

“A BIRDLIKE ACT”:

Sound Recording, Nature Imitation, and Performance Whistling

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ABSTRACT

The history of recorded natural sound is often posited as beginning with the capability for humans to record actual animals in their environment, but in fact this was a departure from the widespread and quite popular practices that preceded such technological developments. Because sound recording technologies were confined to studio spaces and were generally immobile, popular performers adopted a variety of imitative techniques to transport listeners into scenes and settings that the technology itself could not access. The most popular of these imitative techniques was performance whistling. This essay traces historical developments in the cultural attitudes surrounding whistling through its musical and nonmusical associations with a variety of “others,” including animals, African Americans, homosexuals, and the working poor. It also traces how white professional performers drew on American environmental attitudes and the rhetoric of “nature” and “the natural” as a way to distance themselves from these stereotypes and establish themselves as legitimate artists and educators. These whistling practices present a new way to hear the history of recording technologies, identity politics, and the American environmental movement.

OFTEN CELEBRATED AS THE MOST DEMOCRATIC MUSICAL FORM, WHISTLING TODAY IS generally perceived as an innocuous, if slightly annoying, background task: you whistle while you work. But at the height of its popularity between approximately 1890 and 1940, whistling did a significant amount of cultural work, as the act itself and the people who performed it were at the center of dramatic changes in how nature sounds were recorded, presented, and consumed in the United States.¹ Because sound recording technologies were confined to studio spaces and generally immobile through the late 1920s, popular performers adopted a variety of imitative techniques to transport listeners into scenes and settings that the technology itself could not access—places such as farms, forests, fields, zoos, and the Sewanee River.² Among these imitative practices, whistling proved to be both remarkably popular and enduring.

At the turn of the century, the act of whistling was a complex mimetic practice that existed not only at the intersection of music and sound effects but also at the intersection of human and “other.” As a pseudoscience, whistling was used by bird imitators to represent encounters with the natural world, but as a mode of individual expression, whistling was more often associated with African Americans, the unintelligent, homosexuals, and the working poor. In order to overcome these stereotypes, professional performance whistlers—who were primarily white—focused specifically on bird imitation techniques and mobilized the rhetoric of “nature” and “the natural” in order to legitimize their art. Female whistlers connected their performances to

purity and wholesomeness, while male whistlers positioned themselves as naturalists and rugged outdoorsmen. In both cases, whistling became both a process and an outcome of formal nature study, allowing performers to present their whistling imitations not only as entertaining novelties but also as legitimate scientific and pedagogical tools.³

The embodied performances of bird imitation whistling critically disrupt some of the dominant narratives in the history of sound technologies—specifically, the history of recording environmental sounds. Both popular and scholarly writing on environmental recording almost always points to its origins in the work of Albert R. Brand and his colleagues at the Cornell Ornithology Lab starting in the late 1920s.⁴ Using sound motion picture technologies, the ornithologists at the lab were able to capture bird vocalizations in the field with a modified truck as their mobile recording studio.⁵ When they began releasing these recordings to the public in the early 1930s, the albums were heralded as “the first scientific collection of bird songs ever gathered,” an assertion that has proved remarkably resilient even as Brand himself acknowledged their relationship to earlier forms.⁶ In a 1932 article, Brand proclaimed, “All previous methods [of interpreting birdsong], while useful in their way, were, at best, merely makeshifts, awaiting the time when science should have advanced sufficiently so that faithful reproductions of actual singing birds could be made.”⁷ In promoting his own work, Brand simultaneously acknowledged and then rhetorically erased the previous thirty years of nature imitation.

The imitations of the 1890s to the 1930s were responsible for a range of vibrant, complex, and popular sonic interpretations of the natural world that established representational practices for nature sounds in a variety of media. These techniques included the musical simulation of animal and environmental noises, as well as human acts of whistling, grunting, singing, howling, and playing percussive objects to create mimetic sound effects. It might seem obvious to us now that recorded natural sounds would contain the “faithful reproductions” of “actual singing birds,” but in fact this was a departure from the widespread practices that preceded such technological developments. The need for Brand to distinguish his recordings from the “previous methods” speaks to how prevalent these recordings were.

Because whistling was quickly and almost wholly eclipsed by on-location recordings, it is tempting to hear it as a

“failed” representation, a minor subcategory of the subjective practices that were eventually (and inevitably) replaced by recordings of “real” animals and their environments. Yet, as Rick Altman has argued, these are precisely the kinds of media that can challenge the perceived stability of media forms and formats as we understand them today.⁸ In this case, the history of whistling exposes the historical malleability of categories such as “music,” “sound effects,” and “field recordings.” But even more importantly, the fact that the earliest nature recordings came from human mouths points to the fact that environmental recording practices are always imitations, and their meaning is only made within historically specific representational systems. This essay treats whistling as one such system—a system that includes race, class, gender, technology, and environmental politics.

HEARING HOODLUMS

Whistling exists at the center of what scholars have identified as two dominant characteristics of auditory culture and sound reproduction technologies in the United States: inscription and imitation. As a technology of inscription, the phonograph “challenged the visual habits of musical practice” by displacing the printed score and the physical presence of the performer.⁹ According to Lisa Gitelman, these textual displacements were connected to the “the displaced visibility of racial identity” in America, where voice alone could now serve as a marker for “blackness,” regardless of the race of the performer.¹⁰ Susan A. Glenn, in her analysis of female comedic imitation, identifies the early 1900s as “the mimetic moment” in American culture, when “wider discussions [were] taking place among social scientists, psychiatrists, and cultural critics about the psychological, social, and aesthetic meanings of imitation.”¹¹ Crucial to these discussions was the relationship between imitation, gender, and phonographic reproduction. Imitation was often associated with “hysterical” women, as well as “the undeveloped child, the parrot, the idiot,” and other so-called primitives.¹²

Whistlers were able to successfully navigate these issues of identity and taste based largely on two factors. The first is the peculiar physical qualities of whistling itself. Though whistling is an embodied act, it is difficult to sonically “locate,” both individually and stereotypically. Unlike playing an instrument, live whistling happens in the lips, teeth, and throat with very little visible movement. And unlike the

voice, whistling is hard to pin to a specific race or gender, allowing for an incredible amount of fluidity between the actual identity of the performer, the performer's imagined identity to the audience, and the narrative identity suggested by the song or recording. These issues were complicated further in recordings of whistlers. Though the phonograph already inherently disrupted the traditional visual markers of musical performance such as race, whistling allowed performers to transgress species boundaries as well.¹³ This was especially true in the context of "coon songs," a popular musical style that emerged from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy. In these performances, white male whistlers would imitate birds and other animals as well as African Americans and often did both in the context of a single song.

The popularity of bird imitation whistling was also closely linked to the social and environmental politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this time there was widespread public support for a variety of environmental causes due largely to the efforts of women's organizations that emphasized suburban and backyard nature as opposed to the disappearing frontier of the sportsman.¹⁴ These clubs were directly or indirectly responsible for developments such as the foundation of the Audubon Societies, the prohibition of buying and selling illegally obtained animals through the Lacey Act of 1900, the general termination of animal vivisection practices, and the addition of nature education programs to school curricula.¹⁵ These well-documented successes were supplemented by a historically forgotten soundtrack provided largely by performance whistlers. Many women's societies championed the use of imitation whistling either through direct participation or by promoting its development. For female whistlers, the art of bird imitation was a critical component of cultural and political life.

In the late 1800s, whistling as a form of expression was heard as the music of the lower classes and labeled a threat to musical taste as well as personal safety. In 1890, the editors of the *Musical Times* noted that while whistling "has come greatly into vogue," those who perform it should be understood alongside the "misguided musicians" of the Jew's harp, banjo, and coffee can, who were "ignorant to the rudiments of the art."¹⁶ A decade later, public opinion had turned even more hostile, as some residents of St. Louis argued before the local Board of Health that whistling should be banned from streetcars. Their rationale was based on the observation that

the "eruption of a kind of music popularized by vaudeville and classed under the generic name of coon songs" was "so distinctly exasperating when rendered a cappella by the whistling hoodlum as to excite homicidal impulses in the breasts of normally peaceful and patient citizens."¹⁷ The use of the word "hoodlum" itself already suggested the fraught racial and class violence associated with whistlers.¹⁸

The connection between whistling, race, class, and violence was not a difficult imaginative leap in 1900. Just over a year earlier, the popular recording artist George W. Johnson, an African American known as "The Whistling Coon," was at the center of a highly sensational and nationally publicized trial over the death of his common-law wife. Though whistling had nothing to do with the charges, and Johnson was eventually acquitted, he was referred to as "The Whistling Coon" in all of the coverage surrounding the case. The headline from the *New York Times* proclaimed, "Woman Dead; Man Arrested: George W. Johnson, the 'Whistling Coon' in Trouble."

Coon songs, which developed out of blackface minstrelsy traditions, were one of the most popular musical forms in the United States between 1880 and 1910. According to Gitelman, by commodifying a specific image of "blackness," minstrelsy "reinforced racial boundaries by denigrating black Americans, yet it also transgressed those boundaries for pleasure and profit."¹⁹ When the coon song moved from the stage to the recording studio in the 1890s, these racial boundaries became even easier to transgress. Performance minstrelsy was primarily visual, as both white and black performers covered their faces in burnt cork. But precisely as live minstrel shows were falling out of fashion, recorded coon songs took their place, allowing black and white performances of "blackness" to exist without the physical and visual presence of bodies.²⁰

Though almost totally overlooked in scholarship on coon songs, virtuosic whistling was a nearly universal attribute of the coon stereotype, both in popular culture and in actual racial stereotyping as it was practiced in everyday life.²¹ It is not a coincidence that when blackface performer Al Jolson uttered arguably the most famous line in cinema history—"You ain't seen nothin' yet"—it came only moments before "And in the third chorus I whistle."²² An example of this commonplace whistling stereotyping can be seen in a 1903 article in the *Metronome*, where the author observed, "A stranger visiting [Charleston, South Carolina] would be surprised to

hear the whistling done by our negroes. They can go to the theater one night and hear a new piece of music, then the very next morning they have gotten it down to perfection and can whistle it off as if they had known it for a month or two. . . . [T]hese people are always, apparently, in the best of humor.”²³ Here, whistling is seen practically as an inherent trait, though the writer’s admiration is couched in the coon stereotype: carefree, “simple,” and always “in the best of humor.”

The stereotype of the happy whistler can be clearly heard in the most popular song of the 1890s, George W. Johnson’s “The Whistling Coon.” Johnson’s story itself is remarkable. In 1890 he was discovered by Victor H. Emerson of the New Jersey Phonograph Company while whistling on the street by the Hudson River ferry; five years later he would be the best-selling recording artist in the United States.²⁴ Johnson originally received twenty cents for each recording he made of “The Whistling Coon,” but as the song became a hit he went on to record versions for every record company that would have him. According to some figures, he was routinely making between ten and one hundred dollars per week and may have done as many as eighty full-day recording sessions a year for three and a half years.²⁵ While Johnson is rightly celebrated as a pioneering black musician, historian Tim Brooks notes the inherent irony in the fact that his success was based on performing songs that mocked African Americans. As Brooks coldly observes, the novelty of a black man mimicking himself “would always bring a shower of nickels from the white folks.”²⁶

“The Whistling Coon” is a representative example of the deep ironies and inherent contradictions at the heart of how whistling coon songs were composed and understood. Listening to an extant recording of “The Whistling Coon” done for Edison Records and widely available online, one can hear a distant, thin-sounding piano providing the sole accompaniment to Johnson’s narrative, which is told in the first person.²⁷ He begins, “Oh, I’ve seen in my time some funny folks, / but the funniest of all I know / is a colored individual as sure as you’re alive / as black as any black crow.” This individual is the titular “whistling coon,” who is later described as being mute, either by choice or by birth, in the lead-up to the chorus: “Oh, I never heard him talk to anybody in his life, / but he’s happy when he whistles his tune.” The subsequent chorus is instrumental, with a melodic whistling solo performed by Johnson. In the logic of the song’s verses,

Johnson is simply a friend or even casual observer of the whistling coon, able to identify and describe him through his exaggerated physical traits and aloof behavior. But in the chorus, as Johnson takes up the man’s presumed whistling song in imitation, he becomes a whistling coon himself, a nickname he would be saddled with for the rest of his life.

Nearly every whistling coon song was structured in this way, using a first-person narrator to relate a story of a man (or, in rare cases, a woman) who, despite all of his or her other faults, managed to whistle beautifully, memorably, and often uncontrollably. In the logic of these songs, whistling talent and general musical ability are at least as important as the racist visual markers assigned to the characters. For example, in Dan W. Quinn’s recording of “Whistling Rufus,” Rufus is described as a one-man band, a “great musician of high position” despite having a “head like a big crazy hammer and a mouth like a terrible scar.”²⁸ Rufus traveled to perform at parties, and “when he was through with the wine and chicken / he played and he whistled so grand.” Throughout the song, the instrumentation accompanying Quinn’s singing remains primarily in the background and never explicitly denotes a direct imitation of Rufus’s grand playing. But Quinn’s brief whistling solo at the end of the song does just that—it marks a moment where Quinn and Rufus sonically align. The same kind of subject/narrator conflation can be heard in S. H. Dudley’s 1906 recording of “The Merry Whistling Ducky,” where almost no physical description is given for the subject except for the fact that his “peculiar” whistle can be heard at all hours of the day and night.²⁹ Unable to control his whistle while in church, he gets thrown out, only to start whistling again immediately upon exit: “But he began once more as they threw him out the door, / and he whistled up the same familiar tune.” Dudley as narrator demonstrates his familiarity with the tune by imitating/performing it in the song’s conclusion.

The same formula was used when the subject of the narration was a woman, as on Joe Belmont’s recording of “Dat Whistling Yaller Dinah.”³⁰ In the song, Belmont’s narrator pines for his lost love, Dinah. “Oh, she whistles like a devil / as she goes from bass to treble, / and this is what she whistles every night . . .” Belmont then goes into his whistling style of bird chirps, imitating Dinah, during the musical break. In the second verse, Dinah’s whistle becomes slightly less sinister as “she whistles like the mockingbird and thrush.” As in the previous examples, the performer/narrator of this

song is never explicitly identified as “a whistler” or even “a coon,” let alone a woman, but in his close knowledge of his subject and the technical mastery of her musical whistling, he is both aligned with and elevated from the female individual he depicts.

In the same way that whistling could allow whistlers to conceal or change their racial and gender identities, it could also displace their humanness. Whistling coon songs often employed whistling in programmatic and descriptive ways to represent birds. In these depictions, the intellectually inferior coon stereotypes (often “boys”) are aligned with “nature” through whistling. This can be heard in Billy Murray and Joe Belmont’s whistling duet, “An Afternoon in June,” from 1914.³¹ Murray and Belmont were both whistlers, and the song’s story plays to their individual strengths. Murray, as the lead vocalist and narrator, opens with a first-person reminiscence of a day when he encountered a “curly-headed coon” who “whistled to a bird and then he listened / for the whippoorwill’s reply.” Since the song is told in past tense, neither the original boy nor the original bird is present, as is made clear in the lead-in to the instrumental break: “And the music that I heard from the little boy and bird / I would like to hear again.” Here Murray takes the main whistling solo, imitating the boy. At the same time, Belmont adds avian flourishes in the background, completing a strange identity shift where the two white performers are now playing the roles of a little black boy and a whippoorwill. Of course, within the two-minute recording time of a cylinder, the men soon find themselves back in their more traditional roles as narrator and accompanist.

The connection between whistling and animality during this period was not limited to coon songs. As important as it is to understand coon songs within the racial assumptions of the period, they were, in fact, only one component of larger cultural anxieties surrounding whistling. These fears were not just explicitly race based but also class and gender based. In addition to the coon stereotype, there was a white male whistling stereotype marked by unemployment—either by choice or by sheer laziness. Unlike their counterparts in coon songs, these men were often closely, yet positively, associated with animals and the nonhuman world through their “wild” independence and distaste for the trappings of modern urban life. These characters were lovable troublemakers who nevertheless sometimes got into actual trouble. An example of this stereotype is “The Whistling Bowery Boy,”

as portrayed in song by S. H. Dudley in 1904.³² In the first verse, the boy “filled the world with joy” by “always whistling to pass the time away / from the early morning to the close of day.” In the second verse, however, the boy’s fortunes take a dramatic turn as he scares a policeman by whistling in his ear and is sent off to jail. Even there, however, “he whistles like a gale.”

The general sentiment that whistlers were unproductive members of society was still being expressed into the 1930s. Professor Charles Gray Shaw told the *New York Times* in 1931, “Whistling is the unmistakable sign of the moron. . . . It’s only the inferior and maladjusted individual who ever seeks emotional relief in such a birdlike act as that of whistling.”³³ Shaw’s article elicited a widespread and immediate response. *Time Magazine* noted that “the worldwide stir that these remarks caused was a three-day wonder.”³⁴ A list of people who famously whistled was assembled, including Thomas Edison. Idaho senator William Borah even weighed in, though he did so in a way that still suggested a kind of embarrassment: “Any man who says all whistlers are morons must be a moron himself. When I feel like whistling, I whistle. But I rarely feel like whistling.”³⁵

These dominant cultural attitudes, which portrayed whistling as alternately boring or dangerous, forced professional whistlers to redefine and reimagine whistling in order to maintain successful careers in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. In order to erase whistling’s ugly and contradictory human past, whistlers advanced the idea that whistling and birdsong were “nature’s original music,” and they employed the phrase “artistic whistling” in their promotional materials in order to distinguish themselves from untrained musicians such as street performers and everyday amateurs. Women became especially adept at these tactics, having to overcome not only the racialized and class-based assumptions about whistling but also the commonplace wisdom that it was “unladylike.” In order to do so, they recovered the “primitive” aspects of whistling, emphasizing rather than downplaying its connection to the natural world.

“A WHISTLING GIRL AND A CROWING HEN”

The exact origins of the gendered assumptions about whistling are difficult to locate, but in the public discourse surrounding whistling during this period it is clear that whistling, if an art at all, was considered a masculine one.

“Whistling is a fine, free, manly description of music,” wrote a commentator in the *Metronome*, “having no doubt begun with Adam.”³⁶ As female performance whistlers began to appear onstage and on record, they had to prove themselves the exception to these widely shared rules. In a 1913 interview with the *New York Times*, whistler Katherine Minahan recounted a story where she was caught whistling in Catholic grade school. While the mother superior immediately recognized her talent, she warned Minahan to “be careful where and when you do it, for you know whistling isn’t nice.”³⁷ In an 1899 review of a performance by Alice Shaw, the first popular female whistler, the *Washington Post* noted, “Mrs. Alice Shaw, ‘La Belle Siffleuse,’ as she is known . . . was the first of her sex to disprove the old adage about ‘a whistling girl and a crowing hen are sure to come to some bad end.’”³⁸ That phrase actually had several variations in the second line, including “are neither fit for God nor men.” In terms of the former, at least one pastor seemed to think that whistling was fit for God, as “a young woman in a pure white dress nineteen years old” whistled solos during a service in a New York church in 1902. The “stunt” was reportedly a part of a larger movement initiated by the pastor to use vaudeville-style attractions to encourage people to worship.³⁹

The question of whether or not whistling women were “fit for men” was a more complicated one and was not just about their perceived attractiveness to the opposite sex but about their sexual orientation. In early research on homosexuality, which in scientific discourse was called “sexual inversion,” the inability of men to whistle, as well as the ability of women to whistle, was often noted alongside their predilections for other “traditional” gender roles and interests. According to psychologist Havelock Ellis in his pioneering work *Sexual Inversion*, the first connection between whistling and homosexuality was drawn by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who wrote in 1864 that many homosexual men he knew could not whistle, including himself.⁴⁰ In the 1897 first edition of Ellis’s book, he observes three specific cases in which men could not whistle. In Case IX, he notes, “As a boy and a man he has had no taste for field sports, but is fond of music, books, art, and the sea. Smokes freely; cannot whistle.”⁴¹ In Case XVIII, the inability to whistle is again noted alongside the man’s distaste for athletics: “He avoided games and the noisy occupations of boys, but was only non-masculine in his indifference to sport, was never feminine in dress or habit. He never succeeded in his attempts to whistle.”⁴² In Case XIX, whistling is grouped

not with behavioral preferences but in a short paragraph on biological development: “The sexual organs have never been fully developed, and the testicles, though large, are of flabby consistence. He cannot whistle. He thinks he ought to have been a woman.”⁴³ In the expanded 1901 edition of *Sexual Inversion*, Ellis elaborated more broadly on whistling. He wrote, “Although this inability of male inverts is only found among a minority, I am quite satisfied that it is well marked among a considerable minority.” He also noted that “some of the women inverts can whistle admirably.”⁴⁴ By the third edition, published in 1921, he noted that his colleague Hirschfeld “even knows two [female inverts] who are public performers in whistling.”⁴⁵

Even with these connotations—or in some cases, related to them—a significant number of women actively participated in the public performance of whistling in the early 1900s, and those numbers would dramatically increase over the next three decades. This growth can largely be attributed to Agnes Woodward, who established herself as the premier advocate for female whistling activity—if not all whistling activity—in the United States. In the late 1890s, she put together an all-women’s group called the Agnes Woodward Whistling Chorus, which she took on tour in a yellow school bus.⁴⁶ In 1902, Woodward moved to California, where she started a smaller ensemble, the Whistling Trio, a mix of men and women including Hazel Bryson and A. Rae Condit. In addition to the trio, Woodward also performed solo work at a variety of social functions, banquets, and gatherings and gave private lessons. Due to the popularity of her lessons, a group of students and additional instructors began to form around her, and they gave their first public recital in 1908. A brief review in the *Los Angeles Times* noted, “Unique and attractive was the evening of whistling and bird imitations by pupils of Miss Agnes Woodward. . . . [E]very seat was occupied and late arrivals had to stand.”⁴⁷

Woodward formalized her instruction and continued to develop her teaching method with the founding of the California School of Artistic Whistling in 1909, the only independent music school devoted solely to whistling. As whistling grew in popularity, though, it was also taught in at least some larger music programs. Leslie C. Goff taught whistling at the Chicago Musical Seminary, for example. Reflecting on the experience a decade after founding it, Woodward said that “the undertaking was discouraged by everyone,” and it would take until 1924 for the school to

be included in the Los Angeles Music Federation.⁴⁸ While at least one man was affiliated with the school, a concert performer named Homer Mendenhall, Woodward's students appear to have been almost entirely women.⁴⁹ At the school, Woodward utilized what she described as the "bird chirp" technique, which included chirps, trills, spiral as well as dipped yodels, and songs associated with specific birds such as the bobwhite and the eastern quail.⁵⁰

Woodward and her pupils drew on images and associations with actual birds as a way to continuously reassert their femininity in light of the prevailing attitudes about whistling—something the unmarried Woodward seemed to be acutely aware of. Where the whistling stereotypes of the coon and the unemployed white male drew on connections with animals in order to suggest primitivity or a lack of industriousness, the female whistlers of Woodward's school invoked the images of birds and "primitive nature" in order to suggest natural purity and beauty. In the foreword of her 1923 textbook, *Whistling as an Art*, Woodward notes, "At one time whistling was considered unattractive and even unbecoming in a young woman. . . . Of late years, however, the potentialities of the human whistle have become most apparent."⁵¹ In explicating these potentialities, Woodward invokes a mix of artistic merit and pseudoscientific knowledge, a recipe that would become a template for how female whistlers promoted themselves. She begins her list of the virtues of whistling by noting that it is "an Art" ("It is not a fad") and also "a benefit to health," "an accomplishment," "an entertainment," "a vocation," and "an educational factor." On this final point, she notes that whistling "develops the power of observation and imitation, and leads to the study of bird life and habits."⁵²

In practice, whistlers from Woodward's school supplemented their sonic performances with costuming and stage props to appear more natural and birdlike. In a photo taken in 1928 of Woodward's whistling chorus in performance, Woodward stands with her back to the camera in an auditorium, conducting beside an accompanist on a grand piano. The performers, all female, wear dresses and stand in three tiered rows. At the front of the stage and in the foreground of the shot is an abundance of plant life: ferns, moss, and potted plants spill out from under the piano and out of the frame, with twigs and branches placed around the stage's perimeter. Occasionally Woodward would employ actual

costumes, such as in her "baby quartet" of whistlers, young girls who would perform dressed as little birds.

Women whistlers also aligned themselves closely with birds and pristine nature in their marketing materials. Frances Sellers's promotional booklet involved a detailed description of her birth and upbringing in rural Indiana: "Picture a log cabin. . . . [A]cross the mud road stands a virgin forest. A little girl was born in this primitive dwelling. She would wander in the woodland and sit for hours watching the birds. Soon she learned to imitate the calls of her feathered flock."⁵³ Woodward herself, in interviews, often said that she spent significant periods of time in the field researching bird-songs.⁵⁴ However, female whistlers were rarely aligned with intensive outdoor fieldwork (which would have been considered masculine) and instead rhetorically transformed into birds themselves. Florence Alexander Stuenenberg billed herself on the Chautauqua circuit as "Omaha's Bird-Lady," while Agnes Woodward's star pupil, the young Margaret McKee, was often billed as "The California Songbird." When McKee and Woodward left California for the Chautauqua circuit in 1914 (with McKee still three years away from graduating high school), the *Los Angeles Times* opened by noting, "Southern California has numerous mockingbirds—some in feathers and some in velvet gown."⁵⁵ McKee's promotional brochure included a quote from famed soprano Ellen Beach Yaw, who proclaimed, "Margaret McKee is a veritable BIRD!"⁵⁶

McKee's programs blended the artistic and imitative sides of whistling that Woodward championed, as is evident in programs she performed between 1914 and 1916. A show that she headlined in Pasadena featured her sister, Leah, doing readings and impressions, Lillian Melick playing the harp, and Catherine Lennox accompanying Margaret's whistling on piano. Part 1 of the program begins with a harp solo, followed by Leah's interpretations of two short stories. Then McKee performs "Woodland Songsters," a song composed by Carl Michael Ziehrer that was a staple of the era's whistling repertoire and was recorded the previous year by Joe Belmont for Victor records with a full orchestral backing.⁵⁷ In this version, McKee performs solo, blending the calls of the birds with the melody, which, according to the program, "slips like the silken thread of a string of jeweled beads."⁵⁸ The second half of the program is McKee's showcase, as she opens and closes the act. First she performs a piece by Mendelssohn and selections from Donizetti's *Lucia del Lammermoor*, and the evening closes with her rendition of

“The Mocking Bird,” another common whistling number written by Septimus Winner. The song is largely a melodic one based on the titular bird, though most interpretations, including McKee’s, were filled with artistic and imitative flourishes. (Among many others, George W. Johnson recorded a version in 1896.) McKee recorded the song for Victor in 1920, one of over thirty-five recordings she did between 1920 and 1928.⁵⁹

Beyond performing live and recording, whistlers from Woodward’s school also found work in radio and the developing motion picture industry by providing bird sound effects. Several of Woodward’s students appear to have done work for Disney as well as MGM films, though they went largely uncredited. Among these was Marie D. Jeannerette, who continued to teach classes in Pasadena after Woodward passed away in 1939. But perhaps the most widely heard of Woodward’s pupils was Marion Darlington. She provided bird sounds, though was also uncredited, in *Cinderella*, *Bambi*, *Pinocchio*, and *Snow White*, where she performed the whistling in “Whistle while You Work.”⁶⁰

The success of Woodward’s school, and female whistlers in general, was not based solely on self-promotion and sheer talent; it was also deeply connected to a broader network of women during this time who were committed to social causes and animal rights. Within the Los Angeles area, Woodward was a member of several “women’s clubs,” including the Soroptimist Club, a group specifically dedicated to women’s causes. Iterations of her “Whistling Chorus” often performed at that group’s meetings, and she was awarded the organization’s song prize in 1924. She was also active at the YWCA, where, again, she or her affiliated whistlers would provide entertainment at meetings or events. This kind of work, as well as that of her students, was often noted in the *Los Angeles Times*’s Of Interest to Women section.⁶¹ Besides this general kind of engagement, Woodward was an outspoken supporter of animal rights. She was involved in the Anti-vivisection Society as well as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In a scathing letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1922, she chastised a previous letter-writer on the subject of animal vivisection who dismissed the movement as “a lot of sentimentally foolish women.”⁶²

Woodward’s involvement in these clubs was consistent with the broader national movement of women organizing around social causes. As Jennifer Price has pointed out,

the women’s clubs of the 1890s were extremely active in environmental issues, and most early founders of local and regional chapters of Audubon Societies were women.⁶³ These organizations fostered an appreciation for birds that allowed the art of whistling to flourish and develop into the educational and scientific practice that it became in the first part of the twentieth century. While whistlers like those from Woodward’s school tended to lean toward the more artistic and performative side of whistling in order to negotiate negative gender stereotypes, male whistlers moved past the stigmas of early whistling by using the rhetoric of science and ornithology.

“NAMING THE BIRDS WITHOUT THE GUN”

Charles Kellogg’s career is representative of a turning point in the way that male whistlers presented themselves to the public following the decline of coon songs in 1910. Where women tended to focus on the artistic aspects of whistling, male whistlers began to link their practices more explicitly to “nature study” and eventually ornithology. And where women trafficked in the pristine beauty of birds and “virgin” nature, male whistlers positioned themselves as rugged individualists whose whistling education did not take place in the school or in the concert hall but from their own research in the woods and fields. In one anecdote from his memoir, Kellogg recalls a child approaching the edge of the stage, which Kellogg had decorated as a forest scene using painted backdrops and other props. The child asks, “Do you live up there?” Kellogg answers, “Yes, my darling, most of the time, for if I am not here in this charming wood scene, I am in the real woods in some part of the world.”⁶⁴

Kellogg’s vaudeville show was a combination of anecdotes and performative feats that centered on his love of the outdoors and his unusual voice. Kellogg’s voice and birdsong performances were unique because he claimed that he didn’t have a larynx but rather a syrinx, the vocal organ of birds that allows them to produce two notes at once. Because of this, he insisted that his performances were not whistling but “song” and that his “imitations” would be best described as “reproductions.”⁶⁵ Indeed, this was the rhetoric used by the *New York Times* in 1912 when it noted that Kellogg was already well known “for his ability to reproduce musically all sounds of Mother Earth.”⁶⁶ He even claimed that he could put out a fire with his voice.⁶⁷

Despite his penchant for theatricality and potentially unusual biological makeup, Kellogg insisted that he was not an entertainer or a scientist but a naturalist. He often cited his friendship with the naturalists John Burroughs and John Muir as deeply influential in his work, and he spent time with the former in Haiti and with the latter in Yosemite.⁶⁸ His promotional materials claimed, “Kellogg approaches his subject from a natural standpoint, not a scientific one. He ‘names the birds without the gun.’ He does not believe in killing any of God’s creatures, nor in living upon their flesh.”⁶⁹

Kellogg’s placement of himself in such an elaborate stage setting and his larger personal goal of “taking the forest out into the world” spoke directly to the fears that social reformers and environmental activists had over Americans losing touch with nature. In the 1923 book *Music Appreciation for Little Children*, the section on “nature study” notes with heavy pathos that a recording of birds played to children in a school on the East Side of New York City was met with no response: “Bird voices to them were only so many meaningless sounds.”⁷⁰ Based on these fears, scenes of “forest” and “farm” became central to the male naturalist/whistler/educator.

Exemplary in this regard was Donald Bain’s Chautauqua show “A Trip to the Farm.” The performance was a multipart program designed not only to showcase his talents but also to specifically transport audiences from their urban environments to the countryside. Through a combination of whistling, singing, and sound effects, “he puts his audience on a train, whisks them out into the country, takes them through the woods, turns off onto a lane through an open field past a pond, then up to the Farm House. . . . [T]hen, finally, they are led into the Farm House and entertained by the unique ‘double whistling’ and imitations of musical instruments.”⁷¹ Here, whistling is not just for the ear but also for the eye, and Bain imagines his work as having educational value. In a letter dated December 31, 1926, he tells a potential client that his program of “whistling, imitating, and mimicking” is not only an “interesting novelty” but also “instructive.”⁷² Visually, Bain also projected a whistling farmhand image, pictured in his promotional materials with puckered lips in a wide-brimmed hat and overalls.

Where Bain and Kellogg both employed interpretive, naturalist presentations of nature, Charles Crawford Gorst turned whistling into a science—literally. He joined the American Ornithologists Union at its 1917 meeting and

remained active in the organization throughout his life, winning the Burroughs Medal “for his unusual art of interpreting bird songs” in 1936.⁷³ He was also a member and frequent lecturer at the American Museum of Natural History. Unlike many whistlers, Gorst performed and recorded relatively few “novelty songs” and instead stayed close to the three talents listed on his stationery: “Illustrated Lectures, Bird Music, Bird Life.” Gorst’s extant recorded output is relatively small and may comprise only two years, 1915 and 1916, when he recorded a series of “Songs and Calls of Our Native Birds” for Victor and the song “Laughing Love” for Edison.⁷⁴ His Chautauqua performances in the 1920s were more “lectures” than performances, as in his hour-long “The Musical Genius of Birds.” In this presentation, Gorst promises “imitation of about 60 common bird-songs, with full-color 40 x 50 in. pastel paintings of the birds, enlarged and electric lighted, and with narration of humorous and surprising experiences with birds.”⁷⁵ In the accompanying pictures, Gorst appears in two distinct looks. In one he wears a tuxedo and stands in front of one of his paintings, and in the other he is crouched in an overgrown field, looking directly at a bird with his lips pursed, suggesting that he is whistling.⁷⁶ The images reflect exactly what Gorst was, a bridge between the “country boy” and “wild naturalist” and the high society scientists who occupied the museums and lecture halls.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Charles Crawford Gorst’s quest for scientific legitimacy came as whistling was in its last days as both a popular entertainment and an educational tool. By the time Gorst was recognized by the American Ornithologists Union in 1936, the first commercial recordings of “actual” birds collected by Brand and his colleagues at Cornell University had already been released, and in the following three years recordings of birds in the field would multiply dramatically.⁷⁷ With this development, public opinion turned rapidly against whistling in favor of the newer recordings. In a 1940 letter to the Cornell Ornithology Lab, the headmaster of a school for the blind inquired about “actual recordings of songs of different birds” from Cornell that he had heard on a radio program. In expressing his desire to obtain some of these recordings, he says that he has been “unable to get records of bird calls except as imitations by whistlers.” According to the headmaster, these sounds—which were once some of the

most popular and generally accepted sonic reproductions of nature available—had been found “most unsatisfactory” by him and his students.⁷⁸

The headmaster’s sentiments were foreshadowed by a series of musical programs that were launched at the American Museum of Natural History the year earlier. The notes and press releases for those programs anticipate the end of imitative whistling and reveal how strongly it influenced the new and developing practices of recording birds in the field. On the program, long-time museum affiliate Gorst was billed only parenthetically under the species that he imitated: “Whip-poor-will (Bird song imitations by Charles Crawford Gorst).”⁷⁹ The newer recordings from Brand and Cornell garnered two full paragraphs, which extolled the technological mastery involved in finally being able to hear birds themselves as they sing: “The songs and calls on this record are as nearly the product of Nature as is possible to obtain. They were made in the woods and fields; the makers were the birds themselves. Man’s inventive genius made it possible to construct microphones that pick up truthfully every trill and warble of forest and field.”⁸⁰ Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the recordings used the exact same structure: a single isolated species, singing a single isolated song. Performance imitative whistling, long forgotten and historically neglected, actually established representational standards for natural sounds that would continue to be influential well into the development of technologies that could record animals in the field.

About the Author

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Notes

1. As I will explain in more detail below, I use “nature sounds” to encompass a variety of imitative representational practices that were common before the development of technologies that allowed for the recording of wild animals in the field.

2. This is not a random list but actually a sampling from popular song titles during this period, including “Morning on the Farm,” “Forest Whispers,” “Santa Claus at the Zoo,” “In a Clock Store,” and “Down on the Sewanee River.”

3. A 1935 songwriting guide said that “novelties” could be almost any kind of song at any speed as long as it included “an idea twist.” Whistling was often one such twist. See Al Lewis, *From Rhymes to Riches* (New York: Donaldson, 1935), 9, as cited in Daniel Goldmark, “Stuttering in American Popular Song, 1890–1930,” in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (New York: Routledge, 2012), 91.

4. See Myron C. Baker, “Bird Song Research: The Past 100 Years,” *Bird Behavior* 14, no. 1 (2001): 5; Rachel Mundy, “Nature’s Music: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening in the Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., New York University, 2010), 94, 186–88; Stephen Lyn Bales, *Ghost Birds: Jim Tanner and the Quest for the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker, 1935–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 10–12; Don Stap, *Birdsong: A Natural History* (New York: Scribner’s, 2005), 29–30.

5. Specifically, the Cornell Ornithology Lab used the Fox-Movietone system. According to Arthur A. Allen, head of the lab at the time, the idea for recording birds came from the motion picture industry: “[Representatives from a film company] came to our Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell for help, thinking that our knowledge of birds might supplement their knowledge of sound recording with desirable results. To make a long story short, we were able to help, and became so interested in the problem that we conceived the idea of making a permanent record of the songs of all North American birds” (“Hunting with a Microphone the Voices of Vanishing Birds,” *National Geographic Magazine* 71 [1937]: 697–98).

6. George H. Dacy, “Song Hunters with Sound Truck Snare Notes of Wild Birds,” *Popular Science Monthly* 121, no. 3 (1932): 16, as cited in Mundy, “Nature’s Music,” 188.

7. Albert R. Brand, “Recording Sounds of Wild Birds,” *Auk*, October 1, 1932, 436.

8. Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 18.

9. Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 119.

10. *Ibid.*, 17.

11. Susan A. Glenn, “Give an Imitation of Me’: Vaudeville Mimics and the Play of the Self,” *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1998): 49.

12. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 207–13, as cited in Glenn, “Give an Imitation,” 62.

13. Gitelman, *Scripts*, 17.

14. According to Daniel J. Philippon, the work of women like Mabel Osgood Wright “helped broaden the audience for environmental reform and deepen the arguments used by its reformers, moving the focus . . . into the backyard gardens of suburban America” (*Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004], 73).

15. Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 57–109.
16. “Perverted Talent,” *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, July 1, 1890, 398–99.
17. “The Whistling Passenger,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1900, 6.
18. The term was coined in San Francisco in the 1870s to refer to gangs of young men engaged in violent crime, especially against Chinese immigrants.
19. Gitelman, *Scripts*, 133.
20. In this case, the judge ruled that light-skinned Homer Plessy was “black” based on his heritage, not his skin tone. See Gitelman, *Scripts*, 133–36.
21. One scholar who does point to the significance of whistling in racial performance is W. T. Lhamon, Jr., who identifies Bobolink Bob’s “proto-blackface” whistling performances as “talismanic aspects of blackface performance” (*Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998], 4).
22. *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Alan Crosland (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1927). For a discussion on Jolson as a whistler, see Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 112–15.
23. J. Yeeling Richardson, “Is Whistling an Art?,” *Metronome* 20, no. 1 (January 1903): 12.
24. Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 41.
25. *Ibid.*, 80.
26. *Ibid.*, 28.
27. George W. Johnson, “The Whistling Coon,” Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
28. Dan W. Quinn, “Whistling Rufus,” Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
29. S. H. Dudley, “The Merry Whistling Darky,” Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
30. Joe Belmont, “Dat Whistling Yaller Dinah,” Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
31. Billy Murray and Joe Belmont, “An Afternoon in June,” Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
32. S. H. Dudley, “The Whistling Bowery Boy,” Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
33. “Holds Whistling Denotes a Moron,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1931, 27.
34. “Education: Whistling Morons,” *Time Magazine*, October 12, 1931, 56.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Richardson, “Is Whistling an Art?,” 12.
37. “Hers a Unique Talent: Miss Minahan Caught Nightingale’s Note and Fills Make-Believe Forest with Songs of Birds,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1913, 77.
38. “Vaudeville Reflections,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 1899, 26.
39. “Novelties in Church Entertainment,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1902, 8.
40. Ellis mentions Ulrichs in *Sexual Inversion*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1897), 177. For more on Ulrichs, see the analysis of the historical relationship between sexuality, identity, and musicality in Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 70–74.
41. Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 1st ed., 51.
42. *Ibid.*, 62.
43. *Ibid.*, 64.
44. Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1901), 177–78.
45. Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1921), 256. Of course, male and female relationships during this period were not binaries. See Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Harper, 1998).
46. Debra Ann Pawlak, *Bringing Up Oscar: The Men and Women Who Founded the Academy* (New York: Pegasus, 2011), 34–35.
47. “Whistling Success,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1908, V14.
48. “Whistlers Trained in Western School,” *Lyceum*, February 1919, 42; “Girl Whistlers in Music Body,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1924, A14.
49. “Homer Mendenhall,” Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
50. Agnes Woodward, *Whistling as an Art: A Method for the Development of Tone, Technic and Style* (New York: C. Fischer, 1938), v.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, ix.
53. “Frances M. Sellers,” Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
54. “Whistlers Trained.”
55. “Flight of the Mockers,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1914, II6.
56. “Maria McKee,” Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
57. Joe Belmont, “Woodland Songsters,” Library of Congress National Jukebox, <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/>.
58. “Maria McKee,” Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
59. “Margaret McKee,” Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings, <http://victor.library.ucsb.edu>.
60. “Marion Darlington,” Internet Movie Database.
61. See, for example, the Of Interest to Women column in the *Los Angeles Times* of February 21, 1924, which mentions that Woodward’s chorus will be performing for disabled veterans at the invitation of the Wa Wan Club.
62. “Heartless,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1922, II9.

63. Price, *Flight Maps*, 101.
64. Charles Kellogg, *Charles Kellogg: The Nature Singer, His Book* (Morgan Hill, CA: Pacific Science Press, 1929), 134.
65. "Kellogg," Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections Department. According to the online Victor discography, Victor brochures noted that Kellogg used his throat rather than whistled, but he was still listed alongside other "whistlers" and records suitable for "nature study" in printed catalogs. Even though there is a technical distinction here, he was by and large associated with whistling.
66. "Singing a Fire to Sleep," *New York Times*, July 28, 1912, 5.
67. Ibid.
68. Kellogg, *The Nature Singer*, 241–76.
69. "Kellogg," Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
70. *Music Appreciation for Little Children* (Camden, NJ: Victor Talking Machine Company, 1920), 133.
71. Donald Bain, "A Trip to the Farm," Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
72. Bain, letter dated December 31, 1926, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
73. "Wins Naturalist Medal," *New York Times*, April 5, 1936, 30.
74. "Charles Crawford Gorst," Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings, <http://victor.library.ucsb.edu>.
75. "Kellogg," Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
76. "Charles Crawford Gorst," Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
77. Jeffery Boswell and Dominic Couzens, "Fifty Years of Bird Sound Publication in North America: 1931–1981," *American Birds* 36, no. 6 (1982): 924–43.
78. "Gordon Hicks to Kellogg," January 10, 1940, Redpath Chautauqua Collection, University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections.
79. "Free Illustrative Musical Program for Geographic Hall of Birds, October 23–November 5, 1939," American Museum of Natural History Central Archives.
80. Ibid.