

Remembering the Huia: Extinction and Nostalgia in a Bird World

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of nostalgia in practices of remembering the Huia, an extinct bird endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand. It suggests that nostalgia for the Huia specifically, and New Zealand's indigenous birds more generally, has occurred as both restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. It argues that the former problematically looks to recreate a past world in which birds flourished. In contrast, the paintings of Bill Hammond and the sound art of Sally Ann McIntyre are drawn on to explore the potential of reflective nostalgia for remembering the Huia, and New Zealand's extinct indigenous birds more generally, in a more critical and nuanced way.

Keywords: extinction, nostalgia, Huia, New Zealand, birds, art

The Huia was like a fetch – the ghost of one living who is about to die, lingering at the edge of things. (Bowring 111)

Antipodean Extinction: Turning Home in the Anthropocene

Many scientists claim we are now in a new epoch labelled the Anthropocene, in which the earth is undergoing a host of massive ecological and geological transformations, including sea-level and temperature change, species and habitat loss, increased tectonic and volcanic activity, and so on (Clark 2). Among these changes is what has been called the sixth mass extinction event, the first almost exclusively anthropogenic annihilation of species in history (Kolbert 3). Extinction is not just an objective event through which a species exists and is then lost as the last individual of a kind dies. Extinction is much more than this; it does much more than this. Extinction is a significant cultural phenomenon, for species die out physically, but continue to live on through narratives, affects, commodities, and acts of remembering, forgetting, and mourning.

Understanding these ecocultural entanglements is a critical task for thinking through the relationship between human and non-human animals in this time of great ecological change and uncertainty. As extinction studies scholar Thom van Dooren writes, individuals must understand ‘the multiple connections and dependencies between ourselves and these disappearing others’; ‘all of the ways in which we are at stake in each other, all of the ways in which we share a world’ (283). Therefore, at this moment there is an urgent need to critically engage with these losses, to respond appropriately in a range of different ways to extinction

Art theorist Susan Ballard suggests New Zealanders should turn home to consider extinction in this time of the disappearance of innumerable forms of life (74). By this she means reflecting on the significant amount of anthropogenic species loss, largely propelled by settler-colonialism, that has occurred in the Antipodes over the last two centuries (Ballard 74). The purpose of this is not to advocate for protecting an abstract and generalized ‘nature’, but for articulating ‘our place as witnesses, activators, and recorders’ of extinction (Ballard 73). Focusing on extinction within Aotearoa New Zealand can thus contribute to the understanding of species loss more widely within the Anthropocene as a complex ecological, social, and

cultural phenomenon. For in New Zealand there is a paradoxically rich culture of extinction manifest in art, literature, conservation, and popular culture. This has been defined by a deeply affective sense of ‘beforeness and longing’ attached to a collective memory of the country’s pre-colonial past.¹ I wish to critique a particular manifestation of this memory as a form of nature nostalgia that romanticizes and attempts to restore an imaginary time and place in which endemic avian life, free from the harms of European settlers, is considered to have flourished. Nostalgia for New Zealand as a pre-colonial bird world attaches more certainly to the Huia, an extinct endemic bird, than to any other indigenous flora or fauna. I give examples of works from two artists featuring the Huia which I suggest move beyond the simplicity of nature nostalgia. I argue these works utilize a more critical and reflective nostalgia to provide nuanced ways of remembering, being affected by, and mourning the loss of endemic New Zealand birds.

Responding to the Destruction of Nature: Recollection, Nostalgia, and Restoration

The phenomenon of extinction is inextricably tied to memory. While human animals may no longer share a physical space with extinct species, they do share a virtual space through which they consider and are affected by them. Extinct animals return to haunt human animals. As ecocritic Ursula Heise notes, this is not simply a matter of straightforward recollection, but one involving complex processes of remembering and forgetting, and of temporality, of different pasts, presents, and futures (34). While life itself is finite, the duration of its trace in memory and feeling is indeterminate (De Vos 10), at times being forgotten, while at others being remembered and felt across generations. The crude, objective event of extinction known by science, that is, the moment the last individual of a kind dies, not only erases the physical presence of the species, but permanently transforms its temporal existence within culture. After this point, there is recollection of the life of the species in several different temporal registers. There is the ideal period in which the non-human animal flourished, the phase of decline, and the eternal irreversibility of loss. Through the currency of extinction – that paradoxical cultural gain created by ecological loss – the remnants of departed species are preserved in artifacts such

as photographs, stories, art, recordings, and so on. Through these forms, remembering occurs via narratives that focus on just one temporal register of extinction or which move across them.

Fixating on an ideal past in which a species is thought to have flourished is perhaps the most common form of the extinction affect. This act of remembering employs an ‘Edenic narrative’ that recalls a prelapsarian period before human animals corrupted nature in some way (Slater 116). Thus, it is often referred to as ‘nature nostalgia’ (Ladino 89). In the case of extinction, nature nostalgia imagines an Edenic time and place before numerous species were wiped out. Such narratives dominate stories of extinction and employ tragedy to reduce species loss (much like deforestation, pollution, and so on) to the simple formula of environmental decline caused by the modern quest for progress (Heise 34). Literary theorist Svetlana Boym, the foremost thinker on nostalgia, theorizes different forms of this emotion, including one she labels restorative (53). She explains that for the restorative nostalgic, who emphasises *nostos*, or the return, ‘the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot’ (61). Nature nostalgia tends to recall the past in this restorative way. Furthermore, Boym suggests that the restorative nostalgic ‘attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost homeland’ (14). Hence, following this logic, nature nostalgia tries to find means to reconnect to the land, to restore environments, or in the case of extinction, to preserve species or even resurrect them.

In New Zealand nature nostalgia plays a significant cultural role. Here, as literary theorist Alex Calder notes, the narrative of environmental decline has traditionally (and still often does) painted settlers as evil and greedy destroyers of New Zealand’s nature – particularly its forests and endemic birds – in the pursuit of wealth (134). However, in recent decades environmental historians like Peter Holland have been at pains to provide more nuanced accounts that show settlers in fact held a mixed set of opinions regarding the environmental transformation of New Zealand and the loss of its endemic ecology (100). Today the restorative quality of nature nostalgia shapes the response to this historic ecological loss by framing how the past is remembered and how humans should subsequently act. Hence, in New Zealand conservation processes like ecological restoration are deeply shaped by this kind of collective memory, becoming practices of attempting to recreate environments as they were before

colonization.² Debates exist over what exactly is meant ecologically by this pre-colonial time and place and to what extent it can be scientifically known and reconstructed (Head 21). Critics including environmental historian James Beattie argue such remembering of the past relies on the romantic fiction that New Zealand was untouched before European settlement, as if Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) did not exist or had no impact on the land (102). For ecologist and environmental historian Geoff Park, this vision of the past has also underpinned the creation of protected areas as places of untouched nature outside of society and resulted in a strict limiting of what people can do within their boundaries, including the denial of Māori customary use rights and traditional systems of management (Park, *Theatre Country* 190). The desire to return to such a time and place has also been criticised by literary theorist Patrick Evans, as a product of the need of the descendants of settlers to expiate the guilt they have for their colonial forebears' destruction of New Zealand (*Robin Hyde and the Post-Colonial Sublime* 42). This desire manifests in their remaking of history through a narrative that sees them arriving to New Zealand as an empty wilderness, which becomes their homeland they are native to, as cultural studies scholar Stephen Turner claims (*Compulsory Nationalism* 15).

This time and place of the pre-colonial past is often imaged as an avian paradise populated by New Zealand's indigenous birds. In his 1925 painting *The Death of the Moa*, artist Trevor Lloyd plays with this imaginary, as he somewhat humorously depicts a dead Moa (the last of its kind) in the forest surrounded by several of the country's other native avian species grieving over this loss.³ The work can be read as providing a light-hearted commentary on the way the Edenic narrative simplistically portrays the fall of New Zealand's birds as a kind of paradise destroyed by people. Today the restoration of this avian world as it is collectively remembered is now being attempted in reality through the establishment of ecosanctuaries.⁴ In addition, attempts to revive specific indigenous New Zealand species through de-extinction are also gaining traction (Campbell 8). Thus, it is imaginable that de-extinction could form a secondary task for conservation in New Zealand alongside the government's primary goal of making the country predator free by the year 2050, just as it was before human inhabitation, at which point it could presumably be stocked with recovered bird species.⁵ Indeed, such an

historical recreation may fulfil the strong cultural desire to restore the imaginary lost past constructed by New Zealand's collective nature nostalgia.

Considering lost species through the lens of nature nostalgia prevents the development of complex, rich, and nuanced narratives of extinction. These stories are needed because they enable extant human animals to respond to the anthropogenic extinction of non-human animals in thoughtful ways. I am not arguing against things like ecosanctuaries or de-extinction specifically, for these have merits and pitfalls, supporters and detractors, but a detailed discussion of this is outside of the scope of this paper. Rather, I am advocating a critique of nature nostalgia in New Zealand – particularly in relation to the loss of New Zealand's birds – as a mode of memory that constructs a specific imaginary of the country's past and drives attempts to restore it. This critique is based on three key points. First, within restorative nostalgia there is no way of remembering other than through a fixed memory of a fallen paradise to be forever and only recalled in all its glory and recreated as such. By focusing on the flourishing of life in an ideal past, nature nostalgia inhibits the ability to recollect in ways that move across the full life of a species and to produce multiple histories of the existence of non-human animal kinds. Second, dominant narratives of extinction produced by nature nostalgia diminish the scope of how human animals might be affected by and mourn the disappearance of species – by employing the trope of tragedy to reduce the loss they feel for them to a normative sadness over the national or global fall of nature. Third, the simplicity of the narrative of environmental decline underpinned by nature nostalgia erases the complexities of the ecosocial entanglements that lead to the extinction of non-human animals, and in turn, the capacity to critically reflect upon these losses.

Remembering Lost Birds: Longing and Critical Reflection

It is problematic that extinctions are sometimes not remembered well, when the complexities of such events are forgotten through the dominance of 'authorized versions' of species loss (De Vos 10). Merely to recall these events is not enough; we must remember critically. The dominance of the restorative form nature nostalgia takes inhibits extinction from being remembered in other ways. I argue that what Boym labels 'reflective nostalgia' may be useful for expanding the

ways processes of ecological loss like extinction are remembered (61). Restorative nostalgia, as I have suggested above, tends to attempt to ‘conquer time’ by uncritically returning to the true or absolute past (Boym 61). Thus, in regard to extinction, this kind of nostalgia tries to restore the pre-fall paradise in which non-human animals are thought to have thrived. By contrast, reflective nostalgia emphasises *algia* or emotional dwelling on the past (Boym 61). Here dwelling acts as an ongoing process of creatively working through the pain of loss – without necessarily needing or trying to overcome it – by harnessing its affective energy to develop new insights, perspectives, and states of being. It thus ‘reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another’ (Boym 61). According to this mode, nostalgia need not only be conservative and retrograde; it can instead be motivating and politically progressive. In regard to ecological issues, such a mode can inspire, for instance, critical concern and even action over the plight of non-human animals (Heise 14).

When nostalgia shifts from being purely restorative and becomes more reflective, it may enable extinctions to not be homogenized within a single narrative of the loss of nature, but understood within the complexities of the contexts in which they occurred. Responses to extinction ‘need to engage more than a simple defence of nature’, they need to articulate the specific social, cultural, and ecological conditions of those losses (Ballard 71). Furthermore, I suggest that a more reflective nostalgia may increase the capacity to be affected by extinction and to mourn the loss of passed species to a greater depth. For reflective nostalgia entails both mourning and melancholy. According to Freud, melancholy subjects obsessively long for the return of the departed object and thus dwell in pain unable to move on from loss (Heise 34). Mourning, alternatively, is a much more positive process that progressively enables acceptance of loss and ultimately closure (Heise 34). However, for many contemporary thinkers mourning and melancholy cannot be so strictly separated, but exist alongside one another. Hence, the reflective nostalgic dwells on loss but in doing so generates new affective states, and as such engenders positive feelings of compassion, empathy, responsibility, and care for what is lost (Boym 66). It might be said that nostalgia exists on a continuum between its reflective and restorative forms, or that all manifestations of the emotion contain elements of both of these. Therefore, I argue that the limitations of nature nostalgia stem from the way it is dominated by a

strong tendency towards restoration, and that the inclusion of elements of reflection may enable the expansion of the ways ecological losses, like extinction, and the pasts associated with them, are remembered and responded to.

In the remainder of this paper I first outline the extinction of the Huia. I then discuss two examples of postcolonial artworks that enable critical consideration of the Huia and the extinction of New Zealand birds in general through a more reflective form of nostalgia. I argue that these works move beyond the simplicity and generality of much nature nostalgia by expanding the capacity to understand, remember, be affected by, and mourn these losses. While it may be argued that many artists and artworks featuring the Huia achieve this, I narrow my focus to selected works by two artists in particular because, as I will show, they have been referred to as nostalgic, and I seek to develop a deeper understanding of this. In the first example, I consider two paintings by the artist Bill Hammond which feature the Huia. In the second, I explore the use of the Huia's call in a work of sound art by artist Sally Ann McIntyre. In doing so, I do not intend to provide a general comparison of select artworks with the conservation practices I have already discussed, failing to recognise the obvious and numerous differences between these. Rather, I seek to compare the different modes of memory and forms of nostalgia at play in the imagining of the past across these. My argument is that in New Zealand the imagining of the country's ecological losses and the pasts associated with these have been dominated by a popular collective memory that nostalgises a pristine pre-colonial nature, which is most evident in the way it shapes conservation practices as attempts to restore such a time and place. As I have shown, such practices include de-extinction, as attempts to resurrect the Huia demonstrate. In turning to specific examples of art, I seek to show how more reflective forms of nostalgic recollection operate within these, which open new avenues for how bird extinctions in New Zealand might be imagined and felt.

The Death of the Huia: Colonization, Ecology, and Avian Life

Ecological imperialism accompanied European colonial expansion. Flora and fauna travelled with human animals from Europe, forming an ecosocial assemblage that was destructive to the biotas of colonised terrains (Crosby 18). Nowhere was this more pronounced than in New Zealand. New Zealand's endemic birdlife had evolved to become highly distinctive over thousands of years of archipelagic isolation, which had protected some species from predators, and allowing many of them to become flightless, as they took on the role of mammals in their absence (Park, *Ngā Uruora* 285). The initial anthropogenic bird extinctions that occurred in New Zealand were due to overhunting by Māori (Crosby 227). However, the rate of loss was significantly increased later by the arrival of Europeans. Park recounts how New Zealand's endemic bird populations first started to decline rapidly when the explorer Captain James Cook visited the country during his journey around the world in the eighteenth century, as his sailors shot them to eat or keep as specimens:

Cook's men blasted 30 birds out of their trees in one day, including 12 kereru, four South Island Kokako, two red-coloured parakeets, four saddlebacks and one falcon. Virtually all are today close to extinction or extremely rare. (*Ngā Uruora* 95)

Twenty species of bird endemic to New Zealand were then lost after British settlement occurred in the mid-nineteenth-century, with many more remaining on the cusp of extinction today.

These bird extinctions were brought about not by a single cause but several. These included not just the hunting of birds for food, materials, and as scientific specimens for collections that sealed their fate, but also the removal of their habitats through the draining of wetlands and deforestation, and their predation by introduced pests, imported first by Māori, who came with the Polynesian rat and dog, and then by Europeans, who arrived with an array of species including cats and mustelids, the latter becoming the biggest threat to New Zealand's birds (Park, *Theatre Country* 190). In the nineteenth century, European colonisers justified the loss of endemic birds through a lens that deemed them to be weaker and thus inferior to the supposedly hardier and more vigorous European species imported into the country (Park, *Theatre Country* 14). Often, the dying out of New Zealand's birds, like all non-European life –

including the supposed passing of the country's indigenous human population – was seen to be sad and unfortunate, but was nevertheless a natural and inevitable part of the required, unavoidable, and imminent social, cultural, economic, political, and ecological transformation of the country (Park, *Theatre Country* 215), which was made into a 'neo-Europe' for settlement and farming by British migrants (Crosby 148). Thus, during the nineteenth century there was an overlap between the romanticisation of nature as something to admire and appreciate, and the need to 'improve' the landscape through aggressive domination in order to make it more beautiful, healthy, liveable, and productive (Evans, *The Long Forgetting* 61).

The Huia, *Heteralocha acutirostris*, was one of the many New Zealand birds to become extinct after colonisation began, as it was seemingly subject to almost all of the factors driving anthropogenic avian loss that existed at the time. The Huia was a wattlebird endemic to lowland and montane environments in the North Island of New Zealand, and was noted for its distinctive bright orange wattles, black and metallic green tinged plumage, sexual dimorphism, and monogamous social behaviour, as well as its song (Wilson 75-76). The Huia first started to decline due to overhunting by Māori, who sought its feathers for various types of decoration (Monson 68-91). The number of Huia then began to decrease further and faster after Europeans arrived in New Zealand and began hunting them too, but also because increased deforestation caused by settlers meant that the bird started to lose its food source, which was the larvae found in the rotting wood of mature forests (Higgins et al. 1015). Moreover, the seizure of forested lands from Māori by the colonial administration disrupted the indigenous protections in place to ensure the stability of Huia numbers, which dictated that hunting could only occur from May to June when their plumage was in ideal condition, with a ban implemented during spring and summer (Monson 68-93). The other factor behind the extinction of the Huia was the international feather trade, as the bird's plume was loved by Victorians, resulting in settlers sending huge numbers of their quills to Britain for large profits (Hunter 194). While Māori implemented a total ban on Huia hunting followed by the New Zealand government eventually putting legal protections in place to save the species in 1892, these were often ignored and were too little too late regardless, with the last official sighting of the bird occurring in 1907, despite

many unconfirmed yet somewhat still credible reports appearing as late as 1963 (Higgins et al. 1014).

Within the story of the Huia's extinction, amateur ornithologist Walter Buller features prominently. Indeed, accounts of the Huia are commonly as much about the controversial figure of Buller as they are the bird. Buller was renowned for his research on New Zealand's endemic birds, particularly the Huia. Buller collected living and dead Huia specimens, along with other birds, to either keep in cages or have taxidermied (Galbreath 64). He was also involved in the trade of New Zealand bird feathers and acclimatization societies, which systematically introduced European flora and fauna into the country to replace its indigenous species (Galbreath 110). Furthermore, after promoting the legal protection of the Huia, Buller convinced the then Prime Minister of New Zealand, John Ballance, to allow him to acquire a pair of live Huia and transfer them to one of the newly established offshore island sanctuaries he had supported (Galbreath 192). However, Ballance died shortly after and Buller expediently sold the birds to Lord Rothschild, a wealthy and eccentric British collector of exotic creatures (Galbreath 192). As Buller once famously wrote while recounting one of his hunting trips:

...a pair of Huia, without uttering a sound, appeared in a tree overhead, and as they were caressing each other with their beautiful bills, a charge of No. 6 brought them both to the ground together. The incident was rather touching and I felt almost glad that the shot was not mine, although by no means loth to appropriate 2 fine specimens. (13)

Buller saw the extinction of the Huia, like all New Zealand birds, as inevitable. Yet at the very same time he was also involved in the protection, to at least some extent, of New Zealand's unique avian life, including the Huia. Therefore, the contradictory Buller largely typifies what might today be considered the ambivalence of the Victorian worldview with regard to nature and non-human animals.

The Huia has become the ultimate icon of New Zealand's pre-colonial past and the avian life that inhabited it, as well as the destruction of the country's environments and ecology, especially its endemic birds (Campbell 8). As such it has been strongly remembered through popular culture, art, and literature. Buller's 1873 book *A History of the Birds of New Zealand*

contains the earliest account of the Huia, while a later iconic text on the species is W.J. Phillipps' 1963 *Book of the Huia*. More recently the Huia has featured in Stefanie Lash's 2014 novel *Bird Murder*, while Anna Jackson's 2001 book *The Pastoral Kitchen* includes a poem on the bird. In art, Fiona Pardington has been widely recognized for her photographs of Huia specimens in museums.⁶ Many New Zealand paintings also feature the Huia, including works by Bill Hammond discussed here, and also by others such as Jo Ogier.⁷ There are also numerous sound recordings, songs, and musical notations based on the Huia's call, with one such score providing the basis for the recent piece of sound art by artist Sally Ann McIntyre which I will go on to discuss. The significance of the Huia is also exemplified by its appearance outside of fine art, as it features on much common commercial wall art and prints found widely across New Zealand in homes, cafes, and restaurants, for instance. In addition, in Te Papa Tongarewa/the Museum of New Zealand, the long-term exhibition *Blood, Earth, Fire* features a section on the Huia, detailing its significance to New Zealand culture and its extinction.⁸

The Huia is now also a candidate for de-extinction alongside other native New Zealand bird species like the Moa (Campbell 8). As art theorist Rosie Ibbotson shows, work on bringing the Huia back to life relies on hand-coloured, nineteenth century lithographs of the bird made by J.G. Keulemans for Buller's book (33). She demonstrates that the de-extinction of the Huia is thus premised on a particular visual imaginary of the bird, which frames it in isolation as a natural history specimen, as if it could somehow be separated from the ecocultural complexities of the context in which it existed and became extinct in (Ibbotson 41). This argument exemplifies the ways in which, as Boym suggests, contemporary representations of extinction are nostalgic, relying entirely on images to restore a complete picture of the past in which lost species existed (46). She writes that the dominant representation of species loss in film, for instance, 'both induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer; instead of disquieting ambivalence and paradoxical dialect of past, present and future, it provides a total restoration of extinct creatures as a conflict resolution' (Boym 46). Therefore, it is very much this kind of restorative nature nostalgia that drives the de-extinction of the Huia, and which operates more broadly as the dominant form of collective memory shaping how ecological loss and history is imagined in New Zealand.

The Irrevocable Past: Yearning and Mourning in the Paintings of Bill Hammond

Painter Bill Hammond is well-known for his works dealing with New Zealand's bird extinctions, which he started to produce after taking a trip along with other artists to Enderby Island, a sub-Antarctic archipelago in the waters south of New Zealand in 1989. Hammond was moved by the avian life he witnessed on the offshore predator-free sanctuary and New Zealand's history of ecological imperialism resulting in bird extinctions. His works on this matter have been described as a 'nostalgic evocation of birds as the original tangata whenua' (indigenous inhabitants of the land).⁹ I suggest Hammond's nostalgia has a reflective and critical edge to it. 'Hammondland', as his depicted world has been labelled, is not the product of simple or restorative nature nostalgia; it rejects the romantic imaginary of a pre-colonial, people-free forest for birds to enjoy (Smith 176). Rather, Hammond's work is a postcolonial acknowledgment that such a place and time can now only be a fiction. He therefore does not try to render the birds in a realist manner, as a window onto the past, but as strange interspecies hybrids, becomings-animal that signify the intertwinement of people and avian life in New Zealand's history (Smith 160). Hammond therefore avoids 'primitivist associations and pretensions of indigeneity' (Brown 186), instead presenting a kind of dreamscape that is not the past of linear time, but a thick present reflective of the sense of ongoing longing which characterizes the nostalgia he expresses.



Figure 1: W.D. Hammond, *Buller's Table Cloth*, 1994 acrylic on canvas, 1682 x 1675, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Patrons of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1997 (with permission from the artist)

Hammond's 1994 painting *Buller's Table Cloth* (fig. 1) depicts a house in which a long table has a row of bird carcasses laid out upon it, while others hang from the ceiling or are draped across a small side table. Moreover, a pair of taxidermied Huia are shown in a display box in the corner of the room. As Ballard claims, this rendering of Buller's house allows the viewer to imagine how, in their kitchen, his mother would skin and stuff the birds he hunted (75). Furthermore, Hammond's loose canvas could itself be a bird skin or a table cloth (Ballard 77). The drips of paint on it appear like blood. But this is more than just tragedy. It is a reminder that, as Turner notes, the Pākehā (European settlers and their descendants) sense of belonging or homeliness in New Zealand is underpinned by the social, cultural, and ecological devastation upon which the settler colony is premised, the repressed memory of which haunts it (*Settlement as Forgetting*, 35). Hammond's focus is on how culpability for the mass slaughtering of avian life looms over Pākehā within the postcolonial era in this way. It is as if Bhabha's double time of the nation, the

repressed national past, is invoked here to affect and generate questioning of guilt and responsibility for these atrocities – among those who did not cause them or even live when they took place, but who have inherited them through memory (212). The viewer may yearn to intervene but cannot, and with no pre-colonial avian paradise to restore as a national homeland, to repair the devastation, a confrontation with the ‘irrevocability of the past’ and the subsequent ‘impossibility of homecoming’ takes place (Boym 13-61). Therefore, here nostalgia brings the past into the present as a spectre that disrupts the sense of temporal continuity.



Figure 2: Bill Hammond, *Living Large 6*, Christchurch Art Gallery Trust Collection (with permission from the artist)

A year later in 1995, Hammond painted *Living Large 6* (fig. 2), in which bird-like creatures modelled on the Huia form a ghostly audience watching a mysterious, formally dressed horseman sitting on stage with a cello. He could be there to play a requiem for the departed birds, as paint drips down the canvas like tears. The grouping of numerous Huia-like figures avoids representing the species via a single individual or pair in the centre of the frame to reify their iconic status. Moreover, the birds are all facing in the same direction, accentuating their

individual presences and the intensity with which they each look at the horse-man in this melancholic scene. Narratives of extinction involve both mourning and melancholy, as they dwell on the pain of loss to draw attention to departed or endangered species and encourage collective sorrow for them, while also acting as ways of coming to terms with and accepting the magnitude of such passings (Heise 34). For Boym, reflective nostalgia involves both of these processes too, as it is at once ‘a form of deep mourning that performs a labour of grief’, while also being an act of ‘pondering pain’ through creativity and play (66). *Living Large 6*, like many of Hammond’s paintings, expresses sorrow for New Zealand’s lost birds by situating them in an explicitly melancholic scene full of signs of mourning. However, it avoids representing that which is gone via a perfect imitation of the past. Instead it employs the creativity of melancholy to exploratively and meditatively dwell on New Zealand’s history of extinction. Through this act of critically remembering, Hammond reveals the depth of feeling behind this complex and unresolved history within the present.

Fragments and Traces: Memorialization in the Sound Art of Sally Ann McIntyre

The Huia’s call has played, and still continues to play, an important role in the cultural life of the species. Historical accounts of the bird’s song often describe it as being similar to a flute or whistle (Fuller 371). Before the Huia became extinct, H.T. Carver created musical notation based on its call (Heise 43). And in 1949, in an attempt to preserve some memory of the species after it was already lost, Robert Batley recorded an imitation of the bird’s song made by Hēnare Hāmana, a then elderly man who had earlier been a part of unsuccessful expeditions to find remaining individuals using his call to attract them.¹⁰ The recording begins with Batley providing information on the Huia and its extinction before introducing Hāmana, followed by the latter making his simulated call. To writer Julianne Warren, it is ‘a soundtrack of the sacred voices of extinct birds echoing in that of a dead man echoing out of a machine echoing through the world of today’.¹¹ With no recording of the actual Huia call or anyone still alive who has heard it, Hāmana’s imitation cannot be compared to the real thing. Landscape architect Jacky Bowring poetically describes her experience of hearing the call played on the radio one morning:

7.00am. The birdcall on National Radio. But not today. Today it is an imitation of a birdcall, the call of the extinct Huia. Uncannily reincarnated, a whistling ghost, eerie, preternatural. It is the sound of absolute melancholy. A poignant, distant call. Neither wholly avian, nor human. An aural moment of the ache of loss. (111)

As well as inspiring writing and artwork based on it, the emulated Huia call has also been turned into a musical score by composer David Hindley (Taylor 74).

Sound artist Sally Ann McIntyre, like Hammond, draws on a more reflective kind of nostalgia in her work on the Huia. For her 2012 work *Huia Transcriptions*, she recorded Carver's musical notations based on the bird's call using a music box, before playing it on Kapiti Island, an offshore nature reserve which was once the species' habitat.¹² Alongside this live work, a further realisation of the project for an exhibition involved the musical notation and a lyrical interpretation of it being printed on archival index cards that could be played on a pianola.¹³ As Ballard suggests, 'there is something profoundly beautiful and nostalgic about McIntyre's reanimated voices' (81). But again, this is not nature nostalgia. McIntyre's work makes evident the way affect brings together feeling, sensation, and memory. Hence, the collective affect of nostalgia that sticks to the Huia circulates here through a combination of longing for the bird, listening to its recreated call, and reflecting on its passing. This nostalgia is perhaps connected to the fact that, as McIntyre's work acknowledges, just as Hammond's does, the past cannot be restored, as the mechanical sound of her recording is a reminder that there will only ever be traces of the Huia's call. For Boym, 'reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory' (61). Therefore, on an island amidst the soundscape of the extant endemic birds that once sang the dawn chorus alongside the Huia, the irrevocability of the latter is expressed by making audible a distant memory of its call preserved in text. And as this ghostly remnant emanates through the forest, it does not fill the gap in the sonic layer of the indigenous ecosystem which the loss of the Huia formed. Rather, harkening longingly to this artificial call powerfully draws attention to the permanence of its absence within the biosphere.

Historian Alison Landsberg labels recollection that is not of personal experience but of a time or place an individual did not live within as ‘prosthetic memory’, which is transmitted between people through media and narratives (2). Within postcolonial New Zealand, the Huia is recalled through prosthetic memory, for there is now no one still alive who existed when the bird was extant. This raises sociologist Robert Bednar’s question of how someone can mourn a passing that, in Freudian terms, is not their loss, because they have not personally lived with the object and experienced its departure, but have encountered it as only and always gone (62), or in this case, extinct. What results is again, just as in Hammond’s case, both mourning and melancholy (Bednar 62). In the absence of any personal recollection of the departed object, an affective sense of loss attaches to the prosthetic memory of what is gone. Ballard identifies nostalgia, along with shame – read as the emotional embodiment of postcolonial guilt – as aspects of the collective response to the loss of the Huia at play in McIntyre’s work, in which these normally disabling affects drive her to act (81). Therefore, in the absence of a formalized cultural process for collectively working with and through grief for lost species, McIntyre, by playing a recording resembling the Huia’s call where it once lived, creates an affective memorial site to the species and mourning ritual for its passing. Warren, whose own process for mourning extinction is writing, suggests that Batley’s original recording of the Huia’s call is ‘so rich in helping us to not just think about the Anthropocene, but feel it’.¹⁴ Indeed, McIntyre’s recording seeks to further develop this aspiration.

Art and the Non-Human: Attuning to Species Loss through Affect and Memory

Both Hammond’s and McIntyre’s works on the Huia reveal how, among the myriad ways of being moved by non-human animals, a more reflective form of nostalgia can teach that the lives of extinct species, although gone physically, are at stake in how they are remembered, in how individuals emotionally express and work with and through these losses. There is a need to avoid caring for non-human animals in general, through which they remain distanced as abstract others. Simple nature nostalgia is guilty of this. As a restorative mode of memory, it tends to recall and try to restore an imagined place and time of natural flourishing without human animals due to a sense of tragedy at its loss. Indeed, Hammond’s and McIntyre’s works on the

Huia are nostalgic too. Yet through their nuance and reflection, they subtly imply a postcolonial response to the simplicity of a dominant nature nostalgia in New Zealand, which underpins conservation practices like ecological restoration and de-extinction. They acknowledge that the return of a pre-colonial paradise of birds, as a kind of imaginary homeland, is impossible. Rather, by demonstrating an artistic practice of sensitively and longingly attuning to extinction through affective encounter with the recollected fragments that are the traces of past species, Hammond and McIntyre reveal how individuals might respond to these losses of the Anthropocene in thoughtful and caring ways.

Notes

¹This was how artist Peter Madden described the art exhibition *Snare/Mahinga*, which was part of the 2009 Christchurch Arts Festival, and which featured his and other's works responding to the extinction of non-human animals in New Zealand. Madden was quoted by journalist Sally Blundell in her article for *The New Zealand Listener* about the exhibition:

<https://www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2009/the-empty-birdhouse/>

²A pre-colonial baseline for ecological restoration of landscapes is suggested by, for instance, the Department of Conservation, the government organization responsible for New Zealand's state-owned protected areas, in their handbook, *Protecting and Restoring our Natural Heritage: A Practical Guide*: <http://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/conservation/native-plants/motukarara-nursery/restoration-guide-complete.pdf>

³The painting can be viewed here: <https://shop.aucklandartgallery.com/products/13155-trevor-lloyd-te-tangi-o-te-moa>

⁴For example, see this description of New Zealand's pre-colonial past on the website of the popular ecosanctuary, *Zealandia*: <https://www.visitzealandia.com/About>

⁵More on this government policy can be seen here: <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/pests-and-threats/predator-free-2050/>

⁶Pardington's works can be seen here: <https://ocula.com/artists/fiona-pardington/artworks/>

⁷Ogier's works can be seen here: <https://solandergallery.co.nz/artist/jo-ogier/>

⁸More on this exhibition can be seen here:

<https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/visit/exhibitions/blood-earth-fire>

⁹This quote comes from art historian Roger Blackley's interpretation of Hammond's work in the art exhibition *Snare/Mahinga*, which as part of the 2009 *Christchurch Arts Festival*, brought together artworks that focused on the extinction of non-human animals in New Zealand. The

quote appears in journalist Sally Blundell's article about the exhibition in *The New Zealand Listener*: <https://www.noted.co.nz/archive/listener-nz-2009/the-empty-birdhouse/>

¹⁰The recording can be listened to here:

<https://ngataonga.org.nz/blog/nz-history/the-call-of-the-huia/>

¹¹This line is from an unpublished text by Warren called *Hopes Echo*, which can be read online here: <https://merwinconservancy.org/2015/11/the-poetry-lab-hopes-echo-by-author-julianne-warren-center-for-humans-and-nature/>

¹²More can be read about this on the artist's website here:

<http://everyleafisanear.blogspot.co.nz/2012/04/huia-transcriptions.html>

¹³More can be read about this on the artist's website here:

<http://radiocegeste.blogspot.co.nz/2013/07/huia-transcriptions.html>

¹⁴Warren was quoted as saying this in an article titled *Echoes of the Past* published in *New Zealand Geographic* by Kate Evans, which was about the recording of the Huia's call. It can be read here: <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/huia/?state=requireSubscription>

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