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*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the fictional phenomenon of the nineteenth century: in the United States it sold 5,000 copies in two days and over 300,000 within a year; in England the sales topped a million within a year of its publication (Lowence and Westbrook, “Introduction” 2–3). Stowe’s sentimental account of the horrors of slavery, including her problematic pro-colonization platform, attracted the attention of scholarly as well as lay readers, and this critical attention persists over a hundred and fifty years later. While this criticism considers two of the major political concerns of the nineteenth century—slavery and abolition—it has tended to overlook the significance of the novel’s position on the developing racial science of the time. This oversight is surprising given that Stowe’s novel was contemporaneous with a major shift in nineteenth-century science and, perhaps even more importantly, because both attempted to show how visual images could be employed to explain “race” to an American population increasingly interested in defining and maintaining racial differences. This understanding of her project as a visual medium that reaches out to others, then, encourages us to take a critical look at what is arguably the most visual component of a novel—its covers. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* encouraged readers to visualize race through staging tableaux within the text to argue for abolition, nineteenth-century racial science relied on visual images of race that developing visual technologies made possible to reinscribe race as a text that could be easily read and understood by any American. By approaching racialized bodies as texts, racial science emphasized the power of visual images to codify what was arguably the most pressing—and nebulous—concern of the time: racial difference. As I show, picturing race—literally in the pages of scientific texts such as *Types of Mankind* and on the covers of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—offers us a new way to consider the significance of Stowe’s novel and the pervasive influence racial science had on the shaping of American culture.
By translating “race” into a visually appealing and easily accessible concept for the American public, the covers of Uncle Tom’s Cabin helped to transform nineteenth-century science from the purview of elite Anglo intellectuals into a popular cultural epistemology. Both the content and the immense popularity of Uncle Tom’s Cabin have garnered much critical attention, but the form—the physical materiality—of the novel warrants further consideration. As Michele Moylan notes in “Materiality as Performance,” “In addition to being a (quite literal) context that conditions readings, materiality is itself a text—one that can be read as, among other things, a record of its own production, or more precisely, of the traditions, institutions, and formations that produced it” (250). Yet Marcus Wood specifies why Stowe’s novel offers a particularly rich field for this kind of cultural approach.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin is best approached as a cultural sample … in which the bacteria of nineteenth-century racism flourished. … [While] the extent to which Stowe’s book enabled the degenerative racist commonplaces which infested its adapted visual forms [remains unclear, t]he representation of reading provides an educational site [to start]. (186)

The book’s covers—like the “black” skin scientists analyzed—are, in some senses, more significant in the American public’s education about race than is Stowe’s political novel itself, for the cover illustrations chart developments in popular understandings of race in ways that were readily apparent to anyone, whether or not s/he read anything beyond the cover.4 Reading the history of Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s covers shows us how the changing visual representations of racial differences depicted by the covers functioned as a crucial vehicle for disseminating and normalizing key transition moments in the history of contemporary racial science: the supplanting of monogenesis by polygenesis as the leading theory of human origins, the impact of evolutionary theory on anthropology, and, finally, the reframing of “race” in eugenics discourse.

I. Speculators

The 1800s marked a time of significant cultural advancements in the technology of book production. Developments in this field, according to Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, peaked in the nineteenth century: “[I]n the three centuries between 1500 and 1800 not nearly as many technical changes took place as in the decades between 1800 and 1890” (146). By 1850, literacy rates were “virtually universal among native-born men and women” (Casper 135). Increased literacy and improvements in the technologies of book production and design ensured that American readers with the income to indulge were able to enjoy a greater variety and quality of books. As Ronald Zboray notes, the developing technologies included modifications in paper, machinery, binding, and, as the century progressed, reduced costs. While for some the expense of books remained prohibitive, their cost significantly dropped to 75 cents from $1.25 for a hardback—a considerable sum, given that adult Anglo men made roughly $1 per day and Anglo women “a quarter of that” – to as low as 12 1/2 cents, although the average ranged from 38 to 63 cents for a paperback “during the antebellum years” (11–12). Additionally, “Railroad development … improved literary distribution” and “the strength and cost of domestic lighting and the availability of corrective eyeglasses
contributed to ... shaping the social distribution of antebellum reading” (4–5). By the mid-1860s the push for some degree of mandatory school attendance was beginning; public schools and public libraries “flourished” and helped to make books more accessible for multiple generations of consumers (Groves 109; Fabian 285). While class and region certainly influenced the degree to which average adult Anglo-American readers could take advantage of the new print and print-related technologies, the cultural work of books in the nineteenth century was broad in scope, shaping ideas about the nation as it informed the ways in which working-class individuals were able to appropriate for themselves what once was the purview of the elite (Travis 357). To a certain extent, book culture blurred class lines, and the circulation of books helped to construct and consolidate an understanding of the nation as increasingly literary. “As industrialism spread in antebellum America,” Zboray notes, “the printed word became the primary avenue of national enculturation. … [T]ype was well suited to the work of constructing a national identity; imprints simply endured unmodified beyond the exigencies of time and space” (xvi). While the printed word may endure “unmodified,” Zboray’s claim does not hold true for a key element of the book—cover illustrations, as we will see in the case of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*

Stowe inadvertently acknowledged the importance of images to her text when she wrote that “[m]y vocation is simply that of a painter, and my object will be to hold up in the most lifelike and graphic manner possible slavery, its reverses, changes, and the negro character, which I have had ample opportunities for studying. There is no arguing with pictures, and everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not” (Stowe to Bailey, March 9, 1851; qtd. in Hedrick 66). The degree of Stowe’s involvement in the illustration of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s covers remains unknown, and, in fact, the question remains largely unasked. Paul Gutjahr makes this point: “No one knows how much Stowe was involved in the production of the engravings that first accompanied her book. If she was a typical author of her age, she probably had little say” (80). Depending on the degree of control the publisher wished to exert, either he or the typically free-lance illustrator chose what would be illustrated and how. While Stowe may not have had any voice in selecting literal illustrations, she conceptualized her writing in visual terms. Referring to her work as “a series of sketches which give the lights and shadows of the ‘patriarchal institution,’” Stowe’s language reveals her desire to create a visual masterpiece—a *picture* that will not merely “impress” but persuade her opponents to come around to the “right” understanding of slavery, “whether they mean to … or not” (Gutjahr 80). The power of visual images to teach individuals how to feel right about slavery and race, in Stowe’s mind, is a power against which language cannot be measured.

Within this historical context of a developing literature and book technology, we can see how the evolution of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s cover illustrations mass markets the text to increasingly diverse readers and educates them in major shifts in racial scientific thought. Indeed, analyzing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s covers reveals how prominent abolitionist texts can inadvertently perpetuate racial difference in their book packaging, even as their texts argue for racial tolerance, if not juridical equality. With such an implicit understanding of visual images’ importance, Stowe predicts strategies of
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the illustrators of her text. As Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles point out, “[R]eprinted texts do present especially fruitful case studies for book historians since how and why titles have been repackaged can say much about the cultural and social uses of texts” (“Introduction” 6). Such uses are stunning in the select number of book covers I consider here. I should note that the parameters which structured my selection are twofold: chronology and subject. In terms of a timeline, I focus only on American covers, although my argument holds true for British and international versions of the novel from the text’s publication to 1928. In terms of subject matter, I chose covers that focus on Tom and Eva and the significance of literacy to their relationship. In terms of racial science, I have selected three groundbreaking texts, each of which marks a significant shift in racial thought: Josiah Nott and George Gliddon’s 1854 Types of Mankind, which sought to prove once and for all the validity of polygenesis; Charles Darwin’s 1871 sequel to Origin of Species, Descent of Man, in which he considers human development an ongoing evolutionary process; and Charles Davenport’s 1911 Heredity in Relation to Eugenics, which posits that degenerative racial and physical traits are encoded in and transmitted through blood. While significant in terms of their impacts on scientific understanding, these texts were also popular among American readers.7

I consider the relevance of Stowe’s assertion that “[t]here is no arguing with pictures” when it comes to thinking right about race in light of the increasing reliance on visual evidence in scientific accounts of race. While Stowe uses visual images of race to argue for abolition, the cultural work of the book covers employs the same strategy for very different results—arguing not for equality under the law but rather for essential racial differences. An analysis of the covers of several American editions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, therefore, charts a thus far overlooked cultural history in which the novel’s cover illustrations reinforce increasingly essentialist understandings of racial difference and disseminate crucial developments in racial science, even as the contents of Stowe’s novel work to abolish the institutionalized form of racial differences: slavery.8

The racial makeup of America in the nineteenth century “tended to make every citizen, if not an ethnologist, at least a speculator in matters of race,” according to William Stanton (10). Stanton’s term “speculator” points to two crucial and overlapping elements of the relationship between scientific theories about race and cover illustrations of the novel. Webster’s defines the Latin root of “speculate” as “to engage in thought or reflection” and “to buy and sell commodities,” and Tom literally embodies, through all of his transformations on the novel’s covers, both facets of the term. Generating an unprecedented amount of ephemera related to the novel, not the least of which were the numerous cover illustrations, the enormous popularity of Uncle Tom’s Cabin ensured that Tom, according to Stephen Hirsch, “in all of his various forms, [was] the most frequently sold slave in American history” (311).9 The purchase of the novel therefore becomes a purchase of Tom, and thus readers of the novel engage in the very speculative practice Stowe condemns: a trafficking in “black” bodies. While I am more interested in the other meaning of the term “speculator”—critical thinker—we should note that this second term is also connected to the
commodification of the black male body. It is only by looking critically at the spectacle of race that Tom’s perpetually salable body represents that readers perform the task Stowe sets out for them: the task of becoming a “speculator,” or a critical thinker, one who (re)considers slavery in its “true” light. Stowe’s novel encourages its readers to do both: to speculate on the nature of slaves’ racial identity while, through the act of book purchasing, they trade in “black” bodies.

II. “Race is everything: literature, science, art—in a word, civilization depends upon it.”

Published two years after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Josiah Nott and George Gliddon’s enormously popular *Types of Mankind*—a benchmark text on contemporary racial science—was likewise a runaway best seller, immediately selling out of nearly 1,000 copies and going through “at least nine editions before the end of the century” (Stanton 163). This popularity, Stanton notes, was not diminished by either the book’s “relatively expensive” price of $5 for subscribers and $7.50 for others or the fact that it “was not an original work” (163). A compilation of several years’ worth of scientific findings from leading American racial scientists published in memory of the late Samuel George Morton, who died one year before *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published, *Types* chronicles the development of the superior Anglo “races.” More importantly for many invested in racial hierarchies, the authors of *Types* focus attention on the deviations and pathologies—in relation to the normative, yet superior, Anglos—of “inferior,” or non-Anglo races, particularly African Americans and Native Americans. As Josiah Nott comments in his “Introduction” to the book, “One of the main objects of this volume is to show … that the diversity of races must be accepted by Science as a fact, independently of theology, and of all analogies or reasonings drawn from the animal kingdom” (56). These ethnological conclusions, Nott contends, are axiomatic; even if the premises upon which they are predicated cannot be proved, the validity of his and his fellow scientists’ “findings” is unquestionable. Elsewhere in the “Introduction” he writes,

> Whether an original diversity of races be admitted or not, the permanence of existing physical types will not be questioned by any Archaeologist or Naturalist. … Nor, by such competent arbitrators, can the consequent permanence of moral and intellectual peculiarities of types be denied. The intellectual man is inseparable from the physical man. (50)

*Types* provides, according to its authors, overwhelming historical and anthropological evidence—“whether [it] be admitted or not”—“proving” the theory of polygenesis, or what came to be called the “American School” of ethnology, and *Types* supports many of its conclusions with Morton’s work on skulls of various racial groups.11

Although a leading polygenist by mid-century, Morton did not work in a vacuum; Nott, who was by then lecturing in the South on, as he put it, “niggerology,” Gliddon, Louis Agassiz, and Morton all shared their research not only as a marker of collegiality but also more particularly to counter opposition from vocal monogenists, usually men of the cloth, or, as Gliddon and Nott called them, “skunks.”12 By 1844 Morton
established that the Native American Indians were a distinct race with a civilization as old as that of Egypt, and that Egyptians were Caucasians, not Africans, as previously had been believed. That same year Morton’s colleague Josiah Nott publicly posited the theory of polygenesis—a heretical position to be sure, but the only one which explained for Morton, Nott, and Agassiz, as well as less prominent scientists, the phenomenon of the African race, which showed no signs of dying out as the Native Americans were (Nott, Two Lectures 1844; Stanton 99, 69–70, 92). By the mid-nineteenth century, collectively their research unequivocally aligned primates with Africans and African Americans; no mere gradation of beast into man, as Darwin would later suggest, Nott and Gliddon racialized and exaggerated the similarities between humans and primates by arguing that their close relationship could be detected only in those with African ancestry. The scientists’ investment in black inferiority, as Stephen Jay Gould has pointed out, led to a manipulation of data. Gould, who in 1977 reanalyzed Morton’s findings, concludes that, although he could “find no evidence of conscious fraud[,] … Morton’s summaries are a patchwork of fudging and finagling in the clear interest of controlling a priori convictions” (54). Morton’s manipulation of data is apparent not only in his charts detailing the cranial capacities of different groups of people but also, and more visually striking, in the illustrations of racial development based in part on his findings. The images, helpfully included in two sets of two full page charts in Types of Mankind, superimpose superficial characteristics of Africans and African Americans onto primates’ skulls and skeletons (458–59, unnumbered tables inserted after p. lxxvi). Their conclusion is self-evident: blacks are beasts.

While the content of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and especially Stowe’s depiction of Tom counter this theory of black bestiality, the covers depict another story—one of the book’s involvement in perpetuating the visual “story” of racial difference that racial science tells. Stowe’s novel, first serialized in the anti-slavery newspaper, the National Era, in 1851–1852 was initially considered a risk for Boston publishers because of its subject matter. Although rejected by her sister Catharine’s publisher, Phillips, Sampson, and Company, J. P. Jewett and Company undertook the project and issued the first edition in two volumes in March 1852 (Kirkham 140–42). The cover of the first edition was a plain blue cloth with golden decorative borders and intricate corner designs coupled with two oval-shaped flowery designs. Centered between these sketches is the gilded image of a cabin, in the doorway of which a slave woman stands and watches her children play out front. A male slave toting on his shoulder a hoe nearly identical to the ubiquitous handkerchief on a stick—the very image that was used in nineteenth-century newspaper advertisements of runaway slaves—is seen approaching from the rear left side of the domicile (see Figure 1). While at first glance the cover of the first edition of Uncle Tom’s Cabin may seem unrelated to the racial science of the day, early ideas about racial identity are incorporated within the illustration. In this early phase, racial science takes racial others as subjects of study but has not yet completely fleshed out their characterological differences. In other words, the silhouettes on this cover mark the beginning stages of nineteenth-century racial profiling, or the construction of “characters” particular to specific racial groups. The
development of “character” enabled nineteenth-century racial theorists to pin down allegedly essential racial differences that were not always visible on the surface of the body. As Cathy Boeckmann argues,

The notion of character formed the core of discussions of race in the late nineteenth century. In fact, questions of character were so important that a field of study known as characterology was devised to answer them. In current usage, character is a figurative term, signifying the imagined structure of an individual’s moral and ethical orientations, but in the nineteenth century it referred to a quantifiable set of inherited behaviors and tendencies that were almost always racial. (3–4)

Thus the profiling of Tom, Chloe, and their children is simultaneously a sketching out of racial differences as an indication of the roles racial others play within scientific thought as well as within the cultural codification of essential racial traits: slavery. This image of Stowe’s African characters as mere stick figures suggests that while blacks may be incorporated into the nation, they exist only in profile and as a collective. In both popular and scientific thought, blacks’ individuality is of little importance, for it
is only as a fungible group that they—both as an idea and as a laboring population—
do the cultural work that “race” demands of them.

While readers can recognize the figures in the cover illustration as Tom, Chloe, and their children only after reading the first four chapters of Stowe’s novel, the eponymous cabin in which they dwell is immediately identifiable. This glimpse at blacks’ family life under slavery represents the Africans as outlines, empty spaces which readers could fill with evolving scientific ideas about them. Likewise, we can see in the illustration the doorway and part of one of the cabin’s walls, but the interior of the cabin—partially visible because of the open doorway in which Chloe stands—reveals nothing more than the cloth covering of the text. The voyeuristic feel of this cover invites readers to peer into slaves’ lives, but at the same time renders them objects rather than subjects—representatives of a larger group of “racial others,” not Tom and Chloe and the kids. While the pairing of the cabin and Tom’s family largely drops out of later cover illustrations, the relationship between the black man and the white angel of the house, Eva, takes the forefront, as the racial profiling done by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century science develops.

The racial profiling done on the covers of Uncle Tom’s Cabin henceforth becomes increasingly more explicit, as the black man, seen approaching from the background on the first cover, assumes prominence as the subject of both racial science and the novel’s covers.15 This transformation is evident on the cover illustrations of Stowe’s text, due in part to improvements in book design that allow this developing notion of a racial “character” rich display. Initially standard wood engravings were used to produce illustrations, usually generic images like Figure 1. With an improvement in the design of these block engravings, and later with the advent of more precise printing technologies such as halftone plates, lithographs, and photographs, printers could “display an amazingly delicate play of the finest lines”—and hence individuality—in cover and intertextual illustrations (Lehmann-Haupt 192–93, 93–94, 171–72). In the 1881 “Illustrated Edition” published by Houghton, Mifflin, and Company in Boston, for example, readers saw a circular vignette of Tom and Eva sitting at a table (see Figure 2). Both this image and the book’s title located to its right are superimposed on a horizontal floral pattern curving around the book’s binding. This design occupies a third of the cover; the other two-thirds feature the designation “Illustrated” centered immediately beneath the floral border and “Harriet Beecher Stowe” between two embellished lines, centered at the bottom of the front cover’s black border. Positioned between these two identificatory markers is a square image of a dove, beak-down and wings spread, from which several lines emanate and point to an olive branch on which are strategically placed sets of slave shackles. While this image reflects Stowe’s appeal to Christian benevolence and duty as the means by which to stop the injustices of slavery, the sketch of Tom and Eva reveals a more complicated representation of the racial difference justifying slavery.

As Josiah Nott details in his account of a racialized physiognomy, the manifestation of “black” blood is evident in

[t]he narrow, flat crown; the low, slanting forehead; the projection of the upper edges of the orbit of the eye; the short, flat, and, at the lower part, broad nose; the prominent, but slightly turned-up lips, which are more thick than curved; the broad, retreating chin, and
the peculiarly small eyes, in which so little of the white eye can be seen; the very small, thick ears, which stand off from the head; the short, crisp, woolly hair, and the black color of the skin. (Types 416)

By the 1880s, racial scientific thought linked biology with behavior and located the seeds of both in racialized blood. As George Fredrickson notes, racial science contended that “black” blood, which produces the racial character of Africans and African Americans, rendered them “pathetic creature[s,] … slave[s] to [their] emotions, incapable of progressive development and self-government[,] … lack[ing] the white man’s enterprise and intellect” (101). Translated visually, we see in the 1881 cover illustration the confluence of these ideas in the depiction of Tom, whose features embody “the peculiar expression of Negro physiognomy,” suggestive of a stunted intellectual ability. Significantly, we begin to see in these illustrations the interconnectedness of reading and racial science once the “racial character” of Africans and African Americans has been hypothesized by racial theorists. I would like to suggest that in the following cover images I discuss, we can see how the illustrations perpetuating racial
science highlight the importance of the text—of reading—to the project of disseminating “race” to Americans.

In this second image, the delicate Eva sits facing Tom across a desk, pen in hand, while he, dominating more than half of the image, leans forward, elbow on left knee, chin on hand, and stares intently at her. The fact that Eva rather than Tom is writing is significant, for it implies that even the intelligence of an Anglo-Saxon child of five or six years is superior to that of an African American over twenty years her senior. While Eva writes, Tom gazes at her face and not the work in progress, which suggests two related concepts: “black” intelligence is inferior to “white,” and this inferiority is permanent. Unable to master the master’s language, Tom can only stare at his master’s daughter. This image marks not only a dismissal of Tom’s—and by extension, blacks’—potential to attain anything more than a rudimentary level of literacy, it also illustrates the increasing concern the racial science of the 1880s expressed regarding African-American erotic investment in white females. The implicit threat in this image is that Tom, uneducated and uneducatable, prefers to “read” the text of Eva’s body rather than the one she is penning. According to Marcus Wood,

The written word, which comes so easily to white people, will always be a difficult and deformed thing in Tom’s ungainly hands. Literacy is, from the start, carefully conditioned. Tom’s relationship to white language is infantile. … He never learns to write, [and] … only … read[s] the Bible. … Tom being taught to read by Eva, and … sweating over his Bible … become iconic images. (186–87)

Parallel to the text of Stowe’s novel, many of its cover illustrations depict the difficulties Tom encounters in what racial science considered a futile quest for skills not appropriate—and thus unattainable—for his racial identity. While Stowe suggests that Tom’s spiritually motivated aspiration to read his Bible is emblematic of the shared humanity of blacks and whites, the scientifically informed cover images insist upon essential racial differences that are evident not only on and in the body but also in the body’s abilities, or the lack thereof.

The repeated pairing of Tom and Eva in acts of reading highlights how an allegedly essential racial difference becomes more pronounced once the social institution which visibly defined them—slavery—was abolished. The abolition of slavery left a void in the codification of racial difference—a void which racial science filled by profiling black males as increasingly degenerate and illiterate, as ostensibly inherently different from Anglos. In contradistinction to the antebellum literacy embodied by Frederick Douglass—literally picking the pen out of his scarred flesh—we see in postbellum scientific accounts an avowal of negligible black aptitude. The visual representations of racial difference, as we see in depictions of Tom and Eva, encourage viewers to associate blackness with illiteracy and eroticism. While some images of Tom and Eva, Sarah Smith Ducksworth has suggested, “must have fulfilled some fantasy of racial harmony” for Stowe’s readers (228), others encouraged readers to understand interracial relationships in contemporary scientific terms.

While the 1897 cover illustration does not suggest a shared genealogy, it does represent a common idea in post-Civil War racial thought: that blacks were childlike and in need of “parental guidance” much as they received under the auspices of slavery (see
Figure 3). Depicting the most prominent adult male slave of the novel on par with Eva by positioning her beside him, this illustration physically reduces the strapping Tom to the level (both spatially and mentally) of a young child. Tom and Eva both are focused on the letter he composes; he does not gaze at her, despite the fact that she is leaning upon his left arm and rests her hand on his shoulder. While the sentimental nature of this image works to touch the heartstrings—and divest the black male body of any hint of sexual threat through the representation of Tom’s aspiration to literacy—the common nineteenth-century practice of conceptualizing blacks as childlike is problematic on several levels. As William Taylor has noted, “To attribute to someone the simplicity of a child … in … the nineteenth century, was a compliment of the first order, and dangerous too, if the child were to be mistreated and sympathy were not the response sought for” (304–05). Consigning the adult African male to the level of a young Anglo child struggling to read and write undercuts the sense of racial equality, for it suggests that “black” intellectual development ends at the stage when its “white” counterpart begins.
This attention to blacks’ childlike characteristics is evident in the Albert Whitman and Company’s 1928 edition of *Young Folks’ Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Foregrounding the physical racial differences between Eva and Tom, this cover illustration depicts the two reading in a fairly sparse arbor (see Figure 4). Among those I am considering here, this is the first image that depicts Tom’s literacy as achieved, rather than in-process. This shift is noteworthy, not only because it complicates Nott’s assertion that the physical “inferiorities” of non-Anglos manifest their less visually obvious intellectual “inferior- ities,” but also because Eva is no longer cast in the role of instructor at the moment when Tom’s appearance (and not just his posture, as we saw in Figure 2) becomes more threatening.

What we see in this image is the beginning stage of the transition from the text to the body. As I have been suggesting, the subplot of the relationship between racial science and visual culture is the former’s reliance on the text to stand in for the racialized bodies that Americans, it argued, needed to learn how to read. As racial science does its job in educating Americans on how to read “race,” the symbolic text drops out of the picture, literally, leaving us with bodies rather than books on the novel’s covers. In this
image, we see the initial transformation of Tom as emblematic of the potential monstrosity of the black male body. In this early stage, the book is still present, but, as we will see in the final cover image, it soon will be unnecessary. A balding Tom, whose sparse hair resembles horns and adds to his demonized appearance, sits on a tree stump, legs sprawled, with Eva standing between them, her head and Tom’s chin almost touching, holding the Bible in her hands. In the left front corner lies Eva’s hat, forgotten on the grass; a T-shaped cluster of growing vines frames the couple on the right side of the cover, slightly behind Tom. What is most visually striking in this image is the utter difference between Tom and Eva, save for their mutual enjoyment of the Bible and shared physical space. Otherwise, the two are depicted here as polar opposites: dark and pale, big and small, old and young. While Tom can wear the clothes of his master, and thus appear to share Eva’s class status—such as it may be applied to a slave—his approximation of equality with Anglo society in the novel and in this illustration (as in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century America) is just that: an approximation. As Charles Davenport explains, “Eugenics has to do with traits that are in the blood, the protoplasm;” it teaches what has been “forgotten” because of advancements made by “modern medicine”: namely that “all men are created equal in their powers and responsibilities” (1, iv). Despite the model of Christian love and faith that Stowe celebrates as an inherent racial trait and suggests Tom offers Anglo society, his “black” blood elevates him precisely as it fixes him permanently as a biologically inferior racial other.

The extent to which this biological inferiority encoded in “black” blood can be phenotypically manifested is grotesquely charted on the cover of the Edward McCann Company’s 1928 edition of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (see Figure 5). Featuring a hulking Tom, almost grotesque in size, clutching in his arms Eva, who is wrapped in a blanket, this illustration depicts the racist American nightmare of a black “beast” gazing lasciviously at the limp white prey in his arms. According to Leslie Fiedler, “Iconographically, certain of [Tom’s] scenes with Little Eva”—especially this one—“are not very different from later ones portraying the Black Rapist carrying his unconscious pale victim toward defloration and death” (35). The sheer size of Tom’s feet and hands, which clutch Eva’s back and legs, compared to his relatively small head reflect the history of racial science—this Tom could be a model in Types of Mankind. Tom’s monstrous proportions also reflect the future of racial science, for the apelike body previously aligned only with Africans and African Americans pre-Darwin is the very form to which, eugenicists and other racial scientists contended, mixed blood Americans would soon return if sexual reproduction was not properly controlled. The regression to “a negative character” “which a remote ancestor possessed” and which “may appear, after many generations have passed, in its pristine purity” was quickly capitalized on by scientists, racial purists, and authors alike in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to warn against miscegenation and explore the plight of the mulatto, respectively (Davenport 249). Tom’s disproportionate body—small head, broad shoulders thrown back and an even broader pelvis jutting forward—is suggestive of a primitive, “regressed” body that exhibits a primitive sexuality. According to another prominent voice in nineteenth-century racial thought, Arthur de Gobineau, the inferiority of
“black” blood is manifested in the pelvis bone. Certainly an attempt to undermine the implications raised by contemporary scientific charting of different “races”’ sexual organs, Gobineau’s theory suggests that, whatever the size of his genitals, the black man’s pelvis marks his bestial nature—both his lasciviousness and his kinship with primates. Gobineau writes, “The negroid variety is the lowest, and stands at the foot of the ladder [of the racial hierarchy]. The animal character, that appears in the shape of the pelvis, is stamped on the negro from birth, and foreshadows his destiny” (205).

No longer literary, much less literate, the Tom on this cover circulates and promotes to readers and would-be book buyers a racism characterizing the 1920s rather than the 1850s understanding of race within the pages of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As the “Negro Problem” remained unresolved, despite emancipation, constitutional amendments, colonization fantasies, and even a world war, the sentimental illustrations of Eva and Tom that initially sold the book became transformed into a medium for perpetuating racial science. More beast than man, the Tom on this cover reinforces the idea of black male bodies as sexually threatening and deserving of lynching.
Comparing this illustration with that on the first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, we see how the black body has historically been objectified and manipulated by many of those who engaged in racial scientific thought for more than three-quarters of a century. Even Darwinism, which seemed to offer the promise of racial equality, was interpreted as both polygenetic and “nature’s” way of weeding out undesirable, inferior “races”—namely those ranked beneath Anglos on the Great Chain of Being. This sketch of Tom as a racial monster reflects the culmination of a long history of a scientific enterprise whose attempt to discover who and what humans are as well as from whence they sprang was shaped by a priori convictions of “black” inferiority. Published just eight years before the next American racial epic, Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 *Gone With the Wind*, celebrates a nostalgic recollection of American race relations—with blacks as, at various points, childlike and bestial—this edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sketches on its cover the next step in American racial thought: a looking forward that is, in fact, a looking back.

By examining the evolution of racial science on select covers of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, we see how, as Robyn Wiegman notes, “the visible” operates “as the primary vehicle for making race ‘real’ in the United States” (21). Literally showing readers—and those who read nothing more than the novel’s covers—the ways in which racial differences are charted on the body, these covers mark a meeting of science and literature, “fact” and fiction. Reading “race,” racial science, and reading itself on these covers, what is perhaps most evident is how, no matter what the current understanding of “race” may be, it is easily described and disseminated through the visual ephemera of American culture. Commenting on the relationship between the visual and the epistemology of race, Wiegman argues that “[w]hat the eye sees, and how we understand that seeing in relation to physical embodiment and philosophical and linguistic assumptions, necessitates a broader inquiry into the articulation of race …” (24).

While the science of race evolved from monogenesis to polygenesis to evolution to eugenics and beyond, and scientists and Stowe both employed the materiality of the “black” body to explain racial differences, a fundamental racism, as we see it today, undergirds this bodily epistemology in all of its various manifestations. Over a hundred and fifty years after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s publication, science’s conclusion about “racial” differences has transformed from “fact” to a painful reminder of American cultural history. Despite this, many hold faith in the vestiges of the pernicious messages disseminated by the book’s covers rather than the hopeful ones between them.

Notes


[2] For a select sampling of criticism on Stowe and abolition, see Ammons and Belasco; and Samuels. On Stowe and religion, see Yarbrough and Allen; and Morey. Few scholars have commented on the relationship between Stowe and racial science. See Fredrickson (97–129).
[3] The multiple revisions of the novel’s materiality necessarily inform the ways in which readers interpret *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; yet, this has largely been overlooked by critics. One notable exception is Gutjahr, who notes that “after Jewett’s first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel was never a single, uniform entity. As it began to be produced on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in 1852, it reached the hands of readers in editions that involved different bindings, type fonts, paper, introductions, illustrations, and even subtitles. *The National Union Catalog* of book imprints bears striking witness to the diversity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* editions, listing over 250 [sic] editions of the book published between 1852 and 1980; the book remains in print today in an impressive 19 English language editions” (78).

[4] Thus I focus exclusively on cover illustrations in this essay, although my argument certainly pertains to the intertextual illustrations as well. While both forms of illustrations serve similar ends, I chose to focus on covers for two reasons. Covers are more accessible to those who could not afford to purchase the novel but who could gaze at selections peddled by vendors on foot, ship, or wagon and those displayed in bookshops and book sections of dry-goods stores. This democratization of literature is connected to commerce: covers sell. Reflecting an element of the novel, the cover illustration is its own microcosmic advertisement, giving readers a visual “taste” of what lies in store for their reading pleasure. All cover illustrations I discuss are available on Dr. Stephen Railton’s electronic archive, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and American Culture” at [http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/uncletom/illustra/covershp.html](http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/uncletom/illustra/covershp.html).

[5] Many critics have commented on how reading perpetuates specific ideologies by teaching readers to think in certain ways, particularly in terms of gender. See, for example, work by Judith Fetterley; Nancy Armstrong; Cathy Davidson; and Michael Warner. For an excellent account of the material text and its relationship to the ways in which we read and interpret books, see Moylan and Stiles. My work contributes to this ongoing discussion by focusing on the materiality of the text—considering how the covers and the content of literary texts, especially in relation to the question of race, teach readers how to read “race.”

[6] See Levander for an account of the ways in which abolitionist political rhetoric perpetuates the idea of essential racial differences at the same time it works to abolish slavery.

[7] For commentary on the history of racial science, see Fredrickson; Stanton; Harding; Stepan; Wiegman; and Gould.

[8] Although the novel was an international best seller and went through several European editions and translations, due to space constraints I am confining my discussion here to representative American covers depicting Tom and Eva. It is interesting to note that the flowery cover illustrations of contemporary bestsellers such as Susan Warner’s *The Wide Wide World* and Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* are similar to those depicted on some early editions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. What I find intriguing is the ways in which “race” comes to play such a crucial role in the later illustrations of Stowe’s novel. While I confine my discussion solely to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* here, I would like to investigate further this shift in mid- to late-nineteenth-century book illustrations in the works of other popular American novelists such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe.

[9] The commodification of Tom did not lessen either after the initial furor over Stowe’s novel abated or after Emancipation. In fact, as Patricia A. Turner notes, in U.S. popular culture “[s]ince the 1850s Americans have never been Tom-less” (75).


[13] This transposition is more evident in the illustrations on pp. 458–59, which accompany Nott’s essay, “Comparative Anatomy of Races” (411–65). See also Nott and Gliddon’s later work, *Indigenous Races of the Earth*, in which these illustrations are reprinted.

[14] Marcus Wood helpfully contextualizes the history of advertisements for runaway slaves. He notes that typical ads developed “out of the conventions of advertisements for runaway white
indentured servants advertised commonly in colonial papers from the mid-eighteenth century. Especially popular in “[t]he print cultures of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Brazil, the Caribbean and the Southern United States[,]” slave advertisements were composed of a descriptive text, or an image and a text. The images, typecast or wood-engraved, remained largely standardised [sic] over two continents and two centuries. A male was represented by a running clothed figure, carrying a bundle of goods on a stick and passing a tree. A female was represented, most commonly, by a seated clothed figure, resting and holding a bundle. The images were also sometimes used as eye-catching devices for notices for slave auctions, or as advertisements for slave purchase. These two images enjoyed a remarkable longevity and an intercontinental and transcultural currency. (80–81)

Wood also remarks that such advertisements catalogued evidence of physical cruelty and transformed, much as we see in the later abolitionist work of the Garrisonians and others, brutalized blacks from bodies to texts: “The scars and deformities listed recreated the slave’s body as a living and moving text” (81).

[15] I’d like to thank Delores Keller for pointing this out to me.

[16] Later versions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin—some penned by Stowe herself, most by others hoping to capitalize on the novel’s popularity—were marketed to and for children, including short stories and a coloring book with both color illustrations and black and white ones children could color themselves. Many of these children’s books took liberty with Stowe’s novel—often rewriting it, in fact. While most remained fairly faithful to the content of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Eva as the Flower of the South, to name just one example, radically changes the racial politics of the novel in order to argue for slavery. For more on this, see Dr. Railton’s archive on all things Uncle Tom’s Cabin (note 4 above).

Works Cited


