

Picturing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Harlem, 1938

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Uncle Tom's Cabin was an immediate, unparalleled commercial success. First published in 1852, the novel famously outsold every other book of its time except the Bible. The book's immense popularity speaks to its timely political message—President Lincoln would reportedly greet Harriet Beecher Stowe when they met in 1862 by saying, “So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war.”¹ Dismissed by later critics *because* of its popularity (a certain modernist impulse requires “good” fiction to be obscure) the book also spoke the language of popular nineteenth-century religion. As Jane Tompkins has argued, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* “is the *summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story about itself: the story of salvation through motherly love.”² The novel's revolutionary potential, Tompkins continues, existed in its fervent belief in the sacredness of the domestic space and family and its call for a re-ordering of society with the domestic space as a governing model. The overlap between this evangelical premise and the book's popular appeal underscores Stowe's success: she managed to combine a theology tied

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¹ Lincoln's comment is quoted in the introduction to the Limited Editions Club 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or Life among the Lowly*. (1852). (New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1938): vi.

² Tompkins, Jane P. “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History.” In *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Casebook*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 65.

to Victorian domesticity with a plot and melodramatic style that made it easily accessible to middle-class readers.

The book also sparked an unprecedented production of imagery and consumer products: it was, essentially, the first mass-marketed American blockbuster. Images of Stowe's characters ranged from elegant Victorian drawings, to children's book illustrations, to minstrel shows. The turn of the century also saw a variety of theatrical and film productions, with corresponding sheet music and illustrations, related (sometimes only loosely) to Stowe's novel.³ Accompanying a southern critical backlash against the book, racist images of Stowe's characters also appeared and persisted in popular culture. Between 1852 and the 1940s, some version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was always in the public eye.

By 1938, when the publisher of the Limited Editions Club decided to release a newly illustrated version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe's text was a recognized classic.⁴ And, from the vantage point of the New York publishing world, there was no one better to illustrate this new edition than Miguel Covarrubias, an artist and cartoonist from Mexico who had been illustrating black life in Harlem since he arrived there in 1923. For Covarrubias, what had begun as occasional magazine commissions turned into regular opportunities to publish images of African American life and culture in *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*; by the late 1930s, he had become the most sought after illustrator of black life in New York and a popular caricaturist of the day's celebrities and politicians. Many of his drawings were republished in two popular monographs,

³ Perhaps most famously, the Duncan Sisters presented the musical *Topsy & Eva* focusing on the two girls in the story. Their production ran from 1923 through the 1950s.

⁴ The Limited Editions Club was a publishing house which issued limited runs of reissued classics, illustrated and signed by famous artists. Many of these books were then republished in a more affordable version by The Heritage Press. The Heritage Press and the Limited Editions Club versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are identical, except for the last page of the LEC version, which has one additional image (of Tom, Eva, and Topsy reading together) and the artist's signature. Covarrubias also illustrated a 1932 edition of René Maran's *Batouala*, a 1935 edition of Herman Melville's *Typee: A Romance of the South Seas*, and a 1948 edition of Pearl S. Buck's translation of *All Men Are Brothers* for the Limited Editions Club.

The Prince of Wales and Other Famous Americans (1925) and *Negro Drawings* (1927).

Covarrubias's visual illustrations of black humor, dance, and music offer an important vision of Harlem by one of its many enthusiastic visitors and, because they were so widely published, his images became some of the key sites for the public imagination of the jazz age in Harlem. He illustrated an impressive roster of books by leading black intellectuals of the period, including Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues* (1926), Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), and W.C. Handy's *Blues: An Anthology* (1926). He also illustrated several historical novels dealing with slavery, including Theodore Canot's *Adventures of an African Slaver* (1854), reissued in 1928. His *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illustrations were particularly important to him: as his godfather would later recall, these works were the "guiding goal" of the artist's life.⁵ In them, Covarrubias situates *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the context of Harlem in the 1930s, creating sympathetic, enigmatic, and powerful black characters. In his reimagining of the text, he overlaps secular and sacred visual referents; starting with the very first image in the book, Covarrubias underscored Tom's spirituality by depicting Uncle Tom in prayer, his hands clasped and eyes closed (Fig. 1). I believe that by examining Covarrubias's illustrations and their connections to Harlem and the visual culture of the late 1930s, we can consider how he effectively reanimated the religious and political tensions which made Stowe's text such a popular and controversial book in the 1850s.

That the young cartoonist and illustrator who had just arrived in New York became well-known so quickly for his depictions of African-Americans may initially seem surprising.⁶ Covarrubias's introduction to Harlem was defined by a series of lucky encounters: a few days after arriving in New York, he was introduced to Carl Van Vechten, an important writer and

⁵ Williams, Adriana. *Covarrubias*. Ed. Doris Ober. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1994): 96. Williams cites this story from a note to Limited Editions subscribers by Harry Block; it is quite possible that Block was speaking hyperbolically.

⁶ See also Williams, Adriana. "Miguel Covarrubias and the Emerging Image of Harlem." In *Covarrubias: Cuatro Miradas – Four Visions*. (Spain: Conaculta INBA, 2005): 51-74.

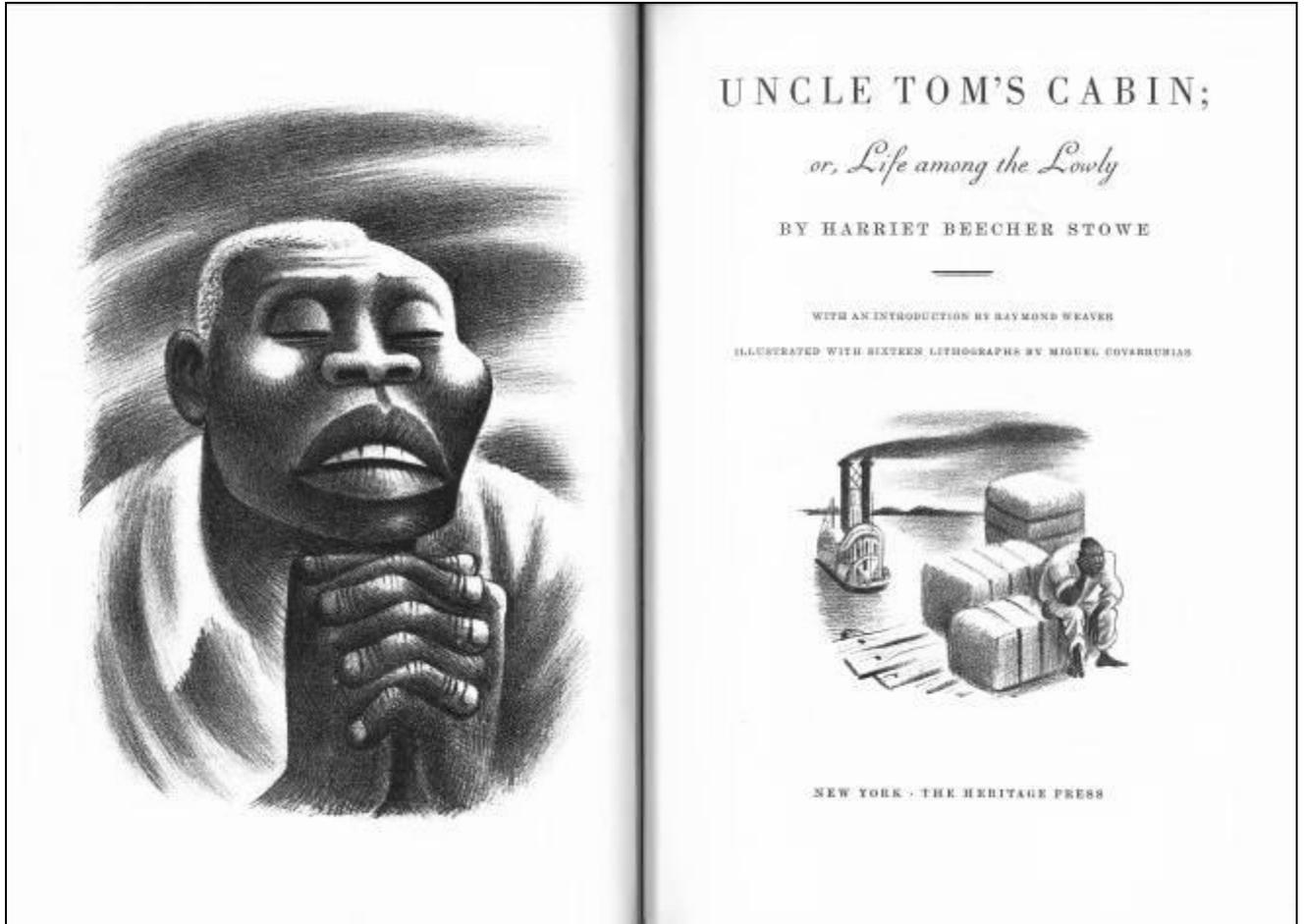


Fig. 1

photographer who was a patron of artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the literary executor for Gertrude Stein. Van Vechten immediately liked the shy, 19-year-old Covarrubias and was impressed by his drawings. He would later write in the preface to *The Prince of Wales*:

From the beginning I was amazed at his ability to size up a person on a blank sheet of paper at once: there was a certain clairvoyance in this. ... Speaking English imperfectly, a newcomer to this country, frequently he was actually ignorant as to whether his model was actor, painter, or author. In spite of this handicap, or because of it, his caricatures almost invariably go deeply behind the mere sculptural formation of the face. They are often a complete criticism of a personality.⁷

It was Van Vechten who pushed for Covarrubias to design the cover of *The Weary Blues* and who likely introduced him to the publisher Alfred A. Knopf, as well as the cultural elite, or “Smart Set” as they were called in New York. Covarrubias took to his new surroundings instantly, spending his money on silk shirts and cravats, and going out nightly to Harlem clubs and parties, sketchbook in hand.

Covarrubias’s connection to Harlem may have also had to do with the similarities between the modern art scene in Mexico in the 1920s and Harlem’s cultural life in the 1930s. In Mexico, Covarrubias was part of a group of young artists fascinated by the country’s indigenous populations and, simultaneously, experimenting with visual strategies. He was a close friend of Adolfo Best Maugard, the art educator credited with creating a national arts program in Mexico under Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos. Best Maugard’s system consisted of seven basic elements of drawing, all found from nature: point and straight line, spiral, circle, semicircle or arc, wavy line, "s" shape, and zigzag. This modern vocabulary of design was based on his observations of children’s drawings and folk arts. Like Covarrubias, Best Maugard was a self-taught anthropologist and collector of folk arts—his artistic philosophies are consistent with

⁷ Covarrubias, Miguel. *The Prince of Wales and Other Famous Americans*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1925).

those of artists in other countries who were simultaneously overlapping their observations of indigenous and folk cultures with experiments in abstraction and design.⁸ This overlap (and appropriation) is at the heart of what has come to be considered “Modern” art. Best Maugard believed that images comprised solely of these simple elements could elicit emotion from their viewers: that they were capable of communicating complex ideas and experiences. Covarrubias’s caricatures, in turn, made use of a visual vocabulary of geometric forms, abstraction, and simplified line drawings to convey complex social criticisms. As the editor of *Vanity Fair*, Frank Crowninshield, observed in 1927:

In all of [Covarrubias’s drawings] we feel, not only humor, truth and a mastery of three-dimensional form (no draughtsman of our time is better able to indicate mass and cubical content), but a rarer quality, which, for want of a better word, we may call ‘aliveness,’ a feeling of actuality, plus a rhythmic, almost sensuous movement. In many of these portraits a deep sympathy is evident; in some of them a touch of pathos.⁹

Using the formal designs suggested by Best Maugard, Covarrubias translated his fascination with Harlem’s night life into an extensive body of drawings. His work was called alternately, blasphemous and sympathetic, genius and heretical.

Despite Covarrubias’s protests that the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* illustrations were not caricatures, that they were done “from a more serious point of view,” some critics found fault with his project for its similarity to his caricatures. In 1940, Edward Alden Jewell, the *New York Times* art editor, wrote, “Covarrubias’ formalized lithographs, fairly long on broad caricature and fairly short on emotional appeal, prove not with complete adroitness, I think, to adapt themselves to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous pre-Civil War document.” He continued, “[Illustration] is, or

⁸ The relationship between Modern art and naïve, self-taught, indigenous, and/or folk artists has a long history and has been written about extensively. Two good resources on this connection in Mexico include *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*. Eds. Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) and *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*. Eds. Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan and Gabriela Cano. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁹ Covarrubias, Miguel. *Negro Drawings*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1927).

should be, designed with but one thought in mind: that of furnishing a pertinent, harmonious parallel sensation [with the text]. And if this goal is to be reached, artist and author must be truly affiliated in a reciprocal enterprise.”¹⁰ It is my contention, despite Jewell’s reservations, that Covarrubias’s images correspond to Stowe’s text in substance and form. A caricature is an exaggeration, a distortion in depicting one’s subject. In several cases, Stowe’s characters verge on caricature in their overly dramatic rendering. Further, the sense of pathos, of sympathy, that viewers noted in Covarrubias’s images corresponds nicely with Stowe’s sentimental effect—she was more interested in conveying a feeling of sympathy for her characters than in creating veristic portraits of them. If critics perceived a disjuncture between Stowe’s text and Covarrubias’s illustrations, the issue is less about questions of caricature and faithful illustration, but rather raises the question of how and why artists and writers are designated as “modern” (or “unmodern”) at specific historical moments.¹¹ Covarrubias’s abstract designs, interest in ethnography, fascination with urban cultures, and his direct involvement with an avant-garde community of writers and artists in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s confirm his role as a “modern” artist. And his images for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* underscore the relevance Stowe’s text (which has been read as supremely “unmodern”) had for its readers in the 1930s.

Stowe’s story consists of a set of overlapping narratives. In the first of these, the reader is introduced to a young wife and mother, Eliza, who discovers that her son Harry is to be sold to another owner. In desperation, she flees North with her son: her escape over the frozen Ohio

¹⁰ Jewell, Edward Alden. “The Books as Illustrated Books.” In *Ten Years and William Shakespeare: A survey of the publishing activities of The Limited Editions Club from October 1929 to October 1940*. (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1940): 15, 24.

¹¹ Scholars such as Jane Tompkins and Mary Kelley have approached this question as it relates to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from a feminist perspective; much remains to be said about *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and modernism in relation to issues of race in the United States.



Fig. 2

River is one of the dramatic climaxes of the book. Her husband, George, escapes to find her, and his character offers a compelling critique of the evils of a government that allows people to be enslaved. The title narrative follows Uncle Tom as he is sold away from his family to the St. Clare's plantation in Louisiana. He befriends Eva, the young daughter of his owner, whose angelic goodness foreshadows her early death. Tom's devotion, Christian faith, and quiet humility make him an obedient slave, but also a Christ-like figure, whose eventual death at the hands of a tyrannical owner (after he is sold by St. Clare) underscored, for Stowe's Christian readership, the brutality of the slave system.

In many of his illustrations, Covarrubias drew from the visual conventions established by earlier editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Three scenes, in particular, are the most frequently illustrated of the book: Eliza's escape over the icy Ohio River, Eva and Tom reading the Bible together in a garden, and Eva's death. In his image of Eliza's daring escape (Fig. 2), Covarrubias depicts two men waving menacingly at Eliza from the shore as she jumps desperately across splintering ice floes, holding tightly to her son. In scenes such as this one, Stowe invoked maternal feelings to impress upon her readers their responsibility to protest slavery because it destroyed familial bonds. Her appeal to mothers was overt:

If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, to-morrow morning,--if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o'clock till morning to make good your escape,--how fast could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom,--the little sleepy head on your shoulder,--the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?¹²

Many illustrators, correspondingly, attempted a similar strategy of direct appeal: by making the enslaved characters seem familiar, unthreatening, even racially ambiguous, illustrators continued

¹² Stowe, 33.

Stowe's political plea to her largest readership: white, middle-class women. Like other illustrators, Covarrubias left Eliza's ethnicity indeterminate. Further, her delicate facial features and elegant clothing differ drastically from his images of other enslaved women, an intentional visual strategy of making Eliza pass. Covarrubias's perpetuation of this concession to a white readership, however, was paired with images more overtly engaged in a critical discourse about race and civil liberties.

Many of Covarrubias's images depict whippings, brutal field work, and searches for escaped slaves. In others, Covarrubias visualized the more subtly dehumanizing practices of slave-owners. In Fig. 3, for example, two men in top hats inspect a woman's teeth at a slave market, while she holds her terrified child. The woman's ragged clothing and bare feet contrast with the men's top hats, bow ties, suits, and watch chains. They tower over her and one man pulls her jaw open. His face is almost abstracted—a pointed beak of a nose underscores the sharp line of his frown and his glowering brows. Both men are stout and ugly and their undignified violation of the mother contrasts sharply with her strong, erect, and solid posture. In Fig. 4, a monstrous white hand looms over another mother and child, who hold tightly to one another and stare up at the hand that reaches to separate them. While the hand is drawn crudely, the carefulness Covarrubias paid to the mother and child is evident in the folds of the mother's clothing and head scarf, the delicate tufts of the child's hair, and the work-worn creases of the mother's hand, which cradles her child's head. The emotion of the scene is heightened by the black, inky night they face. This illustration roughly corresponds to Stowe's description of the enslaved woman Lucy, whose 10-month old son is taken from his crib and sold to another owner while she searches for her missing husband. In the text, despite Tom's reassurances of Christ's love and the future of a joyful afterlife, Lucy jumps from the ship in despair and drowns. The



Fig. 3

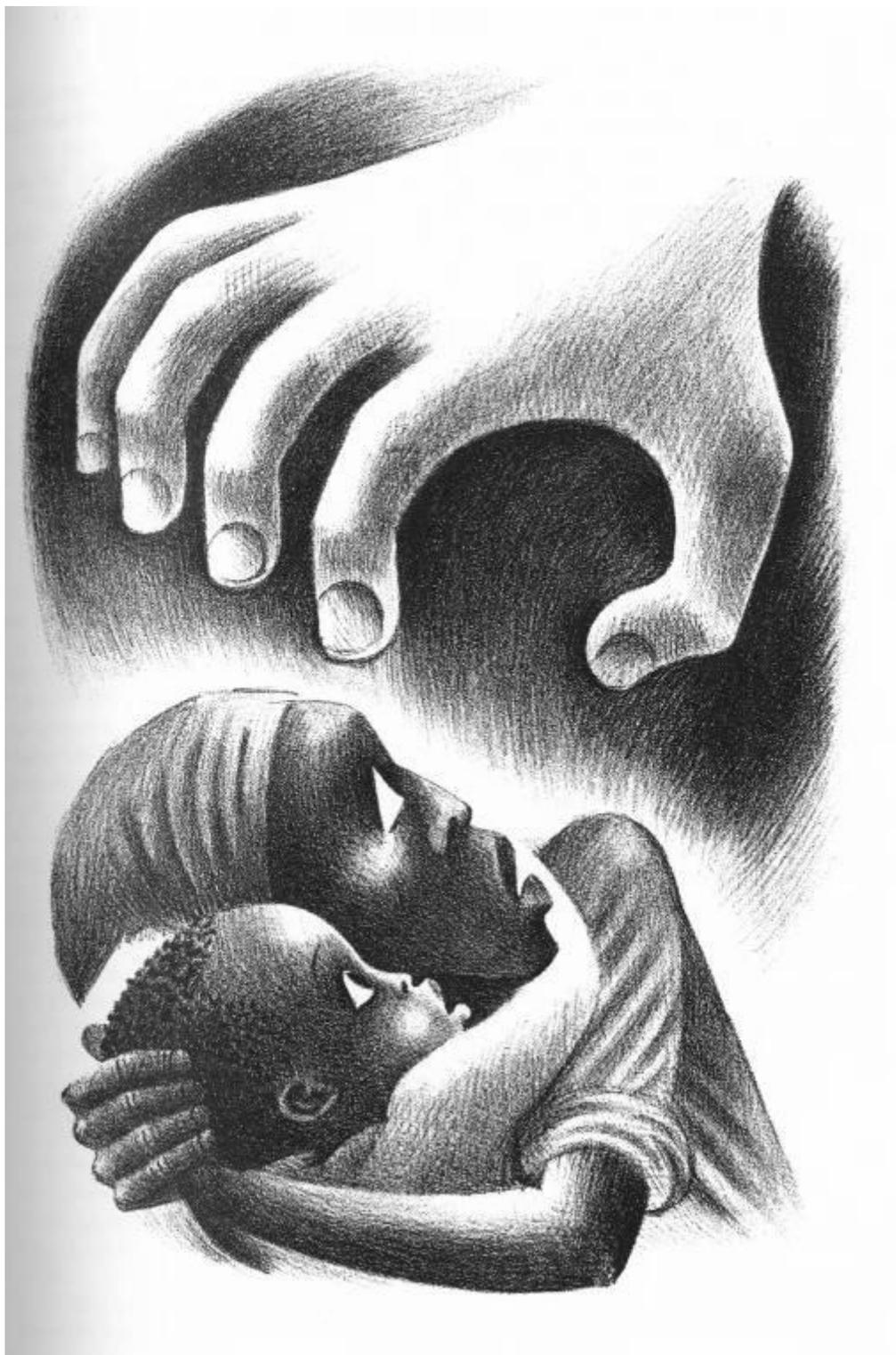


Fig. 4

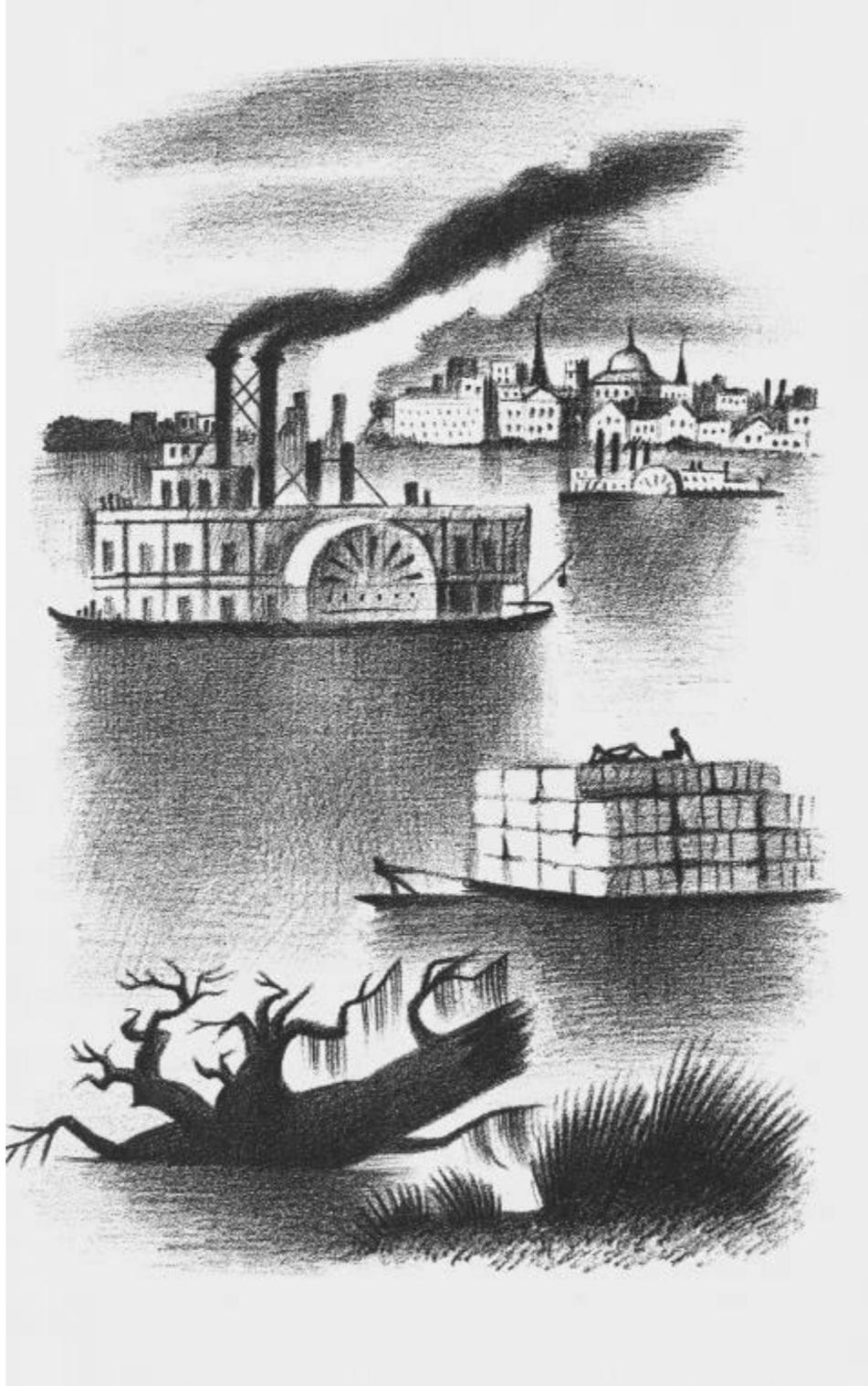


Fig. 5

heartbreaking incident makes Fig. 5 more grim than it appears out of context—two steamboats float along glassy smooth waters—a city frames the background and a barge of cotton manned by two black figures floats in the foreground; there is no evidence that Lucy’s death has caused any ripple in the placid, swampy waters. While these images correspond to incidents in the text, they are also innovative attempts to depict the psychological terrors inflicted upon the enslaved— and these illustrations have no visual precedent in earlier *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* imagery.

In one of the most frequently illustrated scenes, Eva and Tom sitting together in the garden, we find Covarrubias creatively tweaking earlier images (Fig. 6). Eva sits perched on Tom’s leg, the Bible open across her lap. She looks down at it, concentrating on reading. One hand holds the page and the other she holds up, pointing a finger toward heaven. They sit under a tree, surrounded by shrubby plants; a body of water extends behind them. Tom appears to listen intently—his head is lifted and alert, his eyes closed. One hand rests on his knee and the other protectively encircles Eva’s tiny waist. He is broad, strong, and young, and his clothing is quite dapper—he wears striped pants and a collared shirt under a well-fitted jacket. On his feet are boots and by his side is a straw hat (perhaps Eva’s). On Tom’s head is a crown of white flowers. He appears entirely under the spell of the child and yet also as if he is happily humoring her. Early illustrators also matched their images of Tom to Stowe’s description of him: “He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and



Fig. 6

dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity.”¹³ Between the 1890s and 1938, however, this scene was gradually reworked and, in many images, Tom was transformed into an elderly uncle, with white hair, stooped shoulders, and old clothing. Most telling of these changes, his gaze is downcast and subservient. Rather than looking up toward heaven, or out across a wide vista toward symbolic opportunity, in these images Tom looks toward his feet, avoiding eye contact with Eva.¹⁴ This shift in demeanor corresponded to a post-Reconstruction era change in power relationships in the South. As Northern-backed agencies and governments left the South in the 1890s, public campaigns to disfranchise black voters used reports of rapes of white women to legitimize lynch law and to dehumanize African-American men.¹⁵ White supremacists, worried that the social contract by which white controlled black had been broken, initiated desperate and violent attempts to maintain power. The ensuing hysteria guaranteed that representations of Eva with a young Tom would have been taboo.¹⁶ Corresponding to the public brutalizing of black men was a change in the visual culture surrounding *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*;

¹³ Stowe, 14.

¹⁴ For an excellent resource on the images of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in illustrations, popular culture, and advertisements, visit the “Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture” website created by The University of Virginia: www.iath.virginia.edu/utc/

¹⁵ Some important texts on the history of lynching and its relationship to sexual politics in the South include Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the women’s campaign against lynching*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Smith, Lillian. *Killers of the Dream*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949); and Wells, Ida B. and Jacqueline Jones Royster (ed). *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*. (1969) (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).

¹⁶ In her 2007 book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin as Visual Culture*, Jo-Ann Morgan considers the changing illustrations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and popular representations of Uncle Tom to perceptively analyze how Uncle Tom has been envisioned at specific historical moments. As Morgan writes, the visual culture surrounding the book shows how “visual strategies were used to coax Stowe’s several layers of subversive potential back within acceptable boundaries. . . . pictures of figures once read as sympathetic were redefined into an alternative propaganda to reinforce white supremacy and to put limits on African Americans’ access to the rewards of citizenship.” Morgan analyzes historical images of Eva in the garden with Tom, to consider how an audience might have responded to Tom sitting alone with Eva. The titillation of their interaction in early illustrations, where Tom was envisioned as a young man, Morgan argues, is softened by the early readers’ knowledge that “authority accrues to whiteness, which even at its most vulnerable and ignorant masters blackness.”¹⁶ The early illustrations of Tom as a young man, then, conformed to historical constructions of race, and to unspoken knowledge of a firmly entrenched caste system and power dynamic in which whites controlled blacks. Later illustrators, who felt threatened by changing racial power dynamics, rendered Tom old and weak, clearly not a threat to Eva.

Covarrubias's decision to depict a strong, confident Tom contradicts these racist visual conventions.

Though his images draw from some of the traditions of visual culture surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they also suggestively allude to (or may have been seen in relation to) other images in mass circulation at the time. For example, Covarrubias's image of Tom and Eva reading together bears some visual similarities to one of the most memorable scenes of the 1931 Boris Karloff *Frankenstein* movie, in which the monster encounters a young girl, who asks him to play. As Frankenstein sits close to her by the water, surrounded by lush vegetation, she shares the daisies she has picked with him and they toss them into the lake to see if they float. In the original version of this scene, Frankenstein tragically misunderstands the differences between the flowers and the girl: he tosses her into the lake to see if she also floats and when she drowns, he is horrified and distraught. In the released version of the film, the shot of the girl being thrown into the lake was cut. Instead, as Frankenstein reaches toward her, the audience is left to imagine how the monster will harm her. The viewer's act is one of horrified imagination. The visual similarities between the film and Covarrubias's image are striking: Covarrubias places Eva in the giant Tom's arms and they sit alone near a lake; he is festooned with the flowers she has picked. Covarrubias's image may have enacted the same creative jump from his viewers as the scene from the film: a realization of Tom's strength in contrast to Eva's fragility. Yet here, Eva is confident in Tom's good-heartedness and Tom is careful, delicate even, in his protective hold on her. In Covarrubias's image, the young Tom's inability to hurt Eva is a choice rather than a physical impossibility. By depicting Tom as a young, strong man (rather than as an old man), Covarrubias reinstated Tom's moral strengths as central to his character, maintaining Stowe's characterization.

Whether or not Covarrubias was referencing the scene in *Frankenstein* is not a crucial point here; instead, what I wish to underscore is the valence these images would have had in the U.S. during the 1930s. At that time, the idea of a powerful African American man was receiving renewed attention, and works such as Richard Wright's 1938 *Uncle Tom's Children* directed an infuriated critique of white violence against black men and their families to a mass audience. At the heart of a public discourse on race and racism was the question of who the "monster" was and how power dynamics between black and white men and women were to be socially perceived. Covarrubias's reinstatement of Tom as a strong, young black man, then, might be understood as having participated in the public discussion by challenging the racist visual conventions of illustrating Stowe's story.

In Stowe's text, Tom is not just strong in physical stature, but also in his religious faith; his constant belief despite the horrors of slavery was meant to encourage Christian readers to respond in horror to his treatment, to empathize with his goodness, and admire his faith. This servility has been lambasted by critics as a flaw in Stowe's novel. In his 1955 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin critiqued Stowe for allowing Uncle Tom to find communion with God "only through humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh."¹⁷ Because Stowe chose to focus on Tom's Christian devotion, Baldwin argues, he remains a simplistic vision of black masculinity. Tom's Christian faith and humility, however, also make him especially sensitive to the spiritual power Eva wields. Tom is always watching Eva: Stowe writes that "he loved her as something frail and earthly, yet almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine. He gazed on her as the Italian sailor gazes on his image of the child Jesus,--

¹⁷ Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." (1955) Republished in *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin: A Casebook*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 52.



Fig. 7

with a mixture of reverence and tenderness.”¹⁸ In his image of Eva’s death (Fig. 7), Covarrubias created a compelling image of Tom’s spiritual clarity: at the little girl’s deathbed, it is Tom who is able to see Eva’s spirit lifted to heaven. In that scene, as the other characters cover their faces in grief, Covarrubias depicts Tom kneeling by Eva’s bed, his arms and head raised to heaven as Eva floats upward in a beam of light, her hands clasped in prayer. The death scene is perhaps one of the most important (and bluntly foreshadowed) scenes of the novel, and, in Stowe’s text, Tom urges Eva’s father to “Look.” Vision here is symbolic—and Covarrubias created an illustration which underscored Tom’s ability to see clearly into a spiritual realm. While the other characters are physically overcome by grief, Tom *sees*.¹⁹ The image of Tom as visionary may have drawn on African American Christian practices of witnessing; the image can be seen as reinforcing Tom’s connections to a black spiritual community.

Two of Covarrubias’s illustrations are scenes he invented entirely; they have no textual correlation to Stowe’s writing. These are particularly relevant for considering Covarrubias’s approach to the text and, especially, for discussing the book’s renewed political potency in the 1930s. The fourth plate in the book (Fig. 8) shows a black fist raised up and hitting a posted notice for the runaway George (Eliza’s husband). The fist is, of course, George’s—a fact we assume from the text of the notice, but also because the back of the fist has a bleeding letter H carved (or branded) into it by George’s owner, Mr. Harris. The wound is fresh and blood streams from it. In the book, George escapes by disguising himself as a Spanish gentleman traveling with a domestic servant, but he is recognized by a businessman in the tavern where he stops for the

¹⁸ Stowe, 172.

¹⁹ Jo-Ann Morgan compares Tom’s posture in this scene to African worship traditions, arguing that Covarrubias was continuing a tradition of exoticizing Tom. She writes, “African American religiosity was portrayed in popular images as exotic ceremonies that were wildly emotional with frenetic movements. . . . [Covarrubias’s] Tom prayed with arms raised, in a ritual of movement, suggesting African roots.” Morgan, Jo-Ann. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin as Visual Culture*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007): 97. Morgan’s book is a wonderful art historical study of the images related to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; this is, however, her only mention of Covarrubias’s work.

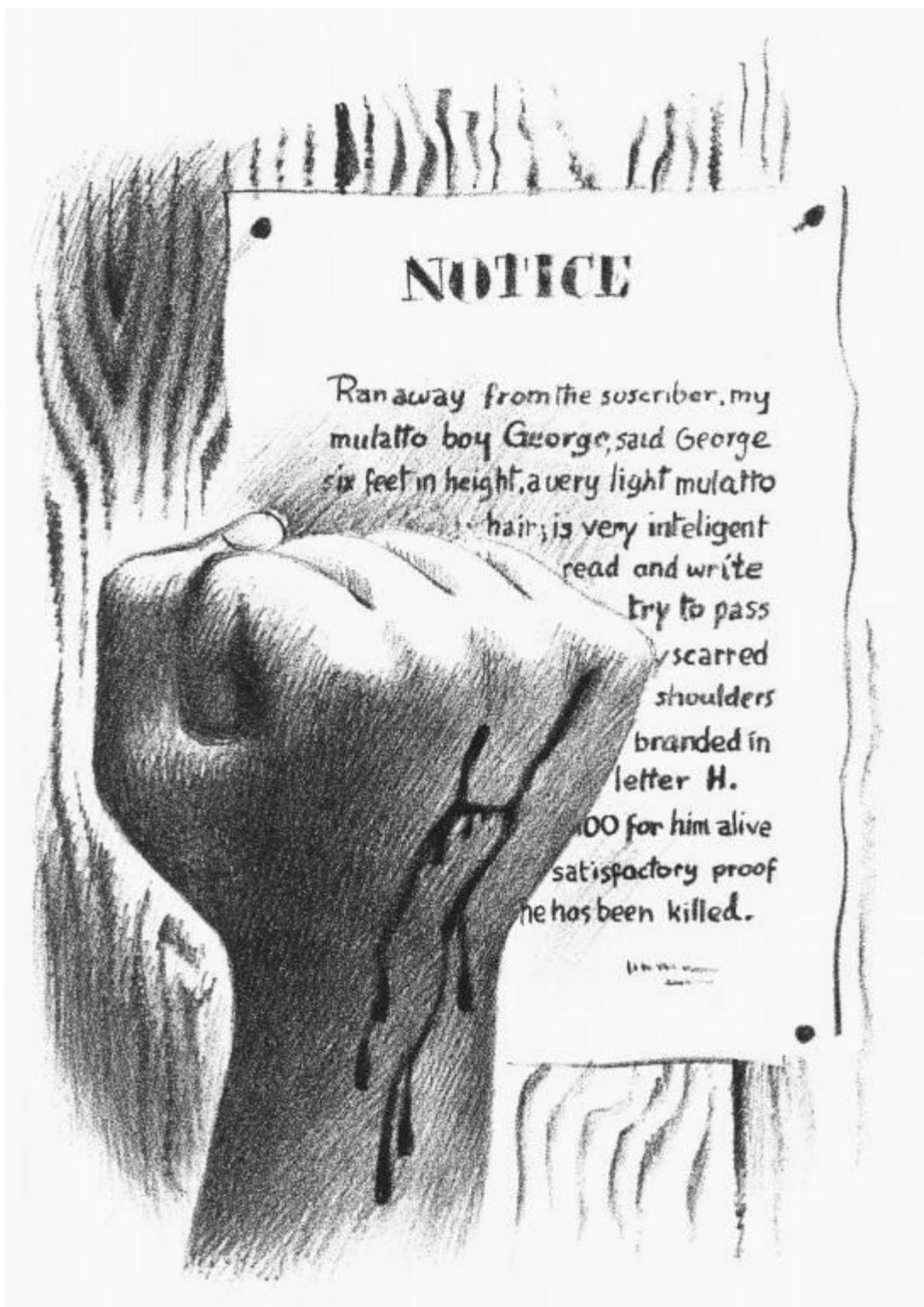


Fig. 8

night. This man, Mr. Wilson, offers a sympathetic, if nervous, ear to George's defense of his escape and urges him not to "break the laws of your country!"²⁰ George replies, "...Mr. Wilson, *you* have a country; but what country have I, or any one like me, born of slave mothers? What laws are there for us? We don't make them, --we don't consent to them, -- we have nothing to do with them; all they do for us is to crush us, and keep us down."²¹

George's raised fist, depicted by Covarrubias in a defiant gesture of power, recalls a long visual history of this hand gesture, most notably during the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s. Used as a sign of solidarity of workers and oppressed peoples, the gesture here is a powerful reminder of the political intentions Stowe had for her text, as well as a direct reference to contemporary political events. That George is disguised as a Spaniard is a convenient and coincidental textual connection to the war in Spain, which was widely discussed in New York's artistic circles during the late 1930s.²² The fist, which would reemerge as a symbol of black power in the 1960s, also suggests the feelings of an increasingly dissatisfied population of African Americans in the United States. George's reminder to Mr. Wilson that the laws of the country do not protect him could easily be repeated by African Americans in the 1930s. As David Levering Lewis has written, in Harlem in the late 1930s,

... almost 50 percent of the families were out of work, yet a mere 9 percent of them received government relief jobs. The community's single public medical facility, Harlem General Hospital, with 273 beds and 50 bassinets, served 200,000 Afro-Americans. The syphilis rate was nine times higher than white Manhattan's; the tuberculosis rate was five times higher; pneumonia and typhoid rates were

²⁰ Stowe, 73.

²¹ Stowe, 73.

²² See Baigell, Matthew and Julia Williams, eds. *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986.

twice as high; two black mothers and two black babies died for every white mother and infant.²³

In the face of such disparities, many in the neighborhood became deeply pessimistic and enraged. Indeed, the printing of the Limited Editions Club version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was sandwiched between two race riots in Harlem in 1935 and 1942—events that signaled that the optimism of the Harlem-based arts movement was crumbling under contested leadership, internal political divisions, and the economic pressures of the Great Depression. In no other editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is George visualized as such a powerful and angry character; Covarrubias's image succinctly appraised the feelings of frustration felt by many of the country's black communities.

Another of Covarrubias's unique images continues this social critique. In Fig. 9, a white, two-story mansion looms large, framed by a moss-covered tree. In front of the house, a grassy hill extends into the foreground. At the bottom of the picture plane, a black man lies buried, his feet shackled and his hands clasped over his chest. He is emaciated. His head is stylized in an oval shape with pointed chin—his facial features are of a type Covarrubias repeatedly used for his black characters, slightly exaggerated and perfectly symmetrical, they seem to suggest African sculpture. As George darkly notes in the novel, for men and women who find no freedom or protection from their government, “All men are free and equal *in the grave*...”²⁴ *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had originally been intended to ignite Christian outrage in its readers: Stowe wrote with the hope that strong feelings of sympathy could lead to demands for political change. In another perilous historical moment, the images of the 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* document a widespread feeling of discontent and the rumbling calls for social and political reform.

²³ Levering Lewis, David. *When Harlem Was In Vogue*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1981): 306.

²⁴ Stowe, 75-76. Italics in the original.

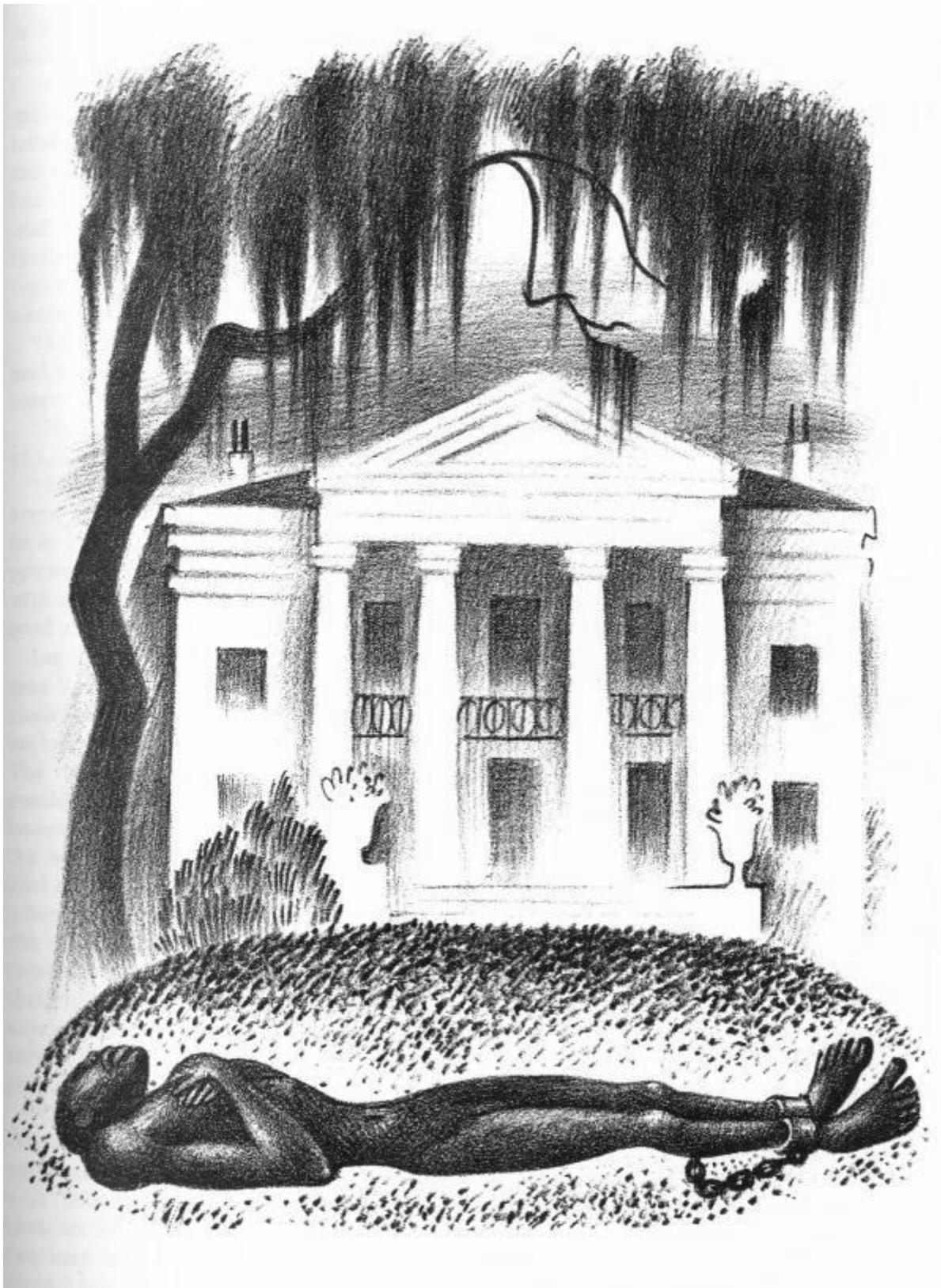


Fig. 9

By 1955, when James Baldwin wrote that “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a very bad novel,” the country was in the midst of profound racial unrest. “Uncle Tom” had been transformed into an epithet, an insulting name for a black accommodationist, someone seen as bowing to white supremacy and Jim Crow oppression. This conception of an “Uncle Tom” found its visual parallel in the widespread images of an old and emasculated Tom. The text’s fluidity, its ability to speak to contemporary audiences, especially through its imagery, is what Baldwin critiqued when he argued that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* could be re-interpreted to fit diverse political projects (especially racist projects) unrelated to Stowe’s original purposes. However, it is also that characteristic of flexibility which Stowe deployed to encourage diverse readers to feel a kinship with her characters and an indignation about their mistreatment, hoping that such indignation would lead eventually to political change. Criticized by black writers, activists, and intellectuals, the book also found few champions in modern literary criticism and academia. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s overt political appeal placed it in a literary realm removed from “high art,” at least in a modernist-driven academic world.²⁵ Covarrubias’s task in illustrating *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was to remake the story’s images in a way that would feel true to experiences of black Americans, or that would at least depict, believably, modern African American characters. By filling his iconography with references to the contemporary experiences of African Americans in New York, Covarrubias managed to move beyond the conventions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* illustrations and revitalize Stowe’s text with renewed relevance for his 1938 readers. Seen from the vantage of 70 years, there are still problems with many of Covarrubias’s illustrations for the book: some

²⁵ As feminist scholar Jane Tompkins has written, in such a climate, “...works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone, do not qualify as works of art. Literary texts such as the sentimental novel, which make continual and obvious appeals to the reader’s emotions and use technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality, epitomize the opposite of everything that good literature is supposed to be. Tompkins, Jane P. “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History.” In *Sensational Designs*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986): 122-46. Reprinted in *Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin: A Casebook*. Ed. Elizabeth Ammons. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 66.

scenes come uncomfortably close to cartooning. Many of his images, however, connect to an aesthetic of the jazz era in Harlem and point to its ending. Further, the vision of blackness Covarrubias created in the text references increasing tides of dissatisfaction felt in black communities in the late 1930s. Covarrubias's illustrations for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were not simply another book project for an artist known to depict African Americans sympathetically and creatively—they were a testament to the relevance of Stowe's text to complicate and illuminate the problems within the frequently-changing public discourse on race, religion, and politics in the United States.