

Commentary on “Picturing ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ from Harlem, 1938”  
By Jo-Ann Morgan

The sixteen lithographs that Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias created for a 1938 book version of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are exceptional, if not unprecedented, among the seemingly endless wellspring of imagery painted, sculpted, printed for book illustrations, advertisements, theatrical ephemera, and scores of other commercial products since the book debuted eighty-six years earlier. In her article “Picturing ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ from Harlem, 1938,” Laura A. Lindenberger Wellen positions Covarrubias’s illustrations within the context of a Harlem Renaissance modernist aesthetic, taking into account some of the Uncle Tom imagery that preceded him. I applaud the inquiry even if I’m not convinced by her claim that his updated renditions of Uncle Tom’s story “effectively reanimated the religious and political tensions” which had originally made Stowe’s novel both popular and controversial. But, if such a resolve eludes my reading of the contribution made by this fascinating artist, the article nevertheless opens up speculation about the resiliency of the perennial bestseller and the visual culture it spawned, and, for me, provokes ideas about possible artistic links connecting Covarrubias to his contemporaries.

Covarrubias would have made a logical choice to illustrate this 1938 Limited Editions Club reissue of the best seller, for according to Wellen, he had been “illustrating black life in Harlem since he arrived there in 1923.” An opportune meeting of the influential writer and critic Carl Van Vechten helped the newly arrived young artist secure work designing covers for such literary classics of the era as Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* (1926) and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935), among others. As well, he was a prolific chronicler of African American life and culture in illustrations for various magazines and books.

Wellen offers there are two visual strategies inherent within Covarrubias’s illustrations. Some he “drew from the visual conventions established by earlier editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” The thrilling sight of Stowe’s “young quadroon” Eliza escaping across ice floes on the Ohio was climactic tableau on stage in “Tom shows,” running in NYC since 1853, and touring the country ever since. So was slave Tom and slaveholder’s daughter Eva, seated together in a garden. Both scenes were ubiquitous in all the illustrated books and in promotional material for performances. Wellen credits Covarrubias with “creatively tweaking earlier images.” Granted, he stylized the familiar figures in a modernist guise that favored non-European inspired geometric abstractions over naturalism, yet the scenes curiously retain the inherent dynamic of Hammatt Billings’s engravings for the 1852 original. As example, on first look Covarrubias’s portrayal of Tom seated with Eva St. Clare reading a Bible together under an arbor might seem to challenge tradition. Stowe, as Wellen points out, described her eponymous character as “a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man.” Early depictions shown him with dark hair and a muscular build. Why he aged quickly in visual culture after emancipation and, especially, became an old man in live performance, has been covered by several scholars. By 1870s, Tom was almost exclusively portrayed as an elderly man, a perception that persisted in Covarrubias’s time. A multi-million dollar motion picture of 1927 featured

actor James Lowe, then 47, as a very old Tom. By comparison, it is tempting to find Covarrubias flouting tradition by making Tom “broad and strong.” However, I must point out, his shoulders slump, and where Wellen sees him “listen intently,” as opposed to the vague passivity of many printed predecessors, one could instead call his closed eyes and placid expression somnolent. The flower garland with which Eva adorned Tom’s neck, was here fashioned into a top knot for his head, reminiscent of white tufts of hair on the theatrical bald pates worn in Tom shows. I wish I could agree with Wellen that “Covarrubias reinstated Tom’s moral strength,” but whatever solidity the figure holds seems more of style than substance. He sits impassive like an ancient stone sculpture. Perhaps Covarrubias was thinking of [those large stone heads of Olmec people of pre-Mayan Mesoamerica \(1250-900\)](#). “In Mexico, Covarrubias was a part of a group of young artists fascinated by the country’s indigenous populations,” we learn.

For understanding the illustrations that “have no visual precedent in earlier Uncle Tom’s Cabin imagery” perhaps we can look to Covarrubias’s New York contemporaries. His image of an omnipotent white hand closing in over the mother and child (Fig. 4) recalls work by several African American artists. In the mural “Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers” (1934) Aaron Douglas used an expressive hand-like shape, evoking South Carolina Venus fly traps and wafting miasmatic gas that seems to grasp at the figure fleeing north. Jacob Lawrence several times used large looming hand shapes to express southern oppression. See panel #11 in his series on Harriet Tubman, or panel #1 in his series on Frederick Douglass (both late 1930s). Even closer in style and empathy was Mexican artist Jose Clements Orozco. Known as a muralist, he was also a lithographer, like Covarrubias, and, apropos, he was in New York between 1927 and 1934, and returned to the state several times in the late 1930s to complete commissioned works. Orozco’s [prints](#) of [peasants](#) and workers done in the 1930s suggest a kindred spirit.