Hope Echoes: Learning A Dead Birdsong
Vocalscape 1: Listening in “The Place”
Work-in-progress, 6-30-18 (Please don’t distribute beyond our group) by Julianne Warren

Approaching: This August day, the clouds are heavy and low—swells of grey down.

The sky has just rained, darkening the pavement. Water is dripping from green boughs of spruce and birch branches. An easy wind smells like wet grass.

Downhill, in a nearby grain-field turned gold, Sandhill cranes chime occasionally, gathering to head south.

The moon will be new tomorrow. The tiniest sliver of today’s waning crescent, though invisible, arcs slowly above the horizon.

The morning sun’s light, filtered through the blanket overhead, is muted. The listener wears a sweater.

Once inside the museum, I walk past the gift shop, show a pass, then climb a staircase to the second floor with a bay of windows on the right. To the left, there is a gallery with an alcove.

A sign on a door in the alcove says, “enter quietly.”

I pause before doing so. I turn around to look, again, through the wide span of glass. This is the ancestral and unceded territory of Th’itu’ Xwt’ana—in English, the Lower Tanana Dene People. Generations of these Athabascans have come to Troth Yeddha’, or, “the ridge of the wild potatoes,” to harvest the legumes. With such a sweeping vantage, this hill has long been an attractive meeting site. Outside, beyond today’s rain veil, are mountains far older even than this land’s First Peoples. The mountains are massive, even when viewed from over a hundred-miles distant. On a clear day, the Three Sisters materialize—their snowy tops gleam gold-pink. And, more to my right, to the southwest, would be Denali—the tallest North American peak. Unless, perhaps, this summit has fallen during the night. We can’t know for sure, unless the clouds withdraw, whether or not it remains standing at all.

I have entered this room several times before. An introductory plaque describes it as “The Place Where You Go to Listen.” An Inupiaq legend was in the memory of the man, John Luther Adams, who imagined and, with the help of others, built it. A woman, so the legend says, sat quietly in a place called Naalagiyagvik on Alaska’s Arctic Coast. In that place, she—I don’t know her name—heard things.

In contrast to the open Arctic plain spreading into the vast, salt-smelling sea, the room the listener is about to enter is a close space—about ten by twenty feet, with no windows. There is one long wooden bench in the center. Floors, ceiling and walls are white, except for one wall that glows with the only source of light. [Image] This light slowly, barely perceptibly, changes color—in summer, of yellow hues and green-blues—corresponding with the
unceasing flow of noise vibrating from a surround of speakers. The noise in the speakers emanates from machines that translate sources of real time physical conditions outside into sounds—filtered, tuned and tempered—merged into a continuous electronic stream. This resonating stream, fluid with emergent tones and rhythms, is a polyphony of irregular seismic groans at foot-shuddering level, the reliable voices of moon—from the perspective of Earth’s horizon—waxing and waning, rising and setting with the chorusing sun sung through sound-damping prisms of fluid palls and mists of air. From ceiling speakers, when active, fluxing aurora bells tinkle down.

[Play: Room threshold] Upon first opening the door, a listener sometimes feels repelled by the room’s chaotic acoustic atmosphere, even afraid. During past visits, I have noticed many would-be participants barely crack the door open before fleeing.

One of the most important things about this place is that the listener can leave. Anyone who enters this room can exit the same way.

But, I will stay for awhile.

Also, I am carrying a sonic secret into the room, where I plan to release it.

Interlude: I will play a 1949 soundtrack of a human imitation of a male and female huia calling to each other while searching for food in the forest. Huia, birds endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand, were already extinct, due to complex human causes, along with the Māori tradition of vocally luring them. The bird mimic is a Māori man named Hēnare Hāmana. He was invited into the recording studio by a Pākehā [Euro-settler] neighbor, a regional historian named Robert Batley, who wanted to preserve a relict of the birds’ language, Batley’s original narration, though still shaping the whistled phrases, has been edited out. The bird-man whistle loops continually in this version I refer to as [Play:] Huia Echoes. (Note: I have visited family of both parties who have encouraged this work.)

In the Room: This place, says Adams, “is not complete until you are present and listening.”

First, the listener must resist leaving. Second, I must not resist immersion before I must go.

Let the sound waves lap against my skin, the rocking Earth, belly-rumble, wet hair, submerge eyes, seep into ears, sprinkle my head.

[Play: Room alone] Let go of the shore, float like a bird on a current of air.

This is a dream of voices dreaming. Who is the dreamer? Is it Earth? The human composer? The present listener? Past and future ears? Some other fount? Is it possible for all to dream the same dream?

The listener doesn’t know.
A Māori chant shared in the nineteenth century by Te Kohuora of Rongoroa, says, Na te—that is, from the—primary source, rising-thought-memory-mind/heart-desire...

I wonder, when the mind/heart remembers the source and desires what emerges, isn’t that supreme hope?

Who can solve hope?

Te Kohuora’s chant continues, Te kore te rawea—that is, unbound nothingness—stirring hau—breath of life and growth—moving through darkness, the world, the sky, moon, sun, light—day!—earth (female)—and—sky (male)—and ocean, the children of earth and sky, food plants, forests, lakes and rivers, ancestors of fish, lizards, birds…life and death.

In Māori, change happens across the pae—liminal spaces of potential emergence—between life and death, light and dark, silence and noise, absence and presence, inhabitants and visitors, one kind of being and another.

In this place, in this room, I imagine many pae—the sound is never-ending and never the same, unfolding in time. There are high tones and low, consonances and dissonances begin and end, the inaudible outside is audible inside mingled with dim ambience and subtly changing colored light. The door opens and closes, the listener who comes in, inhales-exhales, will go out. [Sound fades]

**Huia Echoes:** Then, by pressing a button on my play-back machine, I release the legacy of interrelations voiced by Huia Echoes, foreign to this place, into the many other exchanges already happening: [Play: Room w/Huia Echoes] two men—now both dead—the colonized one sharing a taonga—a treasured thing—with the colonizer, a colonizer passing it on. The taonga is the imitation of two birds reciprocating want, dead voices express animation. What is breathless, and unchanging, sings, full of breath, if not changing, bringing changes.

While the room’s stream of noise runs, to my Occidental take, along an arrow of time, Huia Echoes circles.

While the noise of this inside world is ever-changing as is the outside one, Huia Echoes is a recording with a chorus of voices that repeat—beginning-middle-end—the same, over and over again.

Or are they?

What happens across the pae between this room of noise and the machine-saved echoes of lost man-and-bird?

Huia Echoes sounds mingled and disruptive, tender and insistent. The echoes echo, are buoyed by waves, sink, and soar. The bird-man chorus varies with the outside weather heard inside the world of this place. When the clouds gather, beyond the walls, the octaves of the sun’s choir narrow and darken. The clouds, darkening,
unexpectedly, expose the re-playing Huia Echoes tones. The sun brightening, shades them. Aurora bells curtain the recording’s higher pitches, making them hard to distinguish. Sometimes I hear speech. Catching a sonic wave, the voices sway up and down, male and female:

*Here I am. Here I am. Over here. Here am I.*

I respond: Who are you? Who I am? Am I you, you, me, we?

In the stream of sounds, the calls of Huia Echoes alter. Or, is it Huia Echoes—as leaves do the wind—re-directing the room’s flow of sounds? Are the ears of the listener transformed? Who is the changer, and who is being changed in this dream of dreamers dreaming? Who or what has a will? What is trust, or desire?

*Huia Echoes silent:* After listening awhile, I stop the machine replaying the bird-man recording. My ears are relieved by the silence of their cluttering tones within this room full already of continuous sounds.

Is that relief a germ of forgetting?

Yet, having grown familiar with the added presence of Huia Echoes, the room now also sounds wrong. I feel the absence of the composite voice—with a pang—as a plangent void.

Is that pang a seed of remembering? [Fade out]

[Fade in] What if Huia Echoes, rather than remain a captive of the machine, found a sonic wormhole and escaped? Though the recording is off, I still catch phrases of the bird-man voice repeating—a ghost of tones.

Is that audible phantom, my desire or Echoes’?

*The listener plays*—Still captivated by the ever-rolling sounds of the room. I stay on, listening, but not still.

[Fade out] Without thought, my own voice wells. It does not want to shout nor need to cry out, but, somehow, at the same time to dissolve yet stand out. Alone in that room, my voice turns itself on. My childhood’s nursery rhymes surface as breath and rise through my mouth. Words play in the surf. [Fade in]

*Three blind mice* repeats, mantra-like, though varies in rhythm. *How much wood can a woodchuck chuck…* / much wood could the woodchuck chuck tosses up the pitch of much like a ball. *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers* tumbles out, wanting to outrun time, but unable to. *Humpty Dumpty’s* syllables-full of consonants—and all the king’s men / couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty together again—are unskillfully thrown skipping stones. *Mary had a little lamb*, catches a current, resonates and clashes randomly as it flows, until the lamb was sure to goooooowwwwaaahhhhh blends into the sun chorus—tuned, within human audibility, to the fundamental frequency
of the daily rotation of Earth—24.27 Hz, a tempered G. My tiny vowel washes into a quiet pool of sound an octave
between the organ of solar light and shimmering aurora bells harmonizing with the whole planet!

Long after stopping, I hear my drone go on, like a spirit ship’s wake.

Finally, I become conscious as a composer. I signal an intentional end to my spontaneous improv—a coda
repeats the starting rhyme bending into a question: three blind mice / three blind mice / three blind mice // see how
they run? [Fade out]


Exiting-It was time for me to exit the “Place,” where it has been safe both to give in and to resist, be
distinct. One of the most important things about this room is that the listener can leave. Anyone who enters this
room can find their way out. [Fade out]

Coda: Outside the window pane, the sun and moon sliver--audibly rising back inside--still hid behind silver
billows, as did the distant mountains that I had kept faith in.

Beyond the clouds, a fingering menace is closing around Earth. The menace is an undying sameness, a pae-
less monotone of un-existence.

But, there is a gift of breath that can say yes! and also no! And, in between, spaces of potential emergence
from which many voices may echo.

What if Huia Echoes did pass through a wormhole back there in the chaos of sounds? What if they did
refuse the machine, and my will to turn it off or on?

In the afterglow of listening in The Place, it’s not only that I hear music in the whir of a fan, or mistake a
distant chainsaw cutting firewood as Tibetan throat-singing, there also is something going on with the birds.

One early morning this spring, I heard Huia Echoes in my sleep. The voice was singing in the forest beyond
my open window. I leapt out of bed and grabbed my recording equipment (because, who would believe me?). I
fumbled groggily with the gear, while easily imagining that those Swainson’s thrushes, I suddenly recognized, had
picked up the lost bird-man voice.

Were these boreal flesh-and-feather throats echoing the echoes of extinct birds from a half-world away?

I cherish that dream all the more as awake—a persistent, ringing void—keeping us, in the world-alive, in
play.
*Recordings and works consulted will be included in future iterations.

**This “vocalscape” draft is a work-in-progress, and a piece of a larger work. For a bit more context, please see e.g., https://merwinconservancy.org/2015/11/the-poetry-lab-hopes-echo-by-author-julianne-warren-center-for-humans-and-nature/; http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/F/bo27213130.html.

Image: “The Place,” 8-13-15: