

The Jim Crow Craze in London's Press and Streets, 1836-39

Tom Scriven

**Abstract**

In 1836, American actor Thomas D. Rice first arrived in Great Britain to tour the creation that had made him famous in the United States, Jim Crow. This blackface depiction of a raggedy, runaway slave, with his infectious songs, eccentric dancing, and demotic appeal soon took London by storm. The Jim Crow craze lasted for three years, with Rice finding fame, fortune and success and his imitators becoming ubiquitous in the capital's theatres and on its streets. Although the act and its character have been acknowledged as a precursor to the evolution of British minstrelsy and blackface traditions throughout the Victorian period, the craze itself has not been substantially studied in its British context. This essay will look beyond Rice's act and the performance of Jim Crow in the theatres to look instead at Jim Crow's appropriation in print satire and street performance. It will argue that these requisitions of Jim Crow illustrate how Georgian traditions of carnival and grotesque humour were redeveloped for the early Victorian context. In print, Jim Crow was widely utilized in caustic bodily humour that attacked insincere politicians. On the streets, this same humour was seen as obscene and was repressed and contained, paving the way for the respectable, mainstream Victorian blackface act. However, integral to both appropriations of Jim Crow was the figure of the black buffoon, and the act rapidly provided an archetype for the belittling and persecution of London's black population.

**Keywords:** blackface, street performance, print culture, satire, humour, race, transatlantic culture

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'Jim Crow.' – On Lord Mayor's day (Wednesday week) in London, a good deal of merriment was excited among the populace by a painted wooden figure of 'Jim Crow,' drawn in a cart, which joined on with the rear of the procession [...] Jim Crow is the sobriquet in which we cannot say Mr. Spring Rice rejoices, but which the citizens rejoice to give him.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever created the mock-up of Jim Crow that interloped upon the Lord Mayor's show in November 1836 was responsible for Britain's first noteworthy satirical re-working of an American comic character that had taken London by storm since his arrival that July.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Dartmouth Rice's blackface act, already extremely popular in the United States, found a rapturous reception in London once he had appeared at the Surrey theatre that summer. After the Lord Mayor's show his less popular namesake Thomas Spring Rice, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, remained associated with a raggedy-dressed runaway slave from the southern United States, becoming along with many other Londoners caught up in a craze that became the 'first Atlantic popular culture'.<sup>3</sup> Across the capital Thomas D. Rice was emulated in theatres and thoroughfares, in particular the performance of his signature song, 'Jump Jim Crow'. The tune was simple and repetitive but infectious, the dance was grotesque and eccentric but spirited, and the chorus easy to remember:

Weel about and turn about and do jis so,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 10 November 1836, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> W.T. Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, p. 6.

Eb'ry time I weel about and jump Jim Crow.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless despite the ubiquity of this song on London's streets and in its press, studies of blackface performance in Britain have largely avoided the Jim Crow craze of the late 1830s, preferring instead to treat it as a preface to the more established and codified blackface performances of later Victorian periods<sup>5</sup> In the American literature on the act during this period in the United States, emphasis has been placed on its demotic origins as a cross-racial and subversive representative of the urban proletariat.<sup>6</sup> In these accounts once Jim Crow arrived in Britain his reworking for middle and upper-class audiences dulled these radical implications, as the character, the act and blackface all became respectable and sentimental, a conclusion reinforced by British studies that highlight Victorian blackface's mainstream and favourable reception.<sup>7</sup>

Turning from the theatre to print culture and the streets, this essay will study the appropriation, development and reception of Jim Crow's character, song and image in London during the craze of 1836-39. This fad, although fleeting, offers an important insight into numerous aspects of early Victorian public culture. Most obviously, it provides an early example of the importation of American culture and its redevelopment in distinctly British contexts. This redevelopment was far from unproblematically respectable, instead becoming a vehicle for social criticism in print and a contested feature of London's streets. In both cases, Jim Crow illustrates the continuing vitality and development of the Georgian traditions of mordant humour, social inversion and the carnivalesque well into the 1830s and 1840s. However, common to all of these developments of the act was the representation of black people as comical buffoons. This archetype, outlined by

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<sup>4</sup> The full 'Original Jim Crow' is reprinted in Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, pp. 95-102.

<sup>5</sup> Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*; Michael Pickering, 'John Bull in Blackface', *Popular Music*, 16:2 (1997), 181-201; J.S. Bratton, 'English Ethiopians: British Audiences and Black-Face Acts, 1835-1865', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 11:2 (1981), 127-142.

<sup>6</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*; Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*.

<sup>7</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, pp. 66-68; George F. Rehin, 'Blackface Minstrels in Victorian London and its Resorts: Popular Culture and its Racial Connotations As Revealed in Polite Opinion', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 15:1 (1984), 19-38 (p. 34); Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy*, p. 5; Bratton, 'English Ethiopians'.

Hazel Waters in her study of racism on the Victorian stage, very quickly escaped the theatre, becoming a recurring aspect of both court reports and everyday culture.<sup>8</sup> Despite Britain's popular culture of anti-slavery and increasingly prominent public criticism of slavery in America, Britons nevertheless enthusiastically took up both performing and watching Jim Crow despite its clearly demeaning nature.<sup>9</sup> While this requisition helped maintain transgression and the body as key parts of post-Georgian everyday humour, it also firmly and rapidly set in place in the first years of the Victorian period the archetype of black people as dim-witted, oddly-framed and fundamentally comical.

### **I. Jim Crow's Body and Early Victorian Satire**

The use of Jim Crow to mock Spring Rice during the Lord Mayor's procession was a deployment of the familiar satirical trope of social inversion, depicting the Chancellor as 'aspiring to the dignity of rival to Jim Crow'.<sup>10</sup> *The Times* believed the joke effective and insulting since for them 'Jump Jim Crow' was, without ambiguity, an attempt to accurately depict African-Americans; their first review of Rice's performance claimed his 'personification is the beau ideal of a negro [...] [he] has the faculty of twisting his limbs in such a manner as to represent the distortions of an ill grown African.'<sup>11</sup> When it was reported that the Chancellor had been sent a lock of George Washington's hair by an admiring American, the paper asked 'Cannot Jim Crow spare a lock of his wool for Mr. Spring Rice?'<sup>12</sup> This crude bodily humour became the basis of the newspaper's recurring inversion of Spring Rice as a dimwit belonging to the racialized section of the urban underclass.

For *The Times* this inversion was primarily racial, but as the imagery was taken up by other newspapers and periodicals it focussed on other aspects of Jim Crow's act and body. By the end

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<sup>8</sup> Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representation of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> *The Times*, 25 February 1837, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 26 October 1836, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 10 December 1836, p. 6.

of 1836, Henry Mayhew's radical-leaning *Figaro in London* printed a re-working of the lyrics of 'Jump Jim Crow'.<sup>13</sup> This was the first instance of what would become a craze amongst newspapers for setting their own lyrics to the tune:

The great popularity of this song renders it positively incumbent upon us to furnish to the nation something of an English character to stand by its side. We hasten to do our duty to a public which we know gratefully appreciates our labours.

Jump Bob Peel.  
I came from less than nothing,  
And cotton used to reel,  
When I was quite a stripling,  
And called Bob Peel.  
Wheel about, and turn about,  
And cotton reel;  
Every time I turn about,  
I jump Bob Peel.

As they were consciously aware, the *Figaro* began the British development of Jim Crow for satirical purposes, in this case satirizing the habit of Robert Peel (the son of a prominent, upwardly-mobile cotton manufacturer) of 'rattling' by changing his mind on votes in parliament. In a centuries-old standard of British satire 'Bob' was inverted to a mere cotton wheeler, suggesting that his 'wheeling' was part of his family's crude class aspirations.<sup>14</sup> The *Figaro* concurred with *The Times*' view of the character as an accurate depiction of African-Americans, thinking Rice the 'most perfect representative of nigger characters; that is to say, if niggers have any characters at all.'<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, although this social inversion was also a racial one, in its emphasis on 'wheeling about' the song moved from explicit focus on Jim Crow's 'African' features to the arresting and vibrant dancing. As lyrical reworkings appeared elsewhere in the

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<sup>13</sup> *The Figaro in London*, 31 December 1836, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Lunger Knoppers, 'Sing old Noll the Brewer': Royalist Satire and Social Inversion, 1648-64', *The Seventeenth Century*, 15:1 (2000), 32-52.

<sup>15</sup> *The Figaro in London*, 12 November 1836, p. 3.

press, this emphasis on ‘wheeling about’ rather than purely on Jim Crow’s class or race evolved into a joke not just about individuals but about the entire political establishment, and soon much of the press incorporated irreverent workings of the song’s lyrics; Tory, Whig and Radical all equally loved to Jump Jim Crow.<sup>16</sup>

The efficacy of this joke was built on the bedrock of Jim Crow being grotesque. As *The Figaro* wrote, ‘Rice has made several thousand pounds by his ability to draw down his mouth, wheel about his legs, and play at skittles with his eyeballs’.<sup>17</sup> *The London Dispatch* saw only ‘a hideous face, distorted legs, a strange chuckle, an unnatural whistle, a set variety of extraordinary pirouettes’, and was bemused by the whole performance.<sup>18</sup> *The Satirist* was bluntly dismissive: ‘The disgusting grossness of [Rice’s] performance may probably, in American eyes, be remarkably chaste and delicate; as the Esquimaux fashion of saluting by rubbing their greasy noses together is considered polished in the extreme.’<sup>19</sup> It was, therefore, a perfect representation of the grubbiness of politicians, but it was also one that corresponded to the carnivalesque tradition of linking the inversion of social hierarchy with the ‘comic privileging of the bottom part of the body [...] over the rational and spiritual control of the head.’<sup>20</sup>

This was most clearly picked up in the imagery of John Cleave’s newspapers. Cleave, a veteran of the ‘war of the unstamped’, one of the first Chartists and a pioneer of the populist, satirical and sensationalist press of the 1830s, made particularly prominent use of woodcuts.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the melodramatic, moralistic and sentimental literature that has been the focus of studies of the Chartist era’s radical press, Cleave combined the humour of the contorted frame with radical critique, and starting in 1837 and continuing into the 1840s he utilized Jim Crow’s image and

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<sup>16</sup> *The Penny Satirist*, 13 May 1837, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *The Figaro in London*, 25 February 1837, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *The London Dispatch*, 12 March 1837, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> *The Satirist*, 24 September 1837, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Jacobs, ‘The Politicization of Everyday Life in *Cleave’s Weekly Police Gazette* (1834-36)’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 40:3, (2008), 225-47

lyrics.<sup>22</sup> ‘Three Jim Crows’ (figure 1) relies on the grotesqueness of Jim Crow’s body, his manners and his movement. In C.J. Grant’s drawing Melbourne, Rice and Russell are clearly ‘wheeling about’, adopting the poses familiar from Rice’s act and from his numerous imitators, and since each adopts as their pose a different step of wheeling about they create a sense of constant movement. Although blackface is absent from this image, their dress and the distinctive angles of their bodies mark these men as Jim Crow.

The image of Baron Lyndhurst (figure 2), another noted vacillator who followed Peel’s calculated hesitancy in committing to reform, depicts him wheeling with a chimney with a weathervane, an increasingly common prop in these depictions. In this case Lyndhurst wears full blackface, creating an image of racial as well as social inversion, but also creating an allusion to the practice amongst street performers of using chimney dust as their Jim Crow makeup, and with that another reference to filth, masking and insincerity. In ‘Dissolution of Parliament Anticipated’ (figure 3), the parliamentarians returning to their constituents for the predicted election are clearly led by Jim Crow in a carnivalesque procession, but the fact that he is actually a white man is played on with the notice ‘Promised for white & voted for black’. Some are Janus-faced, others clearly holding their masks, and almost all have weathervanes on their heads. The signs refer clearly to corruption and dishonesty, while the overall tone is about ‘hypocrisy and deceit’, ‘cock crowing’ and ‘pretended love for the poor.’

This corporeal humour touched on the legacy of pornography and the broader fascination in print culture with sexuality that particularly marked the 1820s.<sup>23</sup> Not only did Thomas D. Rice himself perform the part with lithe exaggeration, but he also incorporated into the ‘Original Jim Crow’ sexual boasts that were likely appealing to Londoners, just as they were to urban audiences

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<sup>22</sup> Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working-Class Literature* (London, 1974); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 175-264.

<sup>23</sup> Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth Century London* (London: Atlantic, 2006); Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).



in the United States.<sup>24</sup> The sexual elements to the act were most explicitly picked up by *The Satirist* when they chose to mock Rice's marriage to Charlotte Gladstone, the daughter of the Adelphi's proprietor, by depicting their wedding night. Through a method of conflating Rice with Jim Crow *The Satirist* touched on themes of masturbation, over-indulgence and miscegenation:

De damsel den consented,  
I jumped quite out of my skin,  
And showed that although black without  
I was all white within.  
To play before de curtain  
I now hab change my mind,  
And you may all be certain  
That ebry night behind –  
We toss about and roll about,  
And do jist so,  
And oft I hear de cry, encore!  
To jump Jim Crow.<sup>25</sup>

As Lisa Sigel's study of Victorian pornography illustrates, bodily humour recurred throughout the period, rather than ending by the 1830s as Vic Gatrell contends.<sup>26</sup> Sensuality and obscene, scatological humour remained a feature of the Chartist press and its activists' private correspondence and men like Cleave were redeveloping Georgian satire into a newer form of irreverent humour.<sup>27</sup> Jim Crow was a populist, more acerbic example of the Victorian carnivalesque evident in contemporaneous novels; these jokes were bodily enough to be

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<sup>24</sup> Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> *The Satirist*, 2 July 1837, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, p. xxi; Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Tom Scriven, 'Humour, Satire and Sexuality in the Culture of Early Chartism', *Historical Journal* (forthcoming).

offensive, but not obscene enough to drive these newspapers underground.<sup>28</sup> Cleave's images unsettled many; Francis Place told him in a letter that he disliked them, while Thackeray publicly denounced Grant's 'Rude woodcuts'.<sup>29</sup>

Like Rice himself these satirists were using Jim Crow's body 'as a lightning rod for ideological contest' and as a result the phrases 'jump Jim Crow' and 'wheel about' became established political slang well into the 1840s, not quite crude enough terms to be unrespectable, but not so respectable that they lacked bite.<sup>30</sup> Jim Crow was a suitable addition to the discourse of Old Corruption since it encapsulated the sense that because the ruling class were the personification of arbitrary, unpredictable movement, the country was stagnating. To 'wheel about', as James Crow, the loquacious, Latin-speaking 'editor' explained to an Irishman in a sketch in the *Satirist*, meant to come full circle:

you have seen that fellow who caricatures me on the stages, and jumps "Jim Crow" in a rag-shop of filth and abomination [...] here are four different views of the same man – yet the man has not changed. He first showed his face, then his two sides, then his ---- side. But still the man remains unchanged. So, then, if a man begins public life as a Radical, and shows his face to the people, then takes a sly look into the court, and shows his right side to the people, then finally completes the semi-circle, and shows his stern to the people, it is a very stupid thing to say the man has changed.<sup>31</sup>

To compare a man to Jim Crow undermined the affectation of the stoic, rational and ordered masculinity that developed in the early nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> As the opposite of what a politician had pretensions to be, Jim Crow was attractive source material for political humour, and thus became an important and widespread forerunner of the deployment of American jokes in late

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<sup>28</sup> Mark M. Hennelly, 'Victorian Carnavalesque', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30:1, (2002), 365-81.

<sup>29</sup> Francis Place to John Cleave, 2 April, 1839, The Francis Place Papers, British Library; *Fraser's Magazine*, 17 March 1838.

<sup>30</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, p. 7; Hansard, HC Deb 28 February 1839 vol 45 col 1021, HL Deb 06 August 1840 vol 55 col 1353, HC Deb 28 February 1843 vol 67 col 56, HL Deb 02 August 1850 vol 113 col 695; John Jackson, *The Demagogue Done Up: An exposure of the extreme inconsistencies of Mr. Feargus O'Connor: showing, from the 'Northern Star' itself, that he has justly earned the title of the political Jim Crow* (Bradford: C. Wilkinson, 1844).

<sup>31</sup> *The Penny Satirist*, 13 May 1837, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Roger B. Henkle, *Comedy and Culture: England 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 21-57.

Victorian British political discourse.<sup>33</sup> The satirical Jim Crow inverted social hierarchies, while blackface represented duplicity and rotation paradoxically implied stagnation and indecision. Thus it was all the more damning that *The Age* described the young Palmerston as ‘the juvenile Whig – a painted weather-cock in variegated colours – “Jim Crow,” rouged and perfumed – the chameleon of every Cabinet – the political omnibus that has lost every *fair*.’<sup>34</sup>

## II. Jim Crow’s Body on the Streets

After Rice returned to America in March 1837 Jim Crow was incubated in the metropolis, not just in newspapers but also by imitators within the theatre and on the streets. Although the act was broadly popular, the thesis that the British Jim Crow rapidly gained respectability that was bequeathed to later minstrelsy and blackface performance overlooks the heated resistance to the Jim Crow craze between 1836 and 1839.<sup>35</sup> During these early years, the act unnerved the British urban authorities just as it did America’s, and the Victorians’ ‘acceptance of inversion within a bracketed interval of ordinary life’ was founded on the repression of Jim Crow when performed in the streets or within proximity of the bourgeois home.<sup>36</sup> Its democratic practice and subversive potential needed to be defanged and detained in the spaces set aside for it.

Although the material written for Rice’s British performances blunted the act’s radical edge, there remained demotic aspects of his act in London, in particular his manner of moving from the lower-class Surrey to the more middle-class Adelphi.<sup>37</sup> Since he was appearing at the Surrey and the Adelphi on the same nights, Rice rode a white horse, still in character, across Waterloo Bridge towards the Adelphi, with the Surrey’s audience following with torches.<sup>38</sup> Whatever

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<sup>33</sup> Bob Nicholson, “‘You Kick the Bucket; We Do the Rest!’: Jokes and the Culture of Reprinting in the Transatlantic Press”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17:3 (2012), 273-286.

<sup>34</sup> *The Age*, 23 July 1837, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, p. 67; Rehin, ‘Blackface Minstrels’, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Pickering, ‘White Skin, Black Masks: “Nigger” Minstrelsy in Victorian Britain’ in *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, ed. by J.S. Bratton, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 70-92 (p. 89).

<sup>37</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Harvard University Press: London, 2000), pp. 213-14.

allowances were made for Rice's symbolic yoking of his clientele were not made for a young man named Joseph Hines, who had watched Rice at the Surrey and who was arrested on Waterloo Road singing to a large crowd, 'throwing himself into the most grotesque attitudes, striking about with his arms at all the persons who approached him.' Hines defended himself against the charge of disorderly conduct by pointing out that he was 'only singing Jim Crow', a common and popular song, but from the magistrate's perspective he was creating a crowd and annoying the neighbourhood. Unlike Rice's public performances along the same road Hines was just another member of the urban underclass responsible for an illegitimate public assembly and, as the magistrate pointed out, noise out of place, insisting that Hines practise at home rather than 'prostitute [his] talents' in the streets.<sup>39</sup>

In June 1837 two male performers from Aldgate were arrested for performing a duet as Jim Crow and 'his wife'. As soon as these two were held on bail another "'female" Jim Crow' was brought to the same magistrate, after a man passing the act decided it was his 'duty to interfere to preserve the morals of the public.'<sup>40</sup> Cross-dressing was common among blackface performances, with humour derived from evidently white men playing black 'wench' characters.<sup>41</sup> This Jim Crow was most likely married to Black Sal, a figure usually played by a man in the popular early 1820s play *Tom and Jerry, or Life in London*, and who had become established as the often highly sexualized companion to 'Dusty Bob', the archetypal dustman.<sup>42</sup> *Tom and Jerry* set an important precedent for Jim Crow, who was received by the *Standard* as a 'Transatlantic "Billy Waters"', a real life black London beggar who had appeared as himself in the play and earned himself the 'ungrudging tribute of London's down-and-outs'.<sup>43</sup> Just as in print, on the

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<sup>39</sup> *Morning Post*, 17 October 1836, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Morning Post*, 16 June 1837, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (London: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> Brian Maidment, *Dusty Bob: A Cultural History of Dustmen, 1780-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> *The Standard*, 26 September 1836, p. 3; Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984), p. 230.

streets the Jim Crow craze can partly be attributed to the ease with which it could be merged with established British comic traditions.

The street performances were also fostered by the newfound semi-legitimacy of the cheap popular press. Alongside their weekly theatre reviews and use of Jim Crow in political satire, these papers also directly fuelled these street performers through selling books that contained the act's imagery and lyrics. The notable radical publisher Henry Hetherington advertized Jim Crow song sheets as early as September 1836, with full copies of the manuscript version of the song and an image of Rice as Jim Crow being sold for only one penny.<sup>44</sup> A year later Cleave was advertizing 'Jim Crow's Songster', again with a large portrait of Rice as Jim Crow, along with twenty-five other songs, again for only one penny.<sup>45</sup> Since 'in the first blooms of its publicity' a song like Jim Crow would be sold at between two shillings and three shillings and sixpence by musical publishers, and Cleave and Hetherington had their roots in the piratical 'underworld', these were probably pirated songbooks of the sort that Mayhew noted ten years later.<sup>46</sup> These inexpensive songbooks allowed recital of the lyrics and the music, but the images also offered an accurate guide to the clothing, how to hold the body and how to angle the limbs.<sup>47</sup> This was not just the exploitation of a fad, however, as London's printers and composers had their own custom of partying in costume whenever a co-worker married, with the largest man in the office representing the wife by dressing as Black Sal, enjoying the same 'transgressive possibilities' as the crowd at Worship Street.<sup>48</sup>

Those Worship Street performers made four shillings in three hours, indicating its popularity with performers and audiences alike. Police attention was viewed as an occupational hazard, even

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<sup>44</sup> *London Dispatch*, 24 September 1836, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Cleave's London Satirist and Gazette of Variety*, 4 November 1837, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 3 vols (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861), I, p. 305; McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, pp. 204-37.

<sup>47</sup> Dale Cockrell, 'Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder', *American Music* 14:2, (1996), 161-184 (p. 182).

<sup>48</sup> Charles Manby Smith, *The Working Man's Way in the World: Being the Autobiography of a Journeyman Printer* (London: William and Frederick G. Cash, 1854), pp. 251-57; Maidment, *Dusty Bob*, p. 8.

if the punishments were harsh and the magistrates zealous, as in the case of a man arrested for vagrancy after being found asleep in costume outside a Westminster pub:

Prisoner: I gets my living by jumping Jim Crow, and a very good living it would be if it wasn't for the policemen. I can do it as well as that Mr. Rice, for he's only a Yankee doodle [...]

Mr. White: What is your father?

Prisoner: A Jim Crow as well as myself, and both of us gets our living by jumping and singing.

Mr. White: We must stop your singing; I shall send you for 14 days to the House of Correction.<sup>49</sup>

Although Jim Crow's popularity signals an important stage in the emergence of music as a product of labour, it also signals the increasing regulation of the spaces in which that production could occur.<sup>50</sup> Amateurs were equally targeted. 'Jump Jim Crow' was a versatile song that emerged in varied contexts, but it was a particular irritant when it occurred in the context of the middle-class home. A drunken footman sang Jim Crow before remonstrating with his master, leading to his arrest once he became violent.<sup>51</sup> A group of servants at a pub bet a woman that she would not dress as Jim Crow, walk into Belgrave Square and visit each home, a task she evidently took up enthusiastically as she was arrested there not just for her costume but for also singing and jumping Jim Crow.<sup>52</sup> A surgeon and his wife had a 'mortal antipathy to [...] noisy and boisterous mirth', and when one day their neighbour's footboy, who enjoyed singing while he worked, 'finished the words "Turn about, wheel about, do just so,"', the surgeon 'gave him such a box on the ear as to make him wheel about and turn quite a different turn.'<sup>53</sup> The judge agreed that this was an acceptable course of action, and rejected the footboy's complaint.

The song 'promised subversion, a world undone, and concomitantly, a new set of codes', and social hierarchies were inverted whenever Jim Crow became an everyday act of carnival in the

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<sup>49</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 16 September 1837, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

<sup>51</sup> *Morning Post*, 30 January 1837, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 9 October 1837, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> *Morning Post*, 6 January 1837, p. 4.

bourgeois home, particularly when it undermined the servant/master relationship.<sup>54</sup> Outside the home ‘there was dirt, there was noise, there was human excrement, there was starvation, there was crime, there was violence’, and the footboy’s ears were boxed to keep these corruptions out.<sup>55</sup> ‘Jump Jim Crow’, as a good prospect of employment for the ‘fatherless urchin, who had to choose between thieving and singing for their livelihood’, illustrated at once many of these vices.<sup>56</sup> Thus by the late 1830s the middle class sallied out to the streets and ‘waged a battle to impose the quiet tenor of interior middle-class domesticity upon the rowdy terrain outside.’<sup>57</sup> The 1839 Police Act brought in penalties for any person using noise to bring people together, the first Act to allow the police to interfere with non-criminal street activities, and lamented by those like Charles Knight who preferred street music to the sounds of commerce.<sup>58</sup> In particular it targeted carnival through the regulation of fairs, processions, unlicensed theatre, and an emphasis on the curbing of the printing and performing of obscene material.<sup>59</sup> The decline in reports of prosecutions of Jim Crow performers after 1839 was likely due to the police using their new powers to move on rather than arrest acts. Nevertheless, over the next two decades this conflict between street musicians and the authorities intensified; Jim Crow was the precursor of the Italian organ grinders targeted by, amongst others, Mayhew’s *Punch*.<sup>60</sup>

Jim Crow illustrated that ‘underclass culture was [...] able to represent itself’, but this representation was not solely repressed through co-optation in the respectable, sentimental British theatre.<sup>61</sup> Although it may be the case that the respectable public minstrelsy of later periods avoided the waves of persecution inflicted on other street performers, this was made

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<sup>54</sup> Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, p. 82.

<sup>55</sup> Jenni Calder, *The Victorian Home* (London, 1977), p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Charles MacKay, *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, 2 vols, (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), II, p. 247.

<sup>57</sup> John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 41-81, (p. 43); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London, 1976), p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 217; Charles Knight, *London*, 4 vols, (London: Charles Knight, 1841), I, p. 141.

<sup>59</sup> *An Act For Further Improving the Police In and Near the Metropolis*, (London: Thomas White, 1839), p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, pp. 41-81.

<sup>61</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, p. 6.

possible by the confinement of its direct ancestor, Jim Crow.<sup>62</sup> The craze was an important early stage in the emerging regulatory framework surrounding noise, entertainment and public gatherings. Jim Crow, with its strange, transgressive depiction of the male and female bodies, its irritating noises, its threateningly large audiences and its apparent purposelessness severely impeded the construction of the rational, bourgeois public sphere and the orderly, sanitized modern city.<sup>63</sup> Due to the same grotesque aspects that made the character good material for satire, public display of Jim Crow's body hinted at fissures and transgressions within this emerging idealization of a homogenous social body, and of that project's ultimate futility.<sup>64</sup> It was therefore one of the first, most visible and most audible stages in the Victorians' 'struggle between refinement and vulgarity'.<sup>65</sup>

### III. Jim Crow and Black Bodies

In print and on the streets, Jim Crow was a transgressive character that attacked elite morality and transgressed emerging sanitary boundaries. It has been argued that in America, this populist, demotic use of the character to satirize and annoy the elite declined as racial apprehensions increased with the rise of slavery as a central political concern.<sup>66</sup> In Britain, the supposed absence of any significant black population has been taken as evidence that there was little derogatory intent in the act, but it is clear from analysis of court and police reports that the rapid and vast dissemination of the character during the craze allowed new means of targeting black and mixed-race Britons, alongside visitors and migrants.<sup>67</sup> The sense of racial superiority identified by Waters as being established by Jim Crow's grotesque and comic body in the theatre very quickly

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<sup>62</sup> Rehin, *Blackface Street Minstrels*, p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*; Madeleine Hurd, 'Class, Masculinity, Manners and Mores: Public Space and Public Sphere in Nineteenth-Century Europe', *Social Science History*, 24:1 (2000), 75-110.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 206.

<sup>66</sup> Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, p. 11; Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 187.

<sup>67</sup> Bratton, 'English Ethiopians', pp. 141-2; Rehin, 'Blackface Street Minstrels', p. 34.



crossed the boundary into everyday life and 'Jim Crow' became a term for any person of colour in London, who were represented as 'ill-formed', comical aliens who spoke mangled dialects.<sup>68</sup>

In part, this was motivated by the same tensions over insecurity, disturbance and urban workers that greeted street entertainers. In the modern city the stranger needed to be assessed and contained and 'Jim Crow' became one label that facilitated this process.<sup>69</sup> Thus, a Bengali named John Dervish but nicknamed Jim Crow by his white associates, who hated Bengal and hated being a sailor, was assessed by the Lord Mayor, who judged him of good character and gave him money and leave to stay in London.<sup>70</sup> 'Jim Crow' invoked otherness and movement, summed up his itinerancy and his status as a stranger, and branded him with whites' anxieties; Dervish's chosen name of 'John Davis' aspired to the opposite. Because of this notion of itinerancy and ill-defined status Jim Crow also came to represent whites, his lumpen style of dress increasingly imagined in the press in the racial terms of 'Negro hats' and 'Jim Crow trousers', a contribution to the increasing racialization of class difference throughout the Victorian period.<sup>71</sup>

Jim Crow was also of some utility to black people themselves, for whom playing the character was an opportunity to make money. The boxer Sambo Sutton sang and danced 'Jump Jim Crow' as an encore to his fights, earning the nickname Jim Crow.<sup>72</sup> Jumping Jim Crow merged into the broader practice of singing 'negro songs', or supposedly accurate plantation music, a line of work some black people engaged in.<sup>73</sup> Like all street performers these men and women were vulnerable to the local authorities, but the reports of their appearances in the courts caricatured and hyperbolized their blackness, essentially turning them into comic sketches. In a report titled 'Jim Crow on the "wheel"', a man named Domingo who had been repeatedly arrested for performing the act was charged along with 'Black Sal' for illegally begging and 'unlawfully using

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<sup>68</sup> Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage*, pp. 89-129; Pickering, 'White Skin', p. 87.

<sup>69</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 145-85.

<sup>70</sup> *The Times*, 8 October 1836, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Alastair Bonnett, 'How the British Working Class Became White: The Symbolic (Re)formation of Racialized Capitalism' *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11:3 (1998), 316-40.

<sup>72</sup> *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 8 January 1837, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Bratton, 'English Ethiopians', p. 129.

his legs in the character of Jim Crow'. Domingo was caricatured with Jim Crow's dialogue and grotesque, elasticated facial imagery:

Magistrate: I am bound to believe what has been stated, and I shall commit you for a month to the mill.

Jim Crow: (showing his white masticators), berry good, massa; 'spose yot call this 'bolishing nigger slavery.

He was then removed with his *fair* partner alluded to, who was ordered to accompany him for a week, in wheeling about.<sup>74</sup>

It was also used to degrade black people who clearly identified themselves as respectable. In Hetherington's *London Dispatch* a dispute in court between two fashionably dressed 'rival blacks', both Americans and one a chief cook on a ship and the other a singer, was given extensive space. A fight allegedly began when the singer greeted the cook and asked him to shake his hand, which the cook resisted since the singer made 'ridicule of your own country, singing nigger songs 'bout de street'. These tensions over the song were shared by the magistrate, who was incredulous that Jim Crow could be a respectable song, particularly when sung by a black singer. The complainant described the fight, continuing:

He guv me black eye. (Increased laughter.)

Magistrate: Well, I don't understand how he could do that at all [...]

Mr. Ballantine asked the complainant whether it was true he sung about the streets?

Complainant (bridling up): Sartainly not, your warship. I got a 'gagement at de teatre – de Garrick Teatre, where I sing ebery ebening.

Mr. Ballantine: Negro songs, I suppose, such as 'Jim Crow,' and other popular ones of that sort? (Laughter.)

Complainant: Yes, your warship I sing 'Jim Crow.'

Mr. Ballantine: In character, I think (Loud laughter.)<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *The Era*, 20 October 1839, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> *London Dispatch*, 26 August 1838, p. 5.

However, it was not necessary for black people to perform the act to receive the moniker. An alleged thief operating in Billingsgate market was brought to Mansion House, and named ‘Jim Crow’s brother Tom’. Setting the comic scene, the reporter noted that there was always something ‘ludicrous connected with his adventures’. The prisoner denied stealing two soles, but the Lord Mayor was sceptical since he had been in prison for theft previously:

Mr. Goldham: You remember when you was caught with half-a-bushel of soles about your body.

Tom Crow: Yes, Massa, but not steal ‘em, Massa; only cooked ‘em.

The Lord Mayor: Cooked them! What do you mean by cooking them, when they were found upon your person?

Tom Crow: I run about till me was piping hot, and when dey stop me de fish was fit to be eat. (Great laughter)[...]

The Lord Mayor: And how often has he been detected thieving?

Mr. Goldham: I have turned him out of the market twenty times, but on a dark night he is sure to get in by means of his complexion.

The Lord Mayor: I shall commit him for two months to Bridewell.

Mr. Goldham: Perhaps, my Lord, you will be satisfied with sending him to prison for one month.

The Lord Mayor: You see, prisoner, how tenderly Mr. Goldham is disposed to treat you.

Tom Crow: Ah! he is a good man: Massa Goldham berry good man. If he want his fish cooked, me run five mile to do it well for he; he berry good man. (Laughter).<sup>76</sup>

Reporters often adapted much of their material, editors often manipulated what they received, and these reports clearly turn their subjects from real people into a cast of characters performing blackface buffoonery.<sup>77</sup> This may well have been exploited by black people themselves; acting as a comic thief and thereby receiving some degree of Mr. Goldham’s protection may have been a conscious strategy on the part of ‘Tom Crow’.<sup>78</sup> However, his success as a thief was not attributed to his wit or guile but rather the fact that he supposedly could not be seen at night.

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<sup>76</sup> *The Champion*, 26 December 1836, p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Royle, ‘Newspapers and Periodicals in Historical Research’ in Laurel Blake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (eds), *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (London: MacMillan, 1990), 48-62.

<sup>78</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 232.

The mechanics and rapidity of the Jim Crow craze's dissemination of these comic stereotypes of black people need to be underlined; blackface had racist applications as soon as it became popular in Britain.<sup>79</sup> Jim Crow immediately opened the door for humorous representations of black people in courts and stereotypical labelling of them by neighbours, workmates and strangers. It also encouraged the importation of large quantities of 'Yankeeana'. Following on from the craze, Americanophile radicals like Cleave and Hetherington realized the popularity of American humour and began clipping joke columns and comic stories from imported newspapers, inventing a practice that would become a fad later in the century.<sup>80</sup> These columns became regular features in their satirical newspapers, often including material that reduced black people to their bodies through animalistic and dehumanizing similes and metaphor.<sup>81</sup> This insensitivity to the racist nature of the jokes was symptomatic of wider problems with the radical veneration of America's democracy and culture, a tradition begun by Paine and Cobbett and intensified during the Jacksonian period. This idealization conflicted with radicalism's opposition to slave labour; the consequent inconsistencies and ambiguities led to confused racial politics, arguments of equivalence between slavery and the factory system, and even the adoption of pro-slavery viewpoints amongst radical migrants to the United States.<sup>82</sup>

As with Tom Crow and Domingo, this reduction to the body was also present in British courts. Magistrate Ballantine clearly had a stock joke that black people could not receive black eyes, since he repeated it in another case that he threw out, this time of a woman racially assaulted by a neighbour, who attacked her after swearing 'she could upset the biggest blacking-bottle in London':

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<sup>79</sup> Pickering, 'White Skin', p. 87; Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy*, pp. 109-37.

<sup>80</sup> Bob Nicholson, 'Jonathon's Jokes', *Media History* 18:1, (2012), 33-49.

<sup>81</sup> *Odd Fellow*, 18 September 1841, p.4; 18 December 1841, p. 4; *Cleave's Gazette of Variety*, 25 May 1839, p. 1; 22 June 1839, p. 1; *Cleave's Penny Gazette*, 10 February 1838, p. 1; 22 October 1842, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Michael J. Turner, 'Chartism, Bronterre O'Brien and the "Luminous Political Example of America"', *History* 13:2, (2012), pp. 199-227; Andrew Heath "The producers on the one side, and the capitalists on the other": Labor Reform, Slavery, and the Career of a Transatlantic Radical', *American Nineteenth Century History* 13:2, (2012), pp. 199-227; Ruth Livesey and Ella Dzelzainis (eds.), *The American Experiment and the Idea of Democracy in British Culture, 1776-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013).

Defendant – Yer worship, ax Black Bet if I gave her a black eye. (Laughter.)

Mr. Ballantine – It might be rather difficult to give a black woman a black eye.<sup>83</sup>

His amusement dovetailed with the way that the street-performers he was charged with persecuting would come to view Jim Crow. The Punch performer interviewed by Henry Mayhew shared Ballantine's enjoyment of physical humour:

Enter *Jim Crow*

*Jim sings "Buffalo Gals," while coming up, and on entering Punch hits him a whack of the nose backhanded, and almost breaks it.*

*Jim.* What for you do that? Me nigger! me like de white man. Him did break my nose.

*Punch.* Humbly beg your pardon, I did not go to help it. (For as it had been done, you know, it wasn't likely he could help it after he'd done it – he couldn't take it away from him again, could he?)

*Jim.* Me beg you de pardon. (For ye see, sir, he thinks he's offended Punch.) Nebber mind, Punch, come and sit down, and we'll hab a song.<sup>84</sup>

Mayhew's *Figaro* was responsible for the first redevelopment of Jim Crow within British print satire and a decade later he was interviewing one of the street performers who continued this project of hybridization. However, this body was not one of inverted hierarchy and of carnival, but instead of the ossification of supposed racial differences and the dehumanizing comedy that results. As with Mr. Ballantine's black eye jokes and Cleave and Hetherington's Yankee joke columns, this contributed to the lasting legacy in bodily humour and the comedy of manners of grotesque and simple-minded black archetypes.

#### IV. Conclusion

However fleeting the Jim Crow craze was, it had a multifaceted impact on early Victorian humour, newspapers, racial attitudes, commodity culture, and street culture. American culture

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<sup>83</sup> *Morning Post*, 25 October 1839, p. 4.

<sup>84</sup> Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, III, p. 55.

was of clear importance to the early Victorians, being a malleable import that could be integrated into British comic traditions. The adoption of Jim Crow's wheeling body in the satirical press illuminates the retention, albeit modified, of bodily humour as a crucial element in Victorian satire, and was part of a populist reworking of satire that muddied the boundary between the rough and respectable and allowed newspapers to negotiate away from the underground without abandoning edgy humour. Similarly, Jim Crow's role within popular street culture indicates the continuing importance of quotidian carnival and the Victorian authorities' immediate revulsion toward it, highlighting that rather than purely due to swift legitimization within the theatre blackface became respectable because of the battles to contain it and demarcate its limits. The Jim Crow craze therefore deserves acknowledgement as a forebear to all of the Victorian battles against strangeness, transgression and heterodoxy in the modern city. Yet its success and importance as a comical form cannot be divorced from its racism, since its carnivalesque and subversive uses relied, at their hearts, upon the character of the black buffoon. In producing a demotic culture it also violated and degraded Britain's black population long before imperialism intensified this process. However much the importation of Jim Crow helped continue, adapt and re-direct British comic traditions in the context of Old Corruption and emerging class politics and cultural practices, it was simultaneously a malign representation of black manners, bodies and culture that left a poisonous legacy.