

**Response to Laura A. Lindenberger Wellen,
“Picturing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from Harlem, 1938”
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In “Picturing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from Harlem, 1938,” Laura A. Lindenberger Wellen reads Miguel Covarrubias’s illustrations for the Limited Editions Club edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1938) against the backdrop of that text’s complex situation in American cultural history. Convoking the art-critical discourse of visual modernism, the longstanding visual and critical cultures associated with Stowe’s novel, and the trajectory of black emancipation (especially in relationship to the Harlem Renaissance), Wellen argues that Covarrubias’s illustrations “effectively reanimated the religious and political tensions, which made Stowe’s text such a popular and controversial book in the 1850s,” for a contemporary audience (3).

Part of the political efficacy of Covarrubias’s images, for Wellen, resides in the artist’s capacity to translate Stowe’s sentimental novel into a “modern” idiom. That is to say that, while she is confident that “Covarrubias’s images correspond to Stowe’s text in substance and form” (6), she pays careful attention to the way in which the images deploy what she characterizes as the signally modernist “overlap” of “observations of indigenous and folk cultures with experiments in abstraction and design” (5). Whereas some critics—notably, Edward Alden Jewell—criticized Covarrubias’s images for verging on caricature or otherwise deviating from the faithful representation of Stowe’s text, Wellen suggests that Covarrubias’s instantiation of Adolfo Best Maugard’s Mexican-modernist aesthetic comports both with Stowe’s tendency to overdraw her characters for affective purposes and with the modernist propensity for geometry, abstraction, and distortion. For Wellen, Covarrubias heeds both his muse and his moment, and, implicitly, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* transcends the oft-dismissive label “sentimental.”

The other part of that efficacy has to do with Covarrubias’s attention to the multiform work of black emancipation in the early twentieth century. This is most clear in Wellen’s argument when she discusses the ways in which Covarrubias deviates from the traditional modes of illustrating *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and from the narrative itself, with two textually-unmoored images that evoke the contemporary scene of racial and ethnic politics. These two images evince Covarrubias’s exercise of artistic prerogative, Wellen implies, and they allow the text’s interlocutors to glimpse his constructive project. The first is the depiction of George’s (Eliza’s runaway husband) fist raised against a bill offering a reward for his recapture. Wellen argues that this image appropriates a potent symbol—the raised fist signifying the “solidarity of workers and oppressed peoples” (21)—of the Spanish Civil War and deploys it in a novel context. The second image depicts an “emaciated” and “shackled” black figure, which is buried in a foregrounded hill; back of it sits a “two-story mansion” (22). Wellen connects this to George’s truism about the utter equality of death, but she might’ve read this even more strongly and noted the

relationship of the body to the manse: the work-ruined body nourishes the soil upon which the plantation rests. The oft-celebrated gentility and manner of southern aristocratic society, the picture suggests, has a dark foundation; black bodies are the condition of its very possibility.

Wellen's readings of individual images in Covarrubias's set, taken together, are the strongest piece of her argument. Along with her analysis of his utterly novel contributions to the corpus of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illustrations, discussed in the preceding, she is attentive to the ways in which Covarrubias amends or re-imagines obligatory scenes—such as the famed ice-flow maneuver. It is when working in this vein that she offers the most fully developed, and most convincing, reading in the article, which concerns the depiction of Tom seated with Eva. Wellen argues that Covarrubias responds to a general trend toward illustrating Tom as an aged and somewhat feeble (read, non-threatening) uncle with a depiction of the protagonist as a young, virile, masculine, and moral black man. In the image, Eva sits atop Tom's knee, and the bondsman holds her about the waist with his arm. It is a portrait of spiritual intimacy. Wellen rightly alerts the reader to the way in which the image shatters the taboo concerning the casual interaction of 'black man' with 'white womanhood'—the latter was virtually deified in the postwar South—and she argues that the image suggests that "the young Tom's inability to hurt Eva is a choice rather than a physical impossibility" (16). Again, though, Wellen might have made more of this image: she notes that Tom gazes heavenward as Eva reads to him from the Bible, but, unlike in her reading of the image picturing Eva's death, she doesn't use this image to mark the perceived differences between white and black Christianities. Eva uses text as a religious interface; Tom listens but communes otherwise. There is a visual rhyme between the directionalities of Tom's gaze and Eva's finger, which the directionality of Eva's gaze (text-ward) underlines. The image, perhaps, suggests that Tom engages the divine more directly, or more viscerally, and this might complicate its positive content—reifying, as it may, the binary of white mind and black body. Notwithstanding this detail, however, the depiction of Tom *is* unambiguously adulatory. It doesn't, to my mind, trouble Wellen's reading.

Synoptically, I have few problems with the content of Wellen's argument—the most significant being that, while I understand a forum such as this requires a level of brevity and concision, I want to hear *more* about the illustration history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and about Covarrubias's images. My notes about carrying the readings of individual images further are one aspect of this desire. Wellen's engagement with the images is tantalizing, provocative, and astute, and it makes a convincing case for seeing these narrative accoutrements as an occasion for criticism. However, I did find the programmatic arrangement of Wellen's article a bit puzzling: it begins with a brief account of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* reception history, moves through a quasi-biographical discussion of Covarrubias and his craft, and terminates with the discussion of the images, which is the heart of the argument. I want to make a case, here, for shifting the frame of the engagement slightly, so that the visual culture of the novel—and Covarrubias's

interventions in it—become more clearly the focus, and I want to suggest three avenues for such an adjustment in an expanded edition, which I glean from Wellen’s incipient gestures toward the worlds of Covarrubias’s text.

1) By and large, the “unprecedented” visual culture surrounding Stowe’s novel is invoked rather than exposed. When did it begin? Who are the major contributors, and what is/are their social location(s)? What is the evolutionary trajectory of this culture? Does the trajectory shift at significant historical moments? What is its terminus? What is its reception history? Wellen (helpfully) engages this context at times, but based on the received argument, this (rather than the popularity of the novel more generally) is *the* relevant context. If the article’s exposition were to offer a more robust account of this visual culture, then the weight of Covarrubias’s deviations from it might be brought more clearly to light. I rather appreciate Wellen’s contention that Covarrubias tweaks an extant visual culture, but it would be interesting to know more about that culture as it stands when Covarrubias intervenes. Too, the theoretical underpinnings of Wellen’s account of Covarrubias’s intervention could find more development if she were to pursue an expanded version of this article. Wellen might make good use of Judith Butler’s theory of “resignification” in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997): insofar as the extant visual culture of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* constrains Covarrubias’s creative autonomy—Wellen suggests that it does—his modifications with respect to obligatory or canonical images garner great force from their deviance. This tradition becomes, in Butler’s idiom, the condition of possibility for Covarrubias’s critique. Or, if Butler’s text is too far removed from the scene of analysis, the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on the “signifyin(g)” tradition in African American culture might be another option for discussing the manner in which Covarrubias’s images are political or critical. Aren’t Covarrubias’s images an example of what Gates calls “oppositional” signifyin(g)? Whether it were to address Butler or Gates, it seems to me that Wellen’s analysis could enlarge the scope of either’s theorizing to include the work of visual or material artifacts, and she would augment the significance of her own argument thereby.

2) Insofar as I correctly identify Wellen’s thesis—i.e. Covarrubias’s illustrations “effectively reanimated the religious and political tensions, which made Stowe’s text such a popular and controversial book in the 1850s” (3)—that thesis implies that she might say more about one of two things: either the reception of Covarrubias’s images or the specific historical and political events to which his images speak. Wellen’s reading of the raised, clenched fist is a fine example of the latter type of expansion, but what is it about the Harlem Renaissance, more broadly, that occasions Covarrubias’s mode of revision? Another way to ask the same question might be to say, what is it about the Limited Editions Club edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in particular, that commands attention? It is possible that I misread the focus of Wellen’s argument—that it is, in the last analysis, about Miguel Covarrubias—but this misreading would recommend an alteration in the argument’s deployment, which would signal this concern more forcefully.

3) Lastly, throughout her argument, Wellen invokes the art-critical discourse on visual modernism. She notes the tendency of this discourse to valorize depoliticized images or texts (1, 24); she classifies Covarrubias as a “modern” artist (6); she notes that the designation of a work as “unmodern” is often the attempt of a critic to derogate a cultural artifact, which said critic finds unsavory (6). I admit difficulty in exhuming the operative definition of “modern” or “modernist” in Wellen’s article, and I think her argument might benefit from a clarification of her usage. In particular, Wellen writes, “if critics perceived a disjuncture between Stowe’s text and Covarrubias’s illustrations, [it] raises the question of how and why artists and writers are designated as ‘modern’ (or ‘unmodern’) at specific historical moments” (6), but she doesn’t interrogate the politicization of the terms at this point in her text. I think her discussion toward the end of the article, wherein “unmodern” becomes a euphemism for “propagandistic,” clarifies her point to some degree, but the reader has to wait too long for this elaboration.

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