the “IUCN Red List of Threatened Species” and checked to see how many of these birds’ songs and calls had been saved in Macaulay’s collection. I discovered that of 140 extinct species, the voices of only 5 were represented. Hearing each one evoked poignant feelings. Catalogue number 16209 titled “Human Imitation of Huia”—a mid-twentieth-century soundtrack of a now-deceased Māori man mimicking songs of already extinct huia, a bird endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand—in particular, haunted me.

I could not forget these dead voices, living on.

May we never forget.

Perhaps more of us, following poet Merwin’s advice to “Learn first to listen”—to this bonded group of singing remains—will also remember and come to deeper hearing. Perhaps, in hearing, as Baker in her poem writes, though we may “try to resist // . . . to tug / something out” of the multiplex voice, we will learn that something from within ourselves is wanted to help enrich and multiply the whistling echoes.

## The Historic Score: “Human Imitation of Huia”

The recording in Macaulay Library titled “Human Imitation of Huia” includes narration by Robert Anthony Leighton Bately, a man of British stock, descended from pioneer families. He explains that what we are hearing is a Māori man named Hēnare Hāmāna—a bird mimic who in his younger days had heard living huia—whistling his re-creation, after they were extinct, of a sonic scene. In this imagined plot, a male and a female bird carry on a dialogue as they feed together in a forest. Here is that historic recording with Bately’s narration:

Audio 1: Listen to “Human Imitation of Huia”: <http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/16209>.

Figure 3 is the recording transcribed as a score.

## Presenting the Object: “Huia Echoes,” A Dramatic Chorus

The narration helps sketch the story behind the imitated birdsong in the original recording. It was the whistle that charmed me, though. So, with the generous help of technicians, we removed the narration, freeing only the song to replay (see fig. 4).<sup>1</sup>

Bateley: “Let us imagine two birds are feeding on a rotten tree. After awhile, the female climbs to the top of the tree and glides into the distance. The male bird calls with the following notes,” whistled by Hamana:

**Male call: 19 seconds**



“The female answers:”

**Female answers: 8 seconds**



“After this the males replies:”

**Male replies: 5 seconds**



**Key:**

All staves in octaves 6-7

All rhythmic values approximate

↘ = slide from above

↙ = slide from below

↔ = slide from one note to another

↑ = note is higher than pitch on staff

↓ = note is lower than pitch on staff

“The male bird then joins the female where they scratch among the leaves. After feeding they both climb to the top of a tōtara tree. And, now, to complete the survey of the huia, Mr. Hamana will repeat his calls. The male:”

**Male repeat: 15 seconds**



“The female:”

**Female repeat: 8 seconds**



Figure 3. Transcribed musical notation of whistled version of Huia songs with accompanying narration found in *Human Imitation of Huia*, catalogue number 16209 recording, Macaulay Library, Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Courtesy of Martin Hatch.

The intention of the descriptive words along with the human memory of a native bird tongue still shape the grammar of the musical phrases as the dramatic chorus resounds.

Audio 2: Listen to “Huia Echoes,” a song of the Anthropocene: <http://www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz/sites/all/files/27%20-%20Huia%20%28Imitation%29.mp3>.

This, then, is the aural relic I am calling “Huia Echoes”—the chorus of extinct birdsong, echoed by human voice, echoed by machine, which may be played repeatedly—beginning, middle, end, beginning—looping into listeners’ heads, potentially echoing on.

## “Huia Echoes”: Biographical Notes

*Brief History of Huia, the Echoes’ Source*—Of all the lands of this vast earth, huia, a unique wattlebird, inhabited mainly the northernmost of a pair of stormy southern islands that rifted from Gondwana 80 million years ago. Huia ancestors may

**Male call: 19 seconds****Female answers: 8 seconds****Male replies: 5 seconds****Male repeat: 15 seconds****Female repeat: 8 seconds****Key:**

All staves in octaves 6-7

All rhythmic values approximate






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Figure 4. Transcribed musical notation of whistled version of Huia song extracted from *Human Imitation of Huia*, catalogue number 16209 recording, Macaulay Library, Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Courtesy of Martin Hatch.

have flown here from Australia on westerlies across the sea 50 million years later. The islands' first human beings, the Māori ancestors, finally appeared just 800 years ago. The name they gave the birds sounds like their song—*huia*. And the birds' place, also the people's new home, they called *Aotearoa*, or, in English, "long white cloud." Later, European colonists, whom Māori named Pākehā, christened the islands *New Zealand*. The bird, in Latin, became known as *Heteralocha acutirostris*, which in English means something like "the husband's is different from his wife's piercing sharp beak."

Huias' best-known calls have been described as a flute-like whistle with a prolonged note followed by short, quickly repeated ones, and as a recurring legato phrase quivering at the end. The birds' songs issued from their ivory bills, which were sexually dimorphic to an unusual degree. Females' bills were lancing-long and gracefully curving. Those of males were short and sharp like pick-axes. A pair of orange wattles, fleshy pendants ornamenting the gape flanges of both sexes, contrasted brightly with feathers that were silky blue-black from head to tail. The tips of a huia's twelve tail feathers, however, like his or her bill, were the color of ivory.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, huia joined a long line of these islands' birds—a quarter of them, or over fifty species—who have become extinct since the first human contact in the thirteenth century. More than half of these species, including every kind of moa, vanished between the time of Māori and eighteenth-century European arrivals. The rest were rapidly lost after Pākehā came. And, currently, many more species—including huias' closest relatives, saddleback (tieke or *Philesturnus carunculatus*) and North and South Island kōkako (*Callaeas wilsoni* and *C. cinerea*)—are on life's brink.

The loss of huia, extinct by the early twentieth century, can be blamed on a constellation of place-specific, human-initiated causes that today also ring, repeatedly, with global familiarity. Causes involved acute and chronic disruptions of long-evolved interdependencies among minerals, soils, waters, plants, animals, and air. At the time of Māori ancestral canoe arrivals, the islands' only mammals were bats. These first people brought with them bird-hungry Pacific rats. Then, a few hundred years later, European ships delivered more mammalian predators, like Norway rats, cats, stoats, and ferrets. Red deer from Scotland ate regenerating forest; and exotic birds, such as minas from India, brought unfamiliar ticks that stressed local birds.

Humans also dispatched huia directly. Traditionally, Māori hunters snared them for their beautiful tail feathers used for chiefly and sacred purposes. With the firepower of guns and the commodification of their feathers as hat ornaments (particularly after the future King George V donned one), and as parlor curiosities and museum specimens, Pākehā and Māori hunting intensified. From the nineteenth century, intense Pākehā-driven alterations of land and water also expanded. The new-come imperialists bought or appropriated wide swaths of forests and swamps, many of which were huia and Māori whenua or ancestral places, supporting and supported by interwoven avian-human indigenous identities. The newcomers burned, timbered, and drained these places and divided long-standing relationships in exchange for a managed system familiar to them—one of grass pastures, sheep and cows, and crops of potatoes, oats, and wheat, mined minerals and fossil hydrocarbons, railways and towns of well-warmed houses with weeded gardens, Chinese cherry trees, roads, shops and banks, stone cathedrals, museums, radio stations and recording machines.

*Echo 1, Human Voice:* Curious huia could be lured near to a practiced imitator whistling a resemblance to their songs. As a young man, Hāmana (b. 1880; d. >1949)<sup>2</sup>—a member of Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Ngāti Porou, known in Bately's words as “a local Māori experienced in giving huia calls”—assisted in at least

two Pākehā-led huia search expeditions in 1908 and/or 1909. Only one bird was encountered on the earlier expedition through formerly prime habitat in the northern portion of the Ruahine Range of the North Island.

Huia had occupied wet mountain forests with arching tree branches of wide-girthed tōtara with gold-flaking bark, rendered by Pākehā artists as cathedral-like, and stands of southern beeches floored with decaying boles stocked with huhu grubs and hinau trees with tasty purple berries, both of which huia and Māori liked to eat. Huia frequented tangled manuka groves teeming with tree-crickets, another bird delicacy, on grounds sloping into brook-fed ravines of towering crimson-flowered rewarewa and pukapuka shrubs fragrant with cream-colored blooms. In the soundtrack, now as an aging man, Hāmāna echoes a pair of remembered huia voices, whose kind no one will ever hear again in the flesh, singing to each other in an area of their former forest.

*Echo 2, Machine Recording:* The Pākehā habit of collecting skins of birds known to be endangered to save some museum knowledge of them, or to keep as cabinet curiosities, perhaps extending even to takings for keepsakes of Māori tradition, paradoxically, reduced avian numbers already in perilous decline. Recording equipment, on the other hand, could multiply rather than deplete stocks of avian songs, but was not readily available before huia were gone.

By 1949 the city of Wellington had a radio station with recording facilities. Understanding the bird to be an “object of unusual interest,” Bately, as a local historian and author, wanted “to preserve a resemblance to the call of the huia . . . which is believed extinct.” So Bately invited Hāmāna, who, like him, lived in Moawhango near Taihape, to travel together about 140 miles south to station 2YA’s (now RNZ National) studio.

There, prompted by Bately, Hāmāna whistled his recollection of huia calls into a microphone. Technical experts used a recording lathe to etch the composite music of native bird tones and Māori echo, plus Pākehā narration, into a spiral of grooves on a black lacquer disc, which, as it spun in contact with a needle, could be played back. This machine sounding, then, is a second echo that not only reproduced a remnant of the extinct birdsong, but also saved human memories of huia’s phrases, along with the thus-obscured cultural tradition of learning them. All of these losses were given a voice.

*Echo 3 and Echoing On, Song-repeating Listeners:* The bird-man-machine soundings thereafter circulated and multiplied into countless other echoes, in reproduction of the recording sung out by turntables and by newer kinds of playback machines, and, by some listeners, even embodied and rehummed into the living world. Soon after the Wellington recording was made, the dramatic soundtrack

was presented as part of a talk on “Native Birds of Our District” by V. Smith of Taihape to the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, which appears to have held the phonograph record. Later, the original ten-inch acetate disk was copied onto tapes, including by the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation. John Kendrick, a New Zealand conservationist, sound recordist, and radio host of “Morning Report bird calls,” took a copy of their tape. This copy was copied by field collaborator William V. Ward for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The lab labeled the recording as catalog number 16209 in their Library of Natural Sounds, now the Macaulay Library. Macaulay began digitizing in 2000, subsequently making their holdings available to echo on with a quick click through the Internet. This, as I’ve explained, is how I first encountered “Human Imitation of Huia,” which became edited into this chapter’s focal object—a sonic artifact, which I am calling “Huia Echoes.”

### Spinning “Huia Echoes”

There is “a way the older people have of telling a story,” Māori author Patricia Grace says, “a way where the beginning is not the beginning, the end is not the end. It starts from the center and moves away from there in such widening circles that you don’t know how you will finally arrive at a point of understanding, which becomes itself another core, a new centre” (Thompson 2008, 66).

Perhaps “Huia Echoes” is telling this sort of story, starting at the core of a once-feathered source of destroyed-forest birdsong, circling out in a formerly-forest-bird-interwoven-man’s voice, recorded by a descendant of colonist pioneers into the grooves of a spinning disc, then copied into other machines to repeat into air, potentially resounding through unknown ears and recurring in others’ tongues elsewhere.

This choral artifact as a whole, then, might enchant our imaginations into another central starting place that begins with listening to “Huia Echoes” as a different kind of being. Indeed, this compound voice, I have come to feel, unexpectedly, is not an object after all. The extinct music somehow is not dead. Latent within technology, “Huia Echoes” is an alive companion, evident when I switch on a machine. Indeed, keeping near, housed in my iPhone, this musical storyteller by encouraging me to hear others helps me feel less alone.

Flowing through a legacy of saved memories—elemental, biotic, and mechanical—through a small speaker, the birdsong traces replay into different places. I begin to understand the mimicked dead birdsong as a de-feathered, skin-less teacher,

an audible silence—a reverberating absence—bringing forward the past in moving conversation with the present.

For example, listening in boreal Alaska’s Atigun Pass, I hear the colonist’s machine-bound avian and human prisoners absorbed into wind sounding on rocks, water, and tundra leaves. I want to shout “Quiet!” to the play of air. But, keeping myself still, I also wish the currents to rush on in their forgetting way, dissipating cruelties to each unique winged-body and dark-skinned person who has suffered them. An inkling blows in from behind, whispering: we belong to each other.

As I listen in the foggy pillared peaks of Wulingyuan Scenic Area of China’s Hunan Province, “Huia Echoes” pushes through a din of human-crowd voices so effectively that the whistle draws curious and also nervous looks. As do I, with my blue eyes and pale skin. My first impulses want me and my singing friend to hush or blend in alongside a contrary one to defend us both in a very loud voice, followed by an urge to announce my history of oppressing failures—personal and ancestral—to act with such spirited care toward all manner of life, accompanied by a humiliating feeling that this in itself can be self-aggrandizing. An insight rises from within, humming: desire healing.

It is this legacy of failure—institutionalized—that has delivered the world-of-life into a global epoch of dire consequences, still unfolding—many of which, despite anyone’s deepest desire otherwise—can never be unmade, like huia’s extinction—an entire bird language—extinguishing entwined Maori sacred tradition. This is the epoch that some have dubbed the Anthropocene, which might be considered yet another starting point for a fresh round of storytelling.

## Anthropocene Remains

The Anthropocene, in albeit contested geological terms, is characterized by marks of worldwide human domination in fossil and chemical changes in soils, sediment, ice, or rock. In cultural terms this is an epoch of evidence-based perceptions of rippling, unintended outcomes of human actions reversing billions of years old trends of generative Earth. Reverses include unprecedentedly rapid rates of extinction—careening, in a matter of centuries, toward the likelihood of over 75 percent of bird species missing plus a similar proportion of other living types—with soil fertility diminishing faster than building up interpenetrating with global climate change, rippling in other forms ruin, unjustly distributed.



Injustices might not readily register in geological records but, humanely, it is clear that not all human beings are dominators. Many are unwillingly if not inculpably embedded in an imperial system—of intensive mining of lands and waters, toxic industries, including agriculture, and fossil-fuel burning—imposed by actors in a centuries-old Occidental narrative of “the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible,” in Englishman Francis Bacon’s words, joined with insatiable desire for wealth. This colonizing saga has notably benefited white-skinned people at the expense of those on the most vulnerable front lines of thus suffering Earth, including feathered, finned, and leafy, rooted beings, human ones who live within thin walls, and/or who are women, people in brown and black skins, children, inhabitants of coasts, small oceanic islands and African countries.

But the Anthropocene tale is not finished. The captive irony of this epoch, which “Huia Echoes” helps announce with widening understanding, is that the victory of human empire—a pyrrhic one—has become the unintended trappings of that same dominating intent. In other words, as the price of privilege has enlarged globally—extinguishing huia forest-singing, swallowing the voice of a Maori hunter into a machine alongside swelling hosts of others—mounting debts surround and undermine even the thickest walls of the imperial-minded.

The unfettering irony of the Anthropocene, on the other hand, is that world-wide political unrest and intensifying storms and droughts resulting from the overconfident efforts of dominating humans bare how all life interpenetrates with a still-wild planet fecund with music and inventiveness. The future may be darker than it ever was, our ignorance great, yet “Huia Echoes”—singing remains carefully saved in a machine—may be released in each of us who listen, learn, and remember this tugging voice, holding together a willing companionship of diverse others who together resist tugging. Here might be a new starting place of telling tales, not that everything will be alright, but of widening collaboration of human beings within an ecosphere of mutual belonging, the hope of healing.

## NOTES

- 1 With thanks to Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, USA for permission to use “Human Imitation of Huia,” Catalog #16209, William V. Ward, recordist, and to Collections Management Leader, Matthew Young, for technical help with editing.
- 2 With thanks to Kate Evans of *New Zealand Geographic* and Sarah Johnston of Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision for their correspondences, and for several helpful discoveries of new materials and historical details related to both Hēnare Hāmana and Robert Bately and the 1949 recording, which they also dated.

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