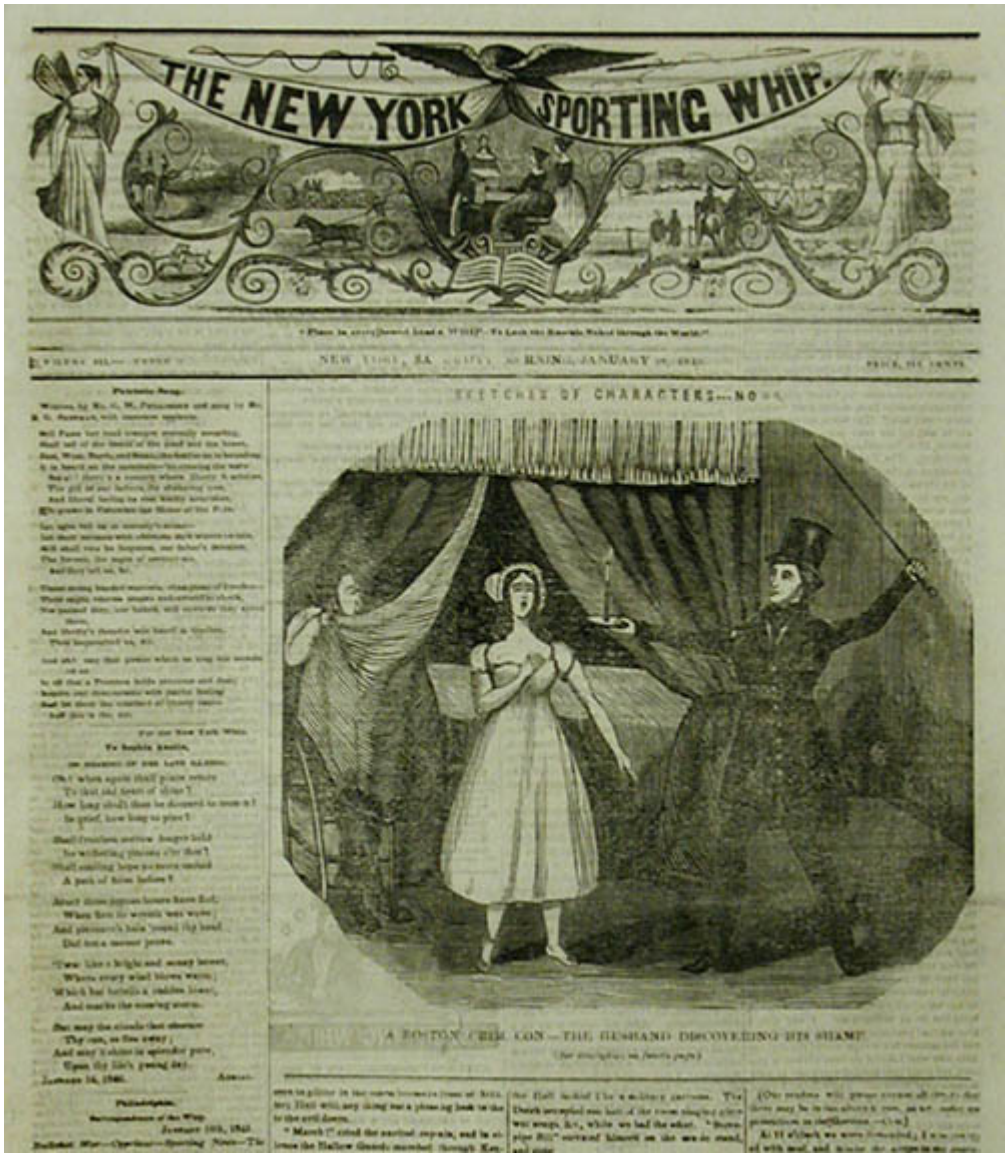
Dancing across the Color Line



I. Few events generated more excitement in antebellum New York City than the arrival of Charles Dickens. In the weeks leading up to his visit, all of the city's newspapers carried daily stories on the impending ceremonies. "The whole community," one editor punned, "is getting as crazy as the very dickens. The Boz fever now reigns to an incredible extent . . . madness will reign paramount for a week or two at least." The climactic moment came on February 14, 1842, when civic leaders hosted a massive ball in Dickens's honor at the Park Theater. It was a remarkable affair that included over three thousand guests, officers in dress uniforms, decorations in the style of the *Old Curiosity Shop*, and *tableaux vivant* of all the early novels. Dickens, we are told, happily danced a half dozen quadrilles and thanked his hosts for their "affectionate" greeting. But he also expressed a desire to see something more of the city: "I have resolved to take up my staff . . . and for the future, to shake hands with Americans, not at parties but *at home*."

Much to the chagrin of the Gotham elite, Dickens did not even mention the "Boz Ball" in *American Notes*, his widely anticipated travelogue from later that fall. Rather, the New York chapter begins with a promenade northward along Broadway, where Dickens notes a number of fine oyster houses and lecture rooms, but no fully satisfying amusements. "How quiet the streets are," he complains: "[A]re there no Punches, Fantoccinis, Dancing-dogs, Jugglers, Conjurers, Orchestrinas, or even Barrel-organs? No, not one. Yes, I remember one. One barrel-organ and a dancing-monkey—sportive by nature, but fast fading into a dull, lumpish Monkey, of the Utilitarian school. Beyond that, nothing lively; no, not so much as a white mouse in a twirling cage." Over the next few paragraphs of *American Notes*, Dickens becomes increasingly impatient. Finally, he decides to quit Broadway above City Hall, "plunging" himself into an east-side neighborhood known for amusement of another sort—the infamous Five Points.

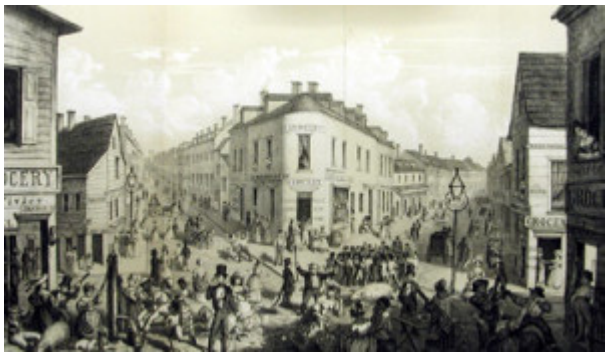


Fig. 1. A contemporary illustration of the Five Points. From D.T. Valentine, Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York for 1855. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Those familiar with Martin Scorsese's recent film, *Gangs of New York*, will recognize the Points as one of the poorest neighborhoods in antebellum America. But its reputation as the era's most notorious "slum" was never simply a function of economics. This status reflected a complex chain of events: the arrival of thousands of Irish immigrants, whose settlement patterns intersected one of the nation's largest communities of newly emancipated slaves; a wave of anti-abolitionist rioting, which sometimes targeted the neighborhood's most successful minority businesses; a burgeoning vice trade, which catered to white men of all classes; the complicity of affluent landlords, who discovered that vice pays reliable rents; and the rapid proliferation of "penny" and "flash" papers, which (quite unlike the city's elite press) treated the cultural spaces of Five Points as newsworthy. Dickens himself helped to launch this last trend during the 1830s, when he featured London's Seven Dials neighborhood in *Sketches by Boz*. One suspects, in fact, that he had this sketch squarely in mind as he ventured into what he called the "Seven Dials of America"—escorted, we are told, by "two heads of the police."

The central episode in Dickens's account of the Points begins with a long "descent" from the street—through darkness, mud, and growing anxiety—when

suddenly, he finds himself in a dance cellar known as Almack's. His description covers three long paragraphs. The most famous passage begins with an audience request:

What will we please to call for? A dance? It shall be done directly, sir: 'a regular break-down' . . . Five or six couples come upon the floor, marshaled by a lively young negro, who is the wit of the assembly, and the greatest dancer known…. [T]he sport begins to languish, when suddenly the lively hero dashes in to the rescue. Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine; new laughter in the dancers; new smiles in the landlady; new confidence in the landlord; new brightness in the very candles. Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine. Dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooded legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs—what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound!

This passage made quite an impression on contemporary readers. The New York *Herald* issued four separate attacks on *American Notes* the week it was published, singling out the "vulgarity" of the Almack's scene for particular scorn. By contrast, the prominent reformer, Lydia Maria Child, celebrated the scene as a clever tactic to focus bourgeois eyes on dreadful living conditions. Modern scholars have shown a different sort of interest. It is the last sentence—Dickens's reference to a million counterfeit Jim Crows—that has received the bulk of attention because it marked a new cultural fault line. On the one hand, the phrase pointed to the emerging blackface industry, whose racial caricatures were fast becoming the nation's most profitable entertainment commodity. On the other, it acknowledged the vitality of an interracial dance culture both distinct from blackface minstrelsy and typically invisible beyond poor neighborhoods like the Five Points.

But what of the hall itself? In the lines leading up to the dance performance, Dickens's portrait is dominated by socio-economic misery. We glimpse "squalid streets," "wretched beds," "fevered brains," and "heaps of negro women," who force the "rats to move away in search of better lodgings." Once inside Almack's, however, the mode of description changes abruptly. Dickens notes a welcoming mulatto "landlady" with "sparkling eyes" and a "daintily ornamented" handkerchief. The "landlord," he suggests, was similarly impressive in his "finery," with a "smart blue jacket" and a gleaming gold "watchguard." By the end of the passage, the poverty of the Five Points is a fading memory. With each dazzling spin of the "lively hero," the initial "wretchedness" is supplanted by energy, confidence, even glory.

This rhetorical shift points to perhaps the most important issue in Dickens's text: the very fact that a prosperous, interracial cultural institution like Almack's *existed* in 1842. Yet its presence begs a more basic question. Although Dickens was a relative newcomer to Manhattan, he seems to have had little trouble finding Almack's. Why, then, have such interracial spaces been so rare in the pages of U.S. history?

II. Part of the answer involves the chronic poverty and prejudice that made the Points such a difficult place to live in the 1840s. Today, in other words, it is hard to see what Dickens saw precisely because antebellum rioters pushed many minority-run venues underground or out of business; or because the early architects of minstrelsy supplanted less jaundiced images of black dancing with an entire industry of racial caricatures; or because limited economic resources made it virtually impossible for most Five Points performers to achieve more than a localized audience. Karl Marx was among the first to note this relationship between social subjugation and historical invisibility. "The poor," he argued, "cannot represent themselves, they must be represented." Marx's point is even truer when race and vice are part of the equation. Most antebellum writers chose not to honor an institution like Almack's with any published commentary. And the descriptions that have survived were usually written by social elites who viewed dancing, drinking, and interracial mixing as self-evident "abominations."

But the blindness is ours, too. The scene Dickens describes seems so singular, at least in part, because of the kinds of questions modern scholars have brought to the table. The vast historical literature on abolitionism is a good case in point. For all of its many virtues, this literature has generally privileged issues of rights and citizenship over commerce and sociability. Thus, we have many fine intellectual and political histories of the antislavery crusade, but relatively little sense of how ordinary blacks and whites came together beyond the convention hall. Recent histories of the New York artisanry, by contrast, have focused almost exclusively on market capitalism's role in fostering racial segregation. These studies help us to understand how and why early industrial workers came to differentiate themselves as "white." Yet this line of questioning makes it virtually impossible to explain the interracial traffic of bodies, cultures, and dollars observed by Dickens.

I do not mean to suggest that the traffic took place on equal terms. One need only think of Dickens's thoroughly odd position at Almack's—with lots of money in his pocket, two policemen in tow, and the circumatlantic publishing industry at his disposal—to appreciate how much social position *mattered* in the Five Points. Nevertheless, our sensitivity to the inequities of power should not prevent us from acknowledging that this was, in fact, a dynamic cultural space shaped by a wide range of historical agents: black and white, male and female, wealthy and poor, tourist and resident.

The patterns become clearer in some of the commentary that followed in Dickens's wake. Consider the following quip from *The Weekly Rake*, one of the

new flash papers from the early 1840s: “[Boz] fell far short of the people’s expectations . . . He compares the Five Points to the Seven Dials. This we don’t like—we can’t bear to hear our favorite retreat abused.” This little bit of underground sarcasm helps to explain why the mainstream press found the description of Almack’s so offensive. The problem was not merely that an English author had given visibility to black cultural forms. It was also a function of what Almack’s represented in the larger urban landscape—a “retreat” for white men from other parts of the city. James Gordon Bennett, the *Herald*’s chief editor, made the distinction clear by caricaturing Dickens as a vulgar consumer: “This account of the Nigger Ball at the Five Points is one of the most singular passages in the book. Boz and his committee appear to have been . . . in their very element—enjoying themselves to the brimful.” Here, of course, the reference was entirely pejorative: this was Bennett’s racialized attempt to settle accounts on the Boz Ball. Still, it presumed a familiarity with one of the city’s worst-kept secrets. Large numbers of white men did indeed make places like Almack’s “their very element.”

But who, exactly, were these shadowy figures? Moral reformers were among the first to recognize that the rise of the modern vice economy stemmed in large part from the massive migration of young single men who came to the city in search of work during the 1820s and 1830s. Almost overnight, lower Manhattan’s boarding houses and cheap hotels had become home to a veritable army of young clerks, secretaries, and bookkeepers with money in their pockets and few breaks on their spending habits. And despite the evangelical warnings about “drunken hells” and “horrifying dissipation,” many of the new arrivals quickly made their way over to the Points.

The editors of *Freedom’s Journal*, the nation’s first African American newspaper, provided a different perspective on the same process. Annoyed by the journalistic convention of blaming recently emancipated blacks for the city’s vice trade, they decided in 1827 to fire back at Major Mordecai Noah, editor of the *New-York Enquirer*: “Our streets and places of public amusement are nightly crowded with [such] characters, of the Major’s own complexion. We wonder the bachelor has never seen them. However disgraceful to our city it may be, it is a fact, that respectable ladies cannot walk our public promenades alone, after dark, without being disgusted or insulted by the rude conduct of base females and their paramours.”

Black elites, in other words, were no less disgusted than white reformers by the proliferation of interracial vice. But they wanted editors like Noah to acknowledge that the “rude conduct” visible in African American neighborhoods was in large part instigated by white visitors.

A few years later, George Washington Dixon, a minstrel dancer intimately familiar with such “rudeness,” offered more extensive commentary in his short-lived serial, *Polyanthos and Fire Department Album*: “There is in this city coteries of young men, many in respectable and fashionable society, whose whole leisure time is employed in licentiousness, seduction, and demoralization.

These coteries are not confined to any particular class. They pervade the commercial, financial, medical, and even the clerical classes." On one level, Dixon's list of professional categories was designed to convey heterogeneity, the surprising variety of men in the "coteries." His larger point, however, was to trace the problem back to a common source—the new urban world of white-collar work.

Those responsible for the "licentiousness," in other words, were *not* the usual suspects: the rowdy mechanics of the Bowery, or East River sailors, out on a spree. Rather, the primary culprits in this case were what contemporary commentators often described as "sporting men." This sobriquet contained a wide range of literal and figurative meanings. Sporting men did in fact spend much of their free time at athletic events. By the 1820s, though, the adjective also conjured nonathletic activities such as gambling, drinking, whoring, fire fighting, or simply loafing. And quite unlike the typical "swell" or "flaneur" (two figures of European origin similarly famous for their perambulations across socio-economic thresholds), the "sports" of New York generally did not observe the lower depths from a distance. Theirs was a voyeurism that routinely included active participation and intimate mixing.

This trail of sin is often hard to see in the mainstream press because of its liminal position: at once within the white-collar professions and gleefully defiant of their moral strictures. Pious and licentious, sunshine and shadow, innocent and vulgar, high and low—antebellum sporting culture took root between and across the binary distinctions represented by middle-class conduct manuals as natural and fixed. In this way, sporting men put themselves in close proximity to the "rougher" social worlds of the emerging urban proletariat, and even identified with some of its causes. But the milieux were never simply equivalent. More accurately, they overlapped and intersected—temporarily—in particular urban sites: brothels, saloons, boxing arenas, cockpits, gambling dens, theaters, and dance halls—places, in short, like Almack's.

III. Much of our ability to map this antebellum underground owes to the rediscovery of a fugitive source—the so-called flash press. Following much the same sarcastic, gossipy, sexually charged format initiated by London's *John Bull* and *The Town*, the New York flash industry reached its high-water mark right around the time of Dickens's visit. The new publications went by a variety of colorful names, including *The Flash*, *The Libertine*, *The Weekly Rake*, and *The New York Sporting Whip*. Most were short lived, not least because of their willingness to flout the boundaries of antebellum libel and obscenity law. Still, the scattered issues that have survived demonstrate a number of important things.

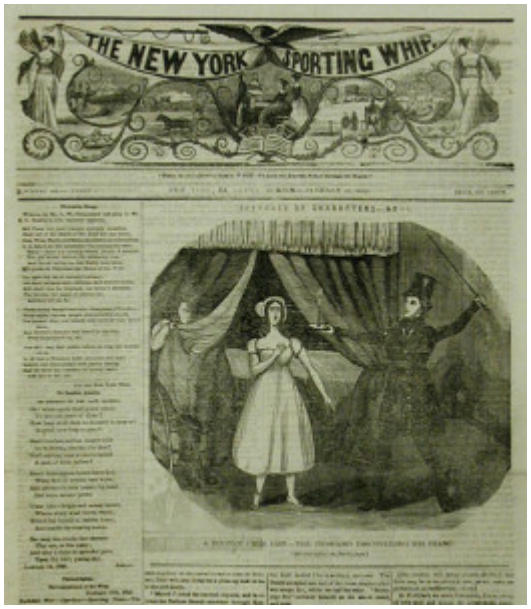


Fig. 2. A cover sheet from one of the underground flash papers: the New York Sporting Whip. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

First, they show that the athletic and nonathletic meanings of “sporting” were two sides of the same cultural coin. Reports on the ring and the turf routinely appeared side-by-side with articles about brothels, saloons, and gambling (a pattern largely invisible in less illicit athletic journals such as the *Spirit of the Times* or *American Turf Register*). These underground sheets also reveal a distinctly northern code of masculine honor that fused the ritual challenges of the rural gentry with the new conditions of urban-industrial life. Many issues featured some sort of “trial of skill” (sprinting, sparring, cockfighting, clog dancing, and the like), usually with a public wager to heighten the stakes. The cultural rituals themselves were descended from common eighteenth-century pastimes, yet after the Second Great Awakening their social status declined precipitously. The flash press thus provided something relatively unique in the era’s urban journalism: an alternative public sphere for white-collar men who rejected the values, tastes, and lifestyles of middle-class moralists.

Beyond its descriptions of physical contests and friendly wagers, the flash press hints at deeper socio-economic tensions. These tensions surface most clearly in a litany of complaints about the excessive rowdiness of the east side “soaplocks” and “jack tars” with whom white-collar sporting men routinely rubbed elbows. Flash readers, in other words, seem to have been happy to enjoy a drink with the locals, perhaps even mimic some of their fashion trends, slang, and dance moves. But the very same columns that make this interclass mutualism visible also demonstrate that the vice economy produced its fair share of resentment and snobbery.

Above all, the sheer scope of the flash industry suggests that antebellum sporting culture was a relatively pervasive phenomenon. There were well over a dozen New York based publications during the 1840s. And the large numbers of gossip items and letters-to-the-editor attest to a population of self-identified sports from as far away as New Jersey, Long Island, Massachusetts,

Pennsylvania, Maryland, Louisiana, and California. The evangelicals, it seems, were quite right to worry.

Such entertainments, they realized, threatened the gender norms upon which middle-class self-definition depended. For its male habitués, sporting culture offered a kind of counteraction against the disciplines of market capitalism, a network of illicit spaces in which unfettered sexuality, physical prowess, and homosocial camaraderie could be pursued away from the drudgery of office work. Middle-class women, by contrast, perceived sporting culture as an obvious threat to the foundations of home, family, and equitable marriage. Significantly, it was female evangelicals who most aggressively pursued moral reform in the Five Points, founding three different missions within about one hundred yards of Almack's. The women who actually worked in the vice trade faced a different set of challenges. Between about 1820 and 1860, when women managed many of the dance halls, brothels, and boarding houses, the cash generated by sporting men supported an unusual degree of female independence. But the proliferation of consumers did not produce greater autonomy. Rather, it led to the emergence of a new profession—the pimp—and an increasingly male-controlled sex industry.

What's missing here, of course, is race, and more specifically, the question of minority agency. Somewhat paradoxically (but not surprisingly), the "lowest" forms of white literature provide the largest number of clues. Consider E.Z.C. Judson's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848), probably the best-known pulp novel before the Civil War. Like Dickens, Judson describes an evening tour of the Points, with a lengthy stop at an interracial venue and ecstatic descriptions of black dancing. And here again, the story points to white-collar patronage. Judson's fictional guide is a young male secretary by the name of Frank Hennock, whom we soon discover has an intimate knowledge of Five Points dance halls. When the party arrives at Almack's, Hennock suddenly breaks into first-name familiarity with the doorman: "[Y]ou know me, Sam, I'm on the cross!"

Unlike Dickens, however, Judson (who wrote under the name of Ned Buntline) had himself spent a good deal of time in the Points, and this experience generated a much finer grain of detail on the page. We discover in *Mysteries*, for example, that the "landlord" of Almack's was an African American man by the name of Pete Williams; that his dance hall was located on Orange Street and cost a shilling to enter; that it held almost two hundred customers of various classes and complexions; that the star of Williams's floor show was known as a juba dancer; and that his dances included "flings, reels, hornpipes, double shuffles, and heel-and-toe tappers."

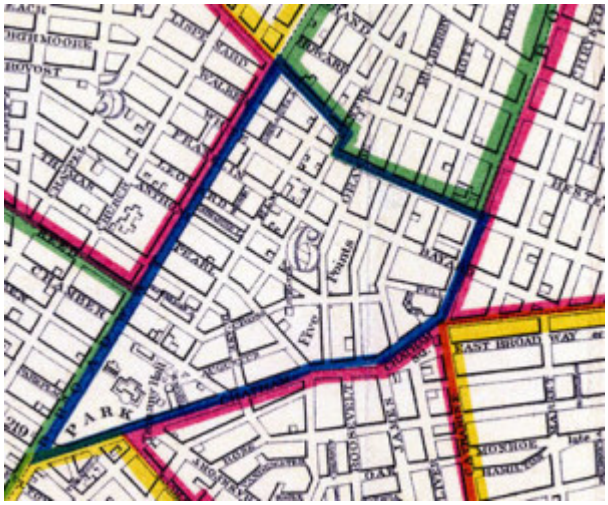


Fig. 3. Detail from an 1831 map of New York City by William Hooker (Peabody and Co.). The Five Points neighborhood is visible within the city's sixth ward, outlined here in blue. Pete Williams's dance hall was on Orange Street above Cross. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Mysteries further suggests that Williams's hall was ransacked on at least one occasion by William Poole (the real-life "Bill the Butcher") and a gang of nativist toughs. It is not at all clear whether this actually happened. Court documents from the late 1840s show no record of an attack, which may indicate that Judson simply invented the scene as a sensational plot twist. Or the antebellum courts may have chosen to ignore the property rights of a minority businessman victimized by a local powerbroker. Either way, though, this scene points to one of the central dilemmas of black entrepreneurship following emancipation. It was at this very moment that African American dance hall owners began to advertise their products more aggressively across the color line. But this policy was always double-edged in its effects. While advertising brought in growing numbers of Frank Hennocks, it also made these "amalgamated" spaces occasional targets for vandalism and violence.

Two years later, Almack's resurfaced in George Foster's *New York by Gas-light*, the era's best-selling city guide. By 1850, the hall was known as "Dickens's Place" (due to the popularity of *American Notes*) and had been forced to relocate because of a fire. Foster presents the performance space as a large underground room with white-washed walls, wooden benches, and an orchestra platform occupied by fiddle, trumpet, and bass drum. He also notes an interior apartment where patrons gambled, purchased cold cuts, chewed tobacco, smoked cigars, and drank homemade champagne. "Three quarters of the women," according to Foster, "were negresses, of various shades and colors," although he mentions a "less tidy and presentable" group of white women, too. His taxonomy of men was more elaborate, ranging from thieves, loafers, Bowery b'hoys, and rowdies to firemen, greenhorns, and "honest, hard working people."

Foster's most intriguing comments focused on Pete Williams. Above all, he emphasized that Williams "made an enormous amount of money," a somewhat nebulous claim to be sure, but one which at least hinted at the possibility of

minority success within the vice trade. Foster also suggested that Williams used his profits to attend a wide range of New York theaters—including the city's most elite venue, the Astor Place Opera House—and may have even written anonymous reviews for the newspapers. Scholars have generally assumed that blacks were confined to the upper gallery of antebellum theaters, or banned altogether. But Foster presents Williams as a regular figure in the pit, calling out for sporting favorites such as Edwin Forrest and Charlotte Cushman. He even compliments Williams for his theatrical acumen, describing him as a "first-rate" critic.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the complexity of these claims. Both Judson and Foster clearly knew Williams's club from first-hand experience. But the texts in which their claims appeared were mass-circulated commodities intended for a variety of market segments. Thus, the ideological registers and racial attitudes can often seem wildly inconsistent. At some moments, Judson and Foster express the transgressive tastes and bawdy humor of white-collar sports; at others, they gasp on behalf of affronted middle-class moralists; at still others, they champion the politics and prejudices of the urban artisanry. The boundaries between the voices, values, and bigotries are not always clear. It is important, therefore, to follow a number of angles of approach into this underground cultural terrain.

City directories make it clear that there was an African American businessman named Pete Williams living and working in the Five Points. The first listing is from 1830, and describes Williams as the "colored" owner of a "boardinghouse" at 41 Orange Street. Over the next sixteen years, he surfaces four more times: at 36.5 Orange in 1836 and 1837, and at 67 Orange in 1843 and 1846. These entries quietly confirm that Williams was an exceptional figure in New York's economic landscape. During the 1830s and 40s, city directories rarely included blacks at all. And those who were included tended to be more elite figures such as church pastors; or barbers, shoemakers, and restaurateurs, who provided useful services for white businessmen (the directories' primary readership). The inclusion of Williams was thus exceptional in terms of race, but also consistent with the market-driven logic of the directories. No other black impresario appeared in these listings. But the fact that Williams did appear suggests that he was unusually successful, and probably counted more than a few white merchants among his customers.

If directories confirm Williams's existence, an 1845 article from the *New York Tribune* helps to clarify Foster's claim that the dance hall was forced to relocate "some three or four years ago":

About 8 o'clock last evening a fire broke out in a small stable in the rear of McBride's Grocery, on Orange Street near Leonard. The loft was filled with hay, and the adjoining building was the large carpenter's shop of Baldwin and Mills . . . Besides the two buildings mentioned, the cooper's shop of Mr. Lynch was destroyed, and Nos. 43, 45, 47, 49, 51 and 53 on Orange Street, all more or less damaged. In the basement of the carpenter's shop of Baldwin and Mills was

the notorious den of Pete Williams, known since the visit to our shores of a distinguished London author as “Dickens Place,” which was completely cleaned out—a process that nothing short of fire could have accomplished. In the rear of the buildings on Orange Street were some twenty or thirty small shanties, occupied by a family in every apartment, numbering perhaps a hundred families in all. These were swept clear, and their occupants—a motley and wretched looking crew whose like exists nowhere in the world—turned into the street. It was impossible to obtain anything like a correct list of the sufferers . . . every cellar vomited forth monstrous masses of reeling wretches disturbed in their disgusting orgies.

At first glance, this article merely underscores the challenges of seeing the local population as three-dimensional historical subjects. It is only because of a random tragedy that the Five Points “masses” became newsworthy. And even in this context, the reporter seems to have been more concerned with denigrating the “wretches” than getting “a correct list of the sufferers.” Still, the fire served to illuminate a number of patterns more commonly suppressed in the antebellum press. We learn, for example, that Williams’s venue was physically connected to at least three white businesses—one above it and two on either side—as well as an interracial shanty colony in the back. This latter fact may explain why Williams was sometimes listed in the directories as a “boardinghouse keeper.”

The architecture itself also complicates the extreme divisions of “high” and “low” that structured the narratives of Judson, Foster, and Dickens. For the first time, we see that this heterogeneous space included artisanal labor (a carpenter, a cooper) as well as white-collar consumption, cottage industries as well as drinking and dancing. If we follow the addresses in the *Tribune* back to contemporary street directories, the picture becomes even more complex. The white folks on this stretch of Orange Street, it turns out, had Irish, Jewish, and perhaps even Italian names: Hugh McBride, Pat Hart, Eliza Mendlesome, and Philip Costello. And contrary to the stereotypes about a brothel in every Five Points building, Mendlesome was listed as a shoemaker with her own business.

IV. These intriguing wrinkles in the social fabric complicate our conventional portrait of a strictly segregated city emerging by the 1850s. The more pressing question, in fact, seems to be not whether, but *how* certain interracial spaces managed to survive within the racial caste system. My point here is not to argue against recent studies that have emphasized a symbiotic relationship between class anxiety and racial segregation. Clearly, the rise of market capitalism had an enormous impact on how the post-emancipation color line was defined and regulated. And in many cases, the ground-level results (segregated workshops, mob violence, minstrel stereotypes) point to a pattern of increasingly rigid racial differentiation. Yet this should not be the end of the story, nor our only story. The most fundamental lesson from Orange Street may be that the market revolution pushed the color line in multiple directions. We might imagine the east side of Manhattan as a kind of cultural crossroads during these years: one trail of consumers pointing to the Bowery Theater to

view white men in blackface; another trail leading to the more heterogeneous milieu of Pete Williams's dance hall.

But what, exactly, did they find there? Above all, they found a space structured by commerce, a world where everything was for sale. Williams, it is important to remember, first encountered Dickens, Judson, and Foster as cash-carrying customers. These customers, in turn, seem to have been drawn to a commodity perceived as unique: a "regular breakdown" in a market saturated with "counterfeit Jim Crows." In many ways, this was a seminal moment in the history of American bohemianism. Precisely because Williams's offerings were*not* minstrelsy, they had to be confined to the lowest substrata of the cultural economy. The process was complicated, though, because it simultaneously generated small pockets of black capital and transformed white customers into underground nonconformists. The U.S. Census of 1850 provides our clearest measure of the sporting migration's material effects. Eight years after Dickens's visit, Williams declared five thousand dollars of property—a remarkably high figure for a resident of New York's notoriously poor sixth ward.

Outsiders often denounced this market-driven race and class mixing as a horrifying erasure of social difference. An 1857 description by a local Protestant missionary was typical. Williams's hall, he wrote, was a place where "the distinction of wealth, position, and character die as by enchantment. The white-gloved aristocrat, the buckram pimp of fashionable life, so far loses his drawing-room tastes, as to join hands with the greasy fingered negress." In actual fact, though, this hall generated its own particular forms of hierarchy and privilege. White men generally occupied the positions of consumers and literary chroniclers. A pair of exceptional black men played the roles of impresario and star. Poor women of both races acted as dance partners and sexual commodities. Policemen served as bodyguards and tour guides. And a much larger number of local residents occupied shanties behind the dance hall, far more concerned with day-to-day survival, one suspects, than Williams's floor show.

We have already noted one important exception: Dickens's initial encounter with the "landlady of Almack's," a reference that may suggest that Williams had a wife and/or female colleague who helped him run the business. Dickens also mentions a dance partner swept "off her feet" by the male lead. Still, the sheer rarity of women observed in positions of artistic prominence and independent consumption serves to differentiate this venue from similar urban spaces five or six decades later. As one recent historian of American bohemianism has observed, it was only during the early twentieth century that white women found it possible to move into the front ranks of boundary crossers.

But here again, this should not be the end of the story. Indeed, what makes Williams's hall particularly noteworthy are the frequent slippages in the hierarchies, the unintended consequences of the commerce. The most far-reaching

of these involves the male virtuoso who first inspired Dickens's to write. We now know a good deal more: that his real name was William Henry Lane, although he generally performed as Juba or Master Juba; that he was born in Providence, Rhode Island, during the late 1820s, part of the first generation of African Americans to come of age following emancipation; that soon after Dickens's visit he became the first black man to break the color line in the minstrel industry; that he participated in a series of "match dances" against Master John Diamond, the leading Irish American minstrel dancer of the day; and that he used his growing fame to forge a more lasting and successful career in Britain, where he eventually performed for Queen Victoria.

Most scholars have assumed that *American Notes* represented the starting point for Lane's public career. But an anonymous letter to one of the flash papers offers a more complex history. An up-and-coming showman by the name of P.T. Barnum, it turns out, had recently managed a young black dancer known as Juba at New York's Vauxhall Gardens. The letter also suggests that Barnum deceived the sporting fraternity in two ways. In 1840, he presented Lane as part of a conventional minstrel show, without informing his patrons that the man behind the burnt cork was black. In 1841, he took the deceit a step further, promoting the young African American virtuoso *as* John Diamond. Barnum even staged bogus "trials of skill" as part of the act, with wagers on Lane-as-Diamond to win!

For evidence of the hopelessly mixed racial origins of U.S. popular culture, this is about as good as it gets. What the letter demonstrates is not simply that Irish immigrants like Diamond imitated black dance moves performed in interracial contact zones, but that one of the first, putatively white imitators was in fact a black man who performed in blackface. For our purposes, though, the more crucial issue is how the accuser made his case. This is what the indignant correspondent wrote to the *Sunday Flash*:

The boy is fifteen or sixteen years of age; his name is "Juba;" and to do him justice, he is a very fair dancer. He is of harmless and inoffensive disposition, and is not, I sincerely believe, aware of the meanness and audacity of the swindler to which he is presently a party. As to the wagers which the bills daily blazon forth, they are like the rest of his business—all a cheat. Not one dollar is ever bet or staked, and the pretended judges who aid in the farce, are mere *blowers*.

The principal offense, in other words, had little to do with the display of non-simulated black talent (that much sporting men could see in the Points every Saturday night). Rather, the problem was that Barnum had "swindled" a group of men who prized fair wagers and authentic trials of skill far more than racial segregation.

One suspects that this scandal in the sporting underground was what drew Dickens to the Points six months later. Perhaps he had heard rumors about Barnum's youthful prodigy, who could perfectly imitate Diamond's imitations. And perhaps it was these very transactions that Dickens had in mind when he

portrayed Lane “leaping gloriously” onto Williams’s counter and laughing “with the chuckle of a million . . . counterfeit Jim Crows!” Given his recent misrepresentations at Vauxhall, it is hard to imagine that Lane did not relish the opportunity to perform as himself for the era’s most famous author—no burnt cork involved. More certain is the fact that he soon capitalized on Dickens’s publicity, discarded Barnum’s bogus personas, and launched a public career that extended well beyond the Five Points.

Lane was part of at least three major dance contests *against* Diamond during the mid-1840s, all in east-side theaters patronized by sporting men. An ad in the *Herald* suggests the specific format:

GREAT PUBLIC CONTEST Between the two most renowned Dancers in the world, the Original JOHN DIAMOND, and the Colored Boy JUBA, for a Wager of $300 . . . at the BOWERY AMPHITHEATER, which building has been expressly hired from the Proprietor . . . The fame of these Two Celebrated Breakdown Dancers has already spread over the Union, and the numerous friends of each claim the Championship for their favorite, and . . . have seriously wished for a Public Trial between them . . . [to] know which is to bear the Title of the Champion Dancer of the World. The time to decide that has come, and the friends of Juba have challenged the world to produce his superior in this Art . . . That challenge has been accepted by the friends of Diamond, and on Monday Evening they meet, and [will] Dance Three Jigs, Two Reels, and the Camptown Hornpipe.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no surviving record of how the contest played out. But the evidence we do have suggests that Lane garnered significant white support. One indicator is the lack of coverage in the *Herald* the following week. While Bennett had been eager to promote the contest, he was surprisingly silent about the results. Also noteworthy are the unapologetic references to the “friends of Juba,” and the use of the term “art” to describe Lane’s dancing. Modern skeptics might argue that such friendship was a far cry from genuine respect; or that the white convention of locating black artistry in vernacular dance forms (as opposed to more intellectual pursuits) was itself a form of condescension. The particular context of these claims, however, points to a different conclusion. Publicly arguing for the superiority of black talent—especially against an Irish American champion, especially in a neighborhood known for its segregationist labor practices and Democratic politics—was no small gesture in 1844. And within less than a year, Lane was out on the road, headlining an interracial minstrel troupe of his own.

An 1845 playbill from Portland provides a sense of how Lane marketed himself:

THE WONDER OF THE WORLD JUBA Acknowledged to be the Greatest Dancer in the World. Having danced with John Diamond at the Chatham Theatre for $500, and at the Bowery Amphitheater for the same amount, and established himself as the KING OF ALL DANCERS!!

Diamond, not surprisingly, ran similar ads with opposing claims. Diamond and

Lane may have even conceived of the original contest *together*—as a money-making gimmick to benefit both parties. The flash press is full of similar scandals during the 1840s. Yet these possibilities do little to alter the larger significance of Lane's playbill. At the very moment when minstrelsy was becoming an international industry, a black man from the Five Points was talking trash at the expense of the era's leading white dancer. What's more, he was using this talk to poke holes in the color line, not from some marginal site of underground struggle, but through market mechanisms generated by commercial minstrelsy itself.

This brings us to Lane's "Imitation Dance," a kind of one-man cutting contest that served as the finale for most of his recorded performances during the mid-1840s. Another playbill from the same tour provides a typical description:

The entertainment to conclude with the Imitation Dance, by Mast. Juba, In which he will give correct Imitation Dances of all the principal Ethiopian Dancers in the United States. After which he will give an imitation of himself—and then you will see the vast difference between those that have heretofore attempted dancing and this WONDERFUL YOUNG MAN. Names of the Persons Imitated:

1. Mr. Richard Pelham, New York,
2. Mr. Francis Brower, New York,
3. Mr. John Daniels, Buffalo,
4. Mr. John Smith, Albany,
5. Mr. James Sanford, Philadelphia,
6. Mr. Frank Diamond, Troy,
7. Mast. John Diamond, New York.

Recent scholarship has rightly pointed to the deep irony (and cruelty) of a commercial industry that forced Lane to imitate "himself." What also needs to be acknowledged, though, is the enormous market savvy expressed through these stylistic reversals. Lane did not simply claim superiority to the leading white dancers. More ambitiously, he made the blackface industry itself an artistic subject, the very focus of his signature performance. And in this sense, the Imitation Dance served as a powerful act of defiance from someone who, more typically, would have lacked any means of broader representational control. Each night Lane cleared the stage and publicly named his leading competitors. He then closed the show by demonstrating—move for move, gesture for gesture—the "vast difference" between his own art and "those that have heretofore attempted dancing."

V. Ultimately, there are at least two very different ways to assess the broader significance of this interracial history. The first would stress the built-in limits of the transgressions: the fact that they were generally confined to an impoverished vice district; and that no legal and political structures existed to support them. The same context of illegality that made this space a site for social experimentation and subaltern mobility, in other words, also made it enormously unpredictable and dangerous. This interpretation would also

emphasize the obvious inequality of the rewards. Men fared much better than women. And the black men who succeeded most were clearly exceptional figures. Most American cities had similar vice districts and underground venues before the Civil War. Yet no other minority impresario or star rose to similar prominence—a pattern which may suggest that the professional trajectories of Williams and Lane actually required a mass-circulated paean from Dickens to become possible. Significantly, when Lane made his London debut in 1848, the playbills announced him as “Boz’s Juba.”

Fig. 4. A portrait of “Boz’s Juba” from an 1848 London playbill. Courtesy of the Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.

From another perspective, though, the critical issue is not so much the origin, fairness, or frequency of the opportunities, but what one does with them when they arrive. And in this sense, the story of Pete Williams’s dance hall demonstrates a truth long understood by workers in the vice trade: namely, that capitalism is slippery as well as unfair. Just as one market begins to shore up a social boundary, another takes root in its cracks. This line of interpretation would also caution against imposing elite standards of resistance on historical subjects whose lives were very different from the antislavery vanguard. Williams and Lane, it is true, did little to further the community-based, philanthropic causes championed by New York’s leading black activists. Yet this should not lead us to dismiss their historical significance out of hand. One might argue, in fact, that these long-forgotten cultural figures initiated a second model of post-emancipation struggle that continues today. What they began to seize upon was a basic paradox at the very heart of the modern circumatlantic economy. One market can never completely control what another chooses to desire.

Further Reading:

In recent years, the Five Points has generated lots of first-rate work. The studies I have found most helpful include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct* (New York, 1985), Christine Stansell, *City of Women* (Urbana, 1987), Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent* (Ithaca, 1989), Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (New York, 1998), Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York, 2001), and Leslie Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery* (Chicago, 2003). On antebellum sporting culture, see especially, Elliot Gorn, *The Manly Art*(Ithaca, 1986), Stephen Riess, *City Games* (Urbana, 1989), Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros* (New York, 1992), Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (New York, 2002), and Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing* (New York, 2003). The pioneering histories of racial divisions within the antebellum artisanry are Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (Berkeley, 1990), David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York, 1991), and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1994). For studies that complicate the story, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York, 1993), Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder* (London, 1997), W.T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain*(Cambridge, 1998), and Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, 2003). On bohemianism, see Stansell, *American Moderns* (New York, 2000). Finally, all current research on William Henry Lane owes a major debt to Marian Hannah Winter, who opened the door for further exploration with her 1947 article, “Juba and American Minstrelsy,” reprinted in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, ed. by Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, Conn., 2001).

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