

**Mandy Reid, 'Racial Profiling: Visualizing Racial Science on the Covers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 30.4 (2008): 369-387**

Perhaps the similarities between the disciplines of art and science are made no clearer than when the seemingly objective facade of science is exposed as facade, something that is especially apparent when we examine the discourses of science in the past. The peculiar institution of nineteenth-century racial science, for instance, which encouraged the visualization of race via the practices of phrenology, evolutionary theory, and the articulation of eugenics, was perhaps most dangerously influential when presented in the popular literature and illustrations of the period that reached mass audiences. As Mandy Reid's article demonstrates, even the book covers (in this instance, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)) were influential in "disseminating and normalizing" (370) the progress of racial science and in codifying the ways in which race was pictured and hence reinforced.

Reid begins by establishing the increasing literacy of the American public and the importance of images at the time, noting Stowe's own figuration of her text as a painting that functions (in Stowe's own words) to paint in as "lifelike and graphic manner possible slavery" (371). Reid focuses on American covers only and on those that depicted Tom and Eve in scenes involving literacy. These covers are examined as evidence of her assertion that (not exclusive to Stowe's text alone) book packaging often enforced racial difference visually, despite the work to the contrary that the abolitionist books themselves set out to do.

The book covers are examined for their evolving representations of race and their visualization of influential contemporary theories such as Nott and Gliddon's polygenesis, Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871), and Davenport's understanding of eugenics in terms of heredity. Specifically, she argues that they manifest over the period from 1852 to 1928 as ever-more explicit racial profilings that ultimately mirror the imperative of racial science that (black) bodies need to be read by Americans. While an 1885 cover depicts Tom's features in a manner typical to "Negro physiognomy", (377) for instance, a 1928 cover presents a threateningly large Tom that visualizes the figuration of the Negro as "biologically inferior" (381) and in need of control via eugenics.

While the changing representations of Tom are considered in light of contemporary theories, Reid suggests that these changes are also reflective of improvements in printing technology. The more crude and generic figures of Tom and other characters in an 1852 cover, for instance, are due to the use of block engravings and would be replaced with more detailed illustrations as refined printing processes were in place.

Overlooked in her analysis, however, is the powerful and persuasive effect photography had, not only on the illustrations used in books but also on the ways in which race was visualized and understood by the very theories of racial science she highlights. Abolitionists, for instance, relied on photographs as irrefutable evidence of the effects of slavery; the most notable instance being the circulation of Mathew Brady's famous and much-reproduced 1863 photograph of Gordon, the whipped slave whose scarred back was described as "tell[ing] the story [of slavery] in a way that even Mrs. Stowe can not approach, because it tells the story to the eye."<sup>1</sup> More disturbingly, also in circulation were the numerous "scientific" photographic studies or catalogues that purported to make visual (and also irrefutable) the claims that the inferiority of the black race was visually evident or

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, *New York Independent*, 1863 (Quoted in the *National Antislavery Standard*, June 20, 1863).

written on the bodies of those photographed. Both opposing visualizations of the race were not only widely disseminated as photographs themselves, but also circulated as visual types produced in illustrations in advertisements, magazines, and book covers. A consideration of the ways in which photography informed this reading of race and its manifestations in the book packaging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would expand and strengthen an already-strong examination of how "the science of race" (383) was visually coded. The ways in which both types of photographs, despite their opposing ideological perspectives, were undeniably attractive to the viewer in encouraging the visual consumption of the black body, for instance, would reinforce Reid's brief mention of the interesting notion of the reader's role as a speculator who, in purchasing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, participated in the "trade in 'black' bodies" (373).

Overall, the analysis Reid undertakes in her article presents a fruitful approach for interdisciplinary scholars of the arts and sciences, particularly as visual and material studies are increasingly being regarded as new and important ways to interrogate both literary and scientific texts.

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