

Cover Essay



Ke Mele Kiwikiu

*Et vivax phoenix, unica semper avis;
ma lalo o kou 'ēheu,
sing deine melodischen Lieder.*

So Ovid, Lili'uokalani, and Lingg
intoned: Phoenix, abiding undeterred
within the covert of your safeguarding,
enchant the forest with the songs we heard
online at *mauiforestbirds.org*
as others in the field once heard before
the ornithologist who, holding fast
and banding you, had gently quipped, “Cyborg,
you’re right; these damned transmitters underscore
this singularity is to the last.”

While dying Keats had lovingly addressed
the heady spectre of his nightingale,
whose cheerie-bye imposed a palimpsest
memento viveri where one might wail,
what promises dare we proclaim in rhyme
to you of nature and a future dream
when climate change, inexorable, chars,
in a flicker of biospheric time,
enduring trees and prey no longer teem
beneath those branches reaching for the stars?

The answer, ‘*aumakua*, is: We can’t
defuse our species’ lusty greed for more
and more—yet, somehow, that distant descant
of yours, mellifluent insectivore,
its tender echoes chirruping, resounds
the call to end our rapacious wonts of
‘*aihue*, ‘*ālunu*, *pākaha* and
return to *pono*, whereby life abounds,
wherein the fullest measure of our love
is found in how we nurse this fallen land.

Mark Olival-Bartley

ABOUT THE ART AND THE POEM

This striking photograph by Jeremy Snell depicts a specimen of kiwikiu (*Pseudonestor xanthophrys*) in the vertebrate zoology collection of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. Founded in 1889, the museum possesses the world’s largest collection of Polynesian cultural artifacts and natural history specimens from the Pacific, whose total is in excess of 24 million, of which the entomological collection alone represents more than 13.5 million specimens. In addition to its educational and cultural mandate, the museum is a research institution, and its library has one of the most extensive collections of books, periodicals, newspapers, and special collections on Hawai‘i and the Pacific. bishopmuseum.org/@bishopmuseum

Kiwikiu, also referred to as Maui parrotbills, are Hawaiian honeycreepers that evolved into insectivores; they use their powerful beaks to remove the bark from trees and eat what they find beneath, favoring moth pupae and beetle larvae. Endemic to the island of Maui, kiwikiu are critically endangered; there are fewer than 300 individuals, and population-viability analyses have predicted extinction in 25 years. Kiwikiu live within a total area of 30 km² amid wet and mesic forests on the windward slopes of Haleakalā, the massive shield volcano that comprises three-quarters of the island. Kiwikiu face manifold threats to their survival, including those that are decades-long (like the Javan mongoose, an alien predator) and newer ones brought on by climate change (such as an increase in disease vectors). The crew and volunteers of Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project, along with its non-profit and governmental partners, are working hard to save kiwikiu. mauiforestbirds.org/@mauiforestbird1

The title of the poem, “Ke Mele Kiwikiu,” is Hawaiian for “The Song of the Maui Parrotbill.” Written in Latin, Hawaiian, and German, the epigraph—“And there lived a phoenix, ever unique bird;” / “beneath your wings,” / “sing your melodic songs.”—is loosely rendered in the second, third, and fourth lines of the poem: The Latin is from the sixth poem of the second book of Ovid’s *Amores*, first published in 16 BCE, which details an avian funeral for a parrot; the Hawaiian is from Queen Lili‘uokalani’s “Ke

Aloha o ka Haku,” which she wrote on March 22, 1895 (while imprisoned in ‘Iolani Palace) and dedicated to her heir, Princess Ka‘iulani, who would never ascend the throne; the German is from “Nachtigall,” a poem about a nightingale by Hermann Lingg, a nineteenth-century Munich poet. The three stanzas of “Ke Mele Kiwikiu”—Petrarchan sonnets *sans* a second quatrain—take inspiration from John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” which was written in a like form of eight stanzas over the course of one day in the spring of 1819 as the twenty-four-year-old English poet was dying of tuberculosis. In Hawaiian mythology, an ‘aumakua is a personal guardian in the form of an animal deity; the ‘aumakua and the worshipper form a symbiotic relationship, protecting one another. *Pono* is the Hawaiian word for “goodness,” “equity,” and “prosperity.” The three Hawaiian nouns—‘*aihue*, ‘*alunu*, *pāka-ha*—translate to “theft,” “greed,” “plunder” and come from a poem in *Buke Mele Lahui*, or *Book of National Songs*, published two years after the Kingdom of Hawai‘i was overthrown in 1893, the same year that *Pseudonestor xanthophrys* was identified as a new species by Walter Rothschild in R. H. Porter’s *The Avifauna of Laysan and the Neighboring Islands: With a Complete History to Date of the Birds of the Hawaiian Possessions*, published in London in 1900, which can be accessed via Biodiversity Heritage Library. biodiversitylibrary.org/@biodivlibrary

The resident poet of *EcoHealth*, Mark Olival-Bartley was born and raised on O‘ahu, where he studied applied linguistics at Hawai‘i Pacific University. He is a doctoral student in American literary history at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, where he tutors composition and poetics. His verse and translations have appeared in journals on both sides of the Atlantic.

(*Mahalo nui loa* to Molly Hagemann, vertebrate zoology collections manager, and Dr. Allen Allison, assistant director of research and senior zoologist, of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum for their *kōkua* in facilitating my visits to the collection of kiwikiu and securing permission for this exquisite cover art. This poem is dedicated to Dr. Hanna Mounce, coordinator of Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project and executive director of Nā Koa Manu Conservation, who has done more than anyone to save kiwikiu).