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Gone for Good:

Slave Family Separation in the Slavery Debates

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Abstract

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America's devotion to family has always had a strong role in its culture. In the antebellum era, the family became political as some abolitionists and slavery supporters began using the separation of slave families in their debates. This thesis will demonstrate that when discussing the separation of slave families, abolitionists and their supporters relied upon sentimental imagery to evoke sympathy and empathy from their audience. The response by slavery supporters was fragmented by multiple ideologies, sometimes contradicting itself. When combined with the antebellum slave narratives which used first person accounts to gain sympathy, the unified tactic of the abolitionists proved more convincing than the disunity of the slavery supporters within the argument over the separation of slave families.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses how the abolition movement developed into its use of empathy in the attack against slave owners. Quotes about the separation of slave families are then analyzed to demonstrate the unified use of vivid imagery to gain support. The second chapter examines the slave owners' response, exploring their multiple methods of countering the attack. The final chapter considers family separation from the antebellum slave narrative perspective. These ex-slaves argued for the abolishment of slavery with the techniques of the abolitionists while simultaneously fighting back against the reasoning used by the slavery supporters against the anti-slavery cause.

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The existence of families can be traced back as far as humans can trace their own history. Consequently if one looks at the history of war, so can the protection of family. Therefore, the attention paid by abolitionists to the plight of slave families is not surprising. However, because of the complexities of the American slave system, the attacks made by abolitionists on slavery supporters about slave families led to an interchange of strategies and facts that became increasingly important as America built towards war. This thesis will demonstrate that when discussing the separation of slave families, abolitionists and their supporters relied upon sentimental imagery to evoke sympathy and empathy from their audience. The response by slavery supporters was fragmented by multiple ideologies, sometimes contradicting itself. When combined with the antebellum slave narratives which used first person accounts to gain sympathy, the unified tactic of the abolitionists proved more convincing than the disunity of the slavery supporters within the argument over the separation of slave families.

The slavery debates were extremely extensive and complex, and so is the historiography already written about the era. While the argument of this thesis is based on close textual analyses, I relied primarily on three historians to provide the needed historical background on abolitionists, slavery supporters, and the slave narratives. I used Eileen Kraditor's *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics* more than any other. It's strength for my thesis lies in her discussion surrounding William Loyd Garrison's use of the "empathy theme". She claims this theme "appears repeatedly...in exhortations among [abolitionists] to increase their

zeal and in efforts to induce complacent whites to imagine themselves in the place of the slaves".[1] While Kraditor gives examples of abolitionists using children to incite empathy, she does not discuss the technique specifically. Furthermore, she does not break the empathy theme down to the specificity that I use as I only discuss slave family separation.

For the history of slavery supporters, I relied upon William Sumner Jenkins' book, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South.* While many authors seem afraid to look at slavery from the slave-owners' perspective, Jenkins gives a detailed history of the progression of pro-slavery thought in American history. His description of how the slavery defenses evolved into the fever pitch of the Civil War aided my understanding of the debates between abolitionists and slavery supporters, though he does not portray the abolitionists' direct attacks except from a secondary standpoint. Using his timeline, however, of the progression of pro-slavery thought I was able to the re-create a semblance of the interchange between abolitionists and slavery supporters. Additionally, his chapters on the multiple pro-slavery ideologies was vital in my analyses of the slavery supporters.

Marion Wilson Starling's *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* provided the background on the antebellum slave narratives. Starling discusses the progression of the slave narrative genre as it evolved from its infancy in the 1700s through the final narratives recorded in the 1900s. Though some textual analysis is included in Starling's work, his primary focus is broad summaries of the narratives. He

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[1] Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics*, (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1969), 237.

also includes information abut the authors' whereabouts during their time as freed men and any unique politics or scandals that were connected with the narratives. By understanding the background of each narrative, I was better able to connect with the author and their text,

While these authors and others like them focus on the broad histories of their single subjects, I have combined the three subjects to better understand the dialogue that took place between them. After the abolitionists began their attack, the result was a rhetorical war with both sides attempting to frantically gain public support using what weapons they had at hand. The lasting legacy of this thesis will be an understanding of how these literary skirmishes played out so that if one were to look at all of the topics that slavery supporters and abolitionists fought about, one would be able to better understand how and why America went to war with itself in the Civil War.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses how the abolition movement developed into its use of empathy in the attack against slave owners. Quotes about the separation of slave families are then analyzed to demonstrate the unified use of vivid imagery to gain support. The second chapter examines the slave owners' response, exploring their multiple methods of countering the attack. The final chapter considers family separation from the antebellum slave narrative perspective. These ex-slaves argued for the abolishment of slavery with the techniques of the abolitionists while simultaneously fighting back against the reasoning used by the slavery supporters against the anti-slavery cause.

Chapter 1:
The Abolitionists' Perspective

Since America's beginning, societies have existed for the abolishment of slavery. The first society began in 1775 in Philadelphia, called The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage.[2] Two years later, in 1777, Vermont became the first state to abolish slavery. As other states in the North followed, in 1808 the United States banned the importation of slaves from other countries. While this was a major advance, it did not abolish slavery within the United States. Then in the 1830s, increased social action with the emergence of newspapers such as *The Liberator* occurred in 1831. Societies such as the American Anti-Slavery Society appeared in 1833, all of which led to "the abandonment of the gradualism and moderation that had characterized the earlier efforts."[3]

As the antebellum era progressed, divisions arose among antislavery supporters. Differences in religion, politics, and economics all played roles and more specialized antislavery groups began to come into existence. In spite of these divisions, the term abolitionist is used in this paper to describe any person who desired an end to the institution of slavery. Though their ultimate goals about the abolition of slavery differed, almost all abolition groups used the separation of families to gain sympathy for the abolishment of slavery. As the abolition movement grew in strength, one of their major tactics was the use of empathy. For instance, abolitionist Beriah Green, Jr. used empathy to answer the Northerners' question, "What can we do?" by saying: "You can act as if

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[2] Slavery, Abolition, and Social Justice 1490-2007, Chronology, available from http://www.slavery.amdigital.co.uk.proxy.library.emory.edu/Chronology/Index.aspx; Internet; accessed 2 March 2010.

[3] Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolition,* 4.

you felt that you were bound with those who are in bonds; as if their cause was all your own...you can plead their cause with the earnestness, and zeal, and decision, which self-defense demands."[4] The use of empathy enabled Americans to look past the racial difference and stress that slaves were human beings, just like them. Moreover, within their use of empathy, multiple abolitionists stressed the situations of children and families. According to historian John Ashworth, abolitionists "were unanimous in agreeing on [the family's] importance."[5] Abolitionists such as Theodore Parker, believed "the family" would "last forever," since "its roots" were "in the primeval instincts of the human race."[6] The separation of slave children from their parents therefore emerged in literature, newspapers, and slave narratives as men and women of both color fought against the institution of slavery.

The power of the empathy theme was in the emotion conveyed in the passages. The quotes about slave owners separating families used vivid imagery to convey the horror felt by the slaves. They therefore directed their arguments to the emotions of Americans to attack the issue of slaves as unfeeling property as insinuated by the legal status of slaves.

The most famous abolitionist was William Lloyd Garrison. He was so vital to the abolition movement, that historian Aileen S. Kraditor said, "It is customary to date the beginning of abolitionism from January 1, 1831, when the first issue of Garrison's *The Liberator* appeared in Boston."[7] On January 8, 1831, *The Liberator* published an article

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[4] Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolition*, 238.
[5] John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic- Volume 1: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 174.
[6] Ibid., 174.
[7] Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolition,* 3.

by Garrison. The article, "Truisms", included twenty-four principles about slavery and its abolition that Garrison believed. Number six reads, "To kidnap children on the coast of Africa is a horrid crime, deservedly punishable with death; but he who steals them, in this country, as soon as they are born, performs not merely an innocent but a praiseworthy act."[8] Garrison uses the continued legality of the internal slave trade to frame the idea of the sale of slave children as legalized kidnapping. Kidnapping, or to steal people, particularly when those people are children, is never deemed acceptable in society and creates images of an unstable society. By comparing the Atlantic Slave Trade to the internal slave trade, Garrison focuses on the fact that they are the essentially the same action but with different consequences. Furthermore, Garrison challenges the idea of slaves as property, and ultimately challenges the United States Constitution and state laws that protect the slave owners' rights to their slaves. Then Garrison mocks America for encouraging this problem, accusing them of celebrating kidnapping. His use of, "in this country", also implies that other countries would be appalled at this act or that at the very least, chattel slavery is not the norm and should be reconsidered in contrast to the actions of other countries. Within these few lines, therefore, Garrison portrays the internal slave trade as hypocritical and cruel, perpetuating lawlessness in America, all through his use of a few key words.

The internal slave trade as a grievance against slave families was again discussed in 1837, when Northern women held their own Anti-Slavery Convention. After this convention, these women published "An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States" with their decrees and arguments for the abolishment of slavery. Based on

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[8] Mason I. Lowance, *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003), 343.

women's roles as mothers, it is not surprising that children and families became a topic of discussion. The document these women published after the convention reminded other women about their responsibilities towards children, declaring, "Women...are constituted by nature the peculiar guardians of children, and children are the victims of this horrible system."[9] The quote does not mention race, only family connections and children's helplessness within the family. This is to remind women that if it were their children, they would be fighting, and therefore, American women needed to get involved. In fact, women sympathized so much with the slaves' situations that by 1844, the American Anti-Slavery Society was mostly women and free Negroes.[10]

The convention then attacked the separation of slave families directly, entreating, "Let us expose the heinous wickedness of the internal slave-trade. It is an organized system for the disruption of family ties, a manufactory of widows and orphans."[11] There is no mistaking the hatred that drips through these words by these female abolitionists. The quote compares slavery to a factory; a reference based on the infamous dehumanizing of the workers as the Industrial Revolution shifted the work force from skilled to unskilled.[12] The factories were known for their poor treatment of the workers, especially women and children. To say that the slavery system was therefore no better than the factories would have registered as an insult to the Southerners who had pride in their idealized images of a happy and prosperous work force. Their use of "widows" and "orphans" goes beyond referencing just women and children, but uses words that shows

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[9] "An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States" issued by the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 21.
[10] *Documents of Upheaval: Selections from William Lloyd Garrison's "The Liberator", 1831-1861,* ed. Nelson Truman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), xix.
[11] *Anti-Slavery Convention* 21.
[12] Catherine Reef, *Working in America (American Experience)* (NY: Facts on File, 2007), xvii, 53.

loss of something previously had. They do not reference the men, simply the women and children, who were considerably more helpless in the male driven American culture, not even having the right to vote.

Other quotes against the separation of families specifically focused on the rights to family. William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian preacher, discussed this in his book, *Slavery,* published in 1835. Though not considered a strong abolitionist, Channing argued against the suffering of the slave family in his discussion on the lack of human rights held by slaves. He argued, "the slave is stripped of his right to his wife and children. They belong to another, and may be torn from him, one and all, at any moment, at his master's pleasure."[13] Textual imagery to incite emotion appears first with the word "stripped", a word that implies nakedness and vulnerability. To deny a man clothes is to reduce him to the level of an animal, and this is the state Channing compares the loss of one's family to. The emotional but also physical force of the separation is then seen in the word "torn". When objects are torn they are separated but also typically suffer damage in the process. This damage is almost always irreparable; at best there is a mark from tedious repair. All of this damage is done, not by necessity Channing argues, but with "pleasure". This evokes the idea that the slave owners were cruel and enjoyed making their slaves suffer. The reader therefore leaves the quote with an image of helpless slaves who are hurt mercilessly by their masters through the loss of their families.

In literature, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* used the separation of families as a main grievance against slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in small segments that appeared in *The National Era,* an anti-slavery newspaper, between June

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[13] Lowance, *A House Divided,* 384.

1851 and April 1852.[14] Stowe's novel sold over 300,000 copies in its first year alone, with over two million copies sold in 1856.[15] The impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on antebellum America became clear when President Lincoln called Stowe "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war" on her visit to the White House in 1863.[16]

When one of the female characters recounts her children being sold away from her she says that her master "told [her] he had sold them; he showed [her] the money, the price of their blood."[17] The phrasing of this disturbing story is concise but powerful. The master relays the horrible news as a matter of business, even showing her money as proof. The reader visualizes these images; a man standing in front of a woman with money in his hand, all that is left of her children. The last part of the quote, "the price of their blood", is the most graphic, reducing not only a human child to money but a human child to blood, signifying their figurative death because their mother will never see them again.

Another powerful use of family separation appears in a quote where a character speaks to another woman, but essentially speaks to the reader. The slave character beseeches, "'Ma'am,' she said, suddenly, "have you ever lost a child?"[18] This one sentence is simultaneously simple and complex. The wording is simple, but Stowe's ability to literally speak to the reader while not making the question singularly rhetorical shows her skill as a writer. The quote puts the slave on par with any woman based on

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[14] Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture, UTC: History of the Book in the 19th Century U.S., available from http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/interpret/exhibits/winship/winship.html; Internet. accessed 18 Apr. 2010.
[15] Africanaonline, Uncle Tom's Cabin, available from http://www.africanaonline.com/slavery_toms_cabin.htm; Internet; accessed 24 March 2010.
[16] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or, Life Among the Lowly*, ed. Christopher G. Diller (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2009), 10-11.
[17] Ibid., 901.
[18] Ibid., 226.

their status as mothers. For any reader who had lost a child to death or other circumstances, the slave mother became sympathetic as a human being. Though there are numerous other quotes and examples of slave family separation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* these two quotes demonstrate perfectly the raw emotion that anti-slavery advocates used to discuss the inhumanity of a system that labeled people as property.

These examples of quotes by abolitionists demonstrate how some abolitionists used the fundamental principle of a person's right to their family to evoke emotion from Americans and gain support for the termination of the slavery system. The only quotes that use specifics about slave family separation are those in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* and those are fiction. Even the quotes that discuss the internal slave trade do not use specific statistics, only relying upon the basic legality of slaves as salable property to substantiate their claims that slavery is cruel to families. These abolitionists therefore expected their use of powerful rhetoric to evoke mental images distasteful enough to push Americans to action. While many would argue that emotion is not always enough to win a discussion on, the strength lay in the unity. The ability for each of the arguments to be combined with the others so that none created contradictions within the entire scope of the abolitionist argument created a solid front to the ensuing counter attacks by slavery supporters, a front that was then also supported by the slave narratives.

Chapter 2:
The Slavery Supporters' Perspective

Because of the growth in the abolition movement in the early 1830s, the height of pro-slavery argument was between 1835 and 1860 as "the defense of slavery always followed an attack."[19] The first few decades of the nineteenth-century included private and minor condemnations of slavery but were not extreme enough to cause the slave-holders to unite.[20] This is why it was not until the 1830s that pro-slavery thought became more than passive and private justifications.[21] The strategy for the smaller attacks and then the attacks that first appeared in the 1830s was to apologize for the institution. While many Northerners and modern historians looked at this as proof of their guilt, it was most likely simply the easiest approach, as an apology does not incite a rebuttal attack. The apology strategy also included blaming Great Britain for introducing slavery in North America leading to the next strategy, the necessity argument.[22] The necessity argument was based on the climate and types of crops. They claimed that slavery was necessary for "the proper cultivation of the soil, and to be the great source of their prosperity" with slavery itself being beneficial to the slaves as "it exists...in a mild and parental form."[23] The final argument is the positive argument that argued the Biblical, social, scientific, and economic benefits of slavery which first appeared in the 1820s. When attacked by the emotional argument of the abolitionists, the slavery supporters responded with answers steeped in multiple ideologies. Their arguments are varied based whichever ideology they use to explain or negate slave family separation and when read together, their arguments

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[19] William S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of South Carolina, 1935), 89, 104.
[20] Ibid., 104.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 77.

confound and conflict with each other. This diversity weakened their argument, making their overall answer to the abolitionists' argument difficult to follow.

William Harper was a politician and judge from South Carolina who was known for his pro-slavery speeches, articles, and legal decisions. One of his best known works, *Memoir of Slavery,* was a speech read before The Society for the Advancement of Learning of South Carolina in 1837. The typed speech was then published in 1838. One of Harper's tactics to combat antislavery was to reverse the accusation on the abolitionists, arguing that the condition of the slaves was higher than the working class in the United States and other industrialized countries, or the argument known as the "failure of free society."[24] Harper maintained that the slave "is liable to be separated from wife and child—though not more frequently, that I am aware of, than the exigency of their condition compels the separation of families among the laboring poor elsewhere."[25] The first section of this quote acknowledges that slaves are separated from their families with seemingly no denial of that fact. Then Harper pauses--almost as if to let antislavery supporters think he is conceding the point, before reversing it and accusing the abolitionists of letting the working class similarly suffer. His use of the phrase, "that I am aware of", is cynically humbling (as he is a well-learned and traveled politician) as if to welcome their criticism in the midst of his attack. However, he never discusses the point stressed by the abolitionists discussed in the previous chapter, the concept that slaves had no rights over their families because they were property. This tactic infuriated antislavery

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[24] Mandel, Bernard. *Labor, Free and Slave: Workingmen and the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States*. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2007), 96.
[25] Memoir on Slavery by William Harper, available from http://www.archive.org/stream/memoirofslaveryr01harp#page/n3/mode/2up; Internet; accessed 15 April 2010. pg. 31.

activists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe who responded to this argument with, "As to family security, it is hard to say which is the worst,— to have one's children sold, or see them starve to death at home. But it's no kind of apology for slavery, to prove that it isn't worse than some other bad thing."[26] Harper and other slavery supporters who used this strategy thus only looked at the similarities in the final result and ignored the cause of the problem.

The quote used above then continues, saying, “but from native character and temperament [of slaves], the separation is much less severely felt."[27] This addresses another ideological argument of the slavery supporters, the ethnological argument. This held that slavery was justifiable because the African race was inferior to the European race and that slaves did not have the same mental or human capacities as their masters.[28] At the time, this argument was exceedingly popular, and even many men and women who fought to free the slaves believed in their racial inferiority, a problem which the United States would not fully resolve until the Civil Rights Movement in the 20th century. It is this argument that abolitionists previously discussed most addressed when they used the vivid imagery to incite sympathy for the slaves. This is not to say that the abolitionists argued that slaves were equal to whites, simply that they shared the same human abilities to love and mourn family separations. However, it was the slave narratives, such as those in the next chapter, that best combated this argument with their descriptions of how slaves felt when they lost their families.

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[26] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or, Life Among the Lowly*, ed. Christopher G. Diller (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2009), 576.
[27] William Harper, *Memoir on Slavery,* 31.
[28] Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought,* 243.

Another slavery supporter who combined the ethnological argument was James Henry Hammond, though unlike Harper, he first tries to deny the separation of slave families. Hammond was a slave-owning politician from South Carolina, and a staunch pro-slavery advocate. When elected to the United States Senate in 1857, he encouraged the use of pro-slavery propaganda to quell anti-slavery activists and coined the phrase "Cotton is king."[29] The following is Hammond's answer to the antislavery charge against family separation in his essay, "Letters on Slavery" from the book, *The Pro-Slavery Argument* published in 1853. Hammond begins by saying that "Sometimes it happens that a negro prefers to give up his family rather than separate from his master." First, the word "sometimes" does not address all or even a majority of slave family separations, yet its existence is enough to create doubt that all slaves preferred the separation of their family to the loss of their master. To qualify this statement, it is followed by Hammond's assurance that he knew "such instances."

Then addressing the issue of those who are sold from their families as attacked by abolitionist ideology, Hammond declares, "As to willfully selling off a husband, or wife, or child, I believe it is rarely, very rarely done, except when some offense has been committed demanding 'transportation.' At sales of estates, and even at Sheriff's sales, they are always, if possible sold in families." A quantitative assurance against the separation of families is seen in the words, "rarely, very rarely" and for those who are separated, bad behavior is blamed. There are quotes around the word "transportation" but no description, leading to the assumption that "transportation" is perhaps better for the slave than for them to remain with the same master, though it also casts a shadow over

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[29] Harvey Wish, *Slavery in the South: First-Hand Accounts of the Antebellum American Southland from Northern & Southern Whites, Negroes, & Foreign Observers* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964), 253.

what "transportation" entails with images of slaves sold further south coming to mind. When slaves must inevitably sold due to the death of an honor, Hammond promises that all efforts are made to keep the families together. This line, however, is all that is said with no discussion as to how they keep families together. Through this quote, Hammond minimizes the frequency of slave sales, blaming it on bad behavior or unavoidable deaths of slave owners.

Hammond concludes, "On the whole...I believe there are more families among our slaves, who have lived and died together without losing a single member...except by the process of nature...than among the same number of civilized people in modern times."[30] While this information is written to reassure worried Americans that the separation of slave families is limited, it does not address the suffering felt by the slaves who were separated, nor does it address or admit that family separation is a problem within the institution of slavery.

To combat the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Mary Henderson Eastman wrote *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* in 1852. *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* was the most successful "anti-Tom" book, selling between 20,000 and 30,000 copies.[31] Eastman staunchly argued against the frequency of slave family separation. When she portrays a woman, Lucy, who has her children sold away from her, Eastman blames it on Lucy's master being a drunk, and thus, not a good example of Southern gentry. "'This is the first time Lucy,' [a slave-owner] said, 'that I have ever known children to be sold away from their mother, and I look upon the crime with as great a horror as you do.'" Eastman's argument has dropped

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[30] Wish, *Slavery in the South,* 270.
[31] Aunt Phillis's Cabin, available from http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/proslav/eastmanhp.html; Internet; accessed 20 March 2010.

Harper's admittance of slave family separation past Hammond's insistence that the number was low, down to zero. The idea that a slave owner would have been unaware of any children being separated from their parents is a literary exaggeration bordering on ridiculous. Those who were familiar with the slave system would have seen the irrational in such a statement, and for anyone else, would have better believed the argument were it arguing for a low frequency of family separations rather than absolute zero. Going back to the idea of Lucy's master being a drunk, Eastman seems to concede that if slave families were separated, it was due to low character and could not be blamed on the institution itself.

The second part of the quote is readily believable, however, as it speaks to the horror felt by southern women at the thought of slave families separated. While the abolitionists tried to establish empathy between white mothers and black mothers, Eastman is trying to show a connection between northern mothers and southern mothers. To succeed would bolster the first part of this quote, as she could argue that southern women would never have allowed their husbands to sell their slaves away from their families. Interestingly, when the woman tells Lucy that she "look[s] upon the crime with as great a horror as [Lucy]", Eastman is portraying empathy between the white woman and the black slave. This contradicts Harper's use of ethnic inferiority, weakening the slavery supporters' entire argument if these quotes were ever combined in explaining slave family separation.

However, Eastman then contradicts herself in her own book. In a conversation between two white characters, a young girl questions her uncle about the sale of Lucy's children. "'Uncle,' said Alice, 'I did not think any one could be so inhuman as to separate

mother and children.' ' It is the worst feature in slavery,' replied Mr. Weston, 'and the State should provide laws to prevent it, but such a circumstance is very uncommon.'"[32] The initial discussion of the cruelty of separating children from their parents is consistent with Eastman's previous claims. However, the uncle's response that the sale of children from their parents "is the worst feature in slavery" verifies that it was an aspect of southern slavery and not unheard of as the female character previously states. Perhaps Eastman means to imply that southern women were shielded from witnessing these horrors, however, Eastman never clarifies this, letting her own contradiction simply hang in the air. Interestingly, the uncle then says that "the State should provide laws to prevent" the separation of children from their families. This is an idea discussed by the next slavery supporter in this thesis, as Louisiana had a law that prevented the separation of children under the age of ten from their parents.[33] For Eastman's argument, this implies that the government should be in charge of regulating the humanity of the slave system, a clever tactic to remove the blame from the slave owners. The quote concludes with the supposed reassurance that family separation is "very uncommon", which still is not completely compatible with Eastman's previous assertion that it never happened.

Henry Hughes, the Mississippi proslavery writer who wrote *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical*, said "among other things, masters...could not separate families, except such separation as is essential to the subsistence of all...they had not power at all to separate mothers and children under the age of ten years."[34] First, the

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[32] Mary H. Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin or Southern Life As It Is*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1852), 68.
[33] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 32.
[34] Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 93.

quote insinuates that masters could only sell slaves when absolutely necessary, but he does not give the qualifications. The wording is subjective and no doubt could be twisted for personal economic gain by the slave owners. As mentioned briefly in the discussion about *Aunt Phillis's Cabin,* Hughes references a law that was commonly used to argue that slave families had protection. However, this law only existed in Louisiana according to historian Eugene Genovese.[35] Therefore, it was possible to sell children of any age is the other slave states, giving any slave owner ample opportunity to do so if that was their intent. Thus, Hughes makes it seem as though separating families is impossible which was not true according to the laws and also contradicts Harper, Hammond, or even Eastman by saying that it was impossible, not just rarely executed. As for Hughes and the abolitionists discussed in the previous chapter, Hughes attempts to blatantly contradict them, which the first-hand testimonies of the slave narratives refute as the next chapter will demonstrate.

Just in these four examples of strategies used by the slavery supporters to combat the attacks by abolitionists against the separation of slave families there are many contradictions. Slavery was a complicated system and therefore inspired multiple explanations to justify it, all of which could be substantiated independently. However, the slavery debates were a flurry of words that relied on public support to enable the continuation of each position. The abolitionists' tactic of relying on basic human emotion helped to unify their movement within their argument about slavery as a crime against families and was easily understood by both men and women, even if it was not believed. Because of the contradictions and complexities within the slavery supporters argument,

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[35] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 32.

no specific strategy can be identified unless one considers that all of the slavery proponents argued that family separation was rare. This, however, was its own problem as they could not agree on exactly how rare and their words ranged from separation as an unfortunate but real problem to nonexistent. And the ex-slaves were more than ready to argue against that perspective.

Chapter 3:
The Slave Narratives

The slave narratives were another avenue used by the abolitionists to discuss the separation of slave families. Between 1760 and 1947, almost six thousand slaves wrote narratives, sixty-five of which existed during the antebellum era. Historian David W. Blight says escaped slaves created their narratives as "an instrument of liberation, when neither law nor society offered the same."[36] The legitimacy of these narratives, however, has been questioned ever since they came into being. According to slave narrative historian Marion Starling, this is expected because of three reasons. Number one is that they were used as abolitionist propaganda. Number two is that they portrayed a culture that was strange and obscure to many of their readers. Finally, many people past and present have doubted their reliability based on their autobiographic nature in regards to the accuracy of memory, and in the slaves' case, the ability for ghostwriters and editors to preserve the authors' facts and voice.[37] For these reasons, many narratives began with authenticity letters written by respected members of society and/or abolitionists that attempted to pacify the readers that the narrative was a work of fact. In years since, historians have used attempted to verify the validity of the narratives, such as has been done with the narrative of Harriet Jacobs who historians believe did write her own narrative and relayed the events plausibly.[38] These slaves also gave speeches such as Douglass and Brown.[39] While the narratives portray different circumstances how slave

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[36] True Tales of Bondage and Freedom: Nineteenth Century Slave Narratives, Publishers' Bindings Online, available from http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/gallery/slave_narratives.htm ; Internet; accessed 20 April 2010.
[37] Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1981), 221.
[38] Ibid., 213.
[39] Ibid., 235.

families endured separation, they all exemplify the distinction of slaves as people instead of chattel, using raw emotion to turn Americans against slavery. Additionally, they counter the slavery supporters' arguments that said the separation of slave families was either rare or nonexistent.

In 1789, Olaudah Equiano published his narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African.* The narrative was originally published in London, but expanded into English, Dutch, and German amid its thirty-six editions between 1789 and 1857.[40] In his lifetime, Equiano was a slave in America, England, and the West Indies, which aided the popularity of his narrative. Equiano's separation from his family occurred in Africa at the age of ten when slave traders kidnapped he and his sister. After stolen from his parents, he then suffered the loss of his sister. When relaying the incident, he said, "My sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other's arms."[41] He "cried and grieved continually; and for several days did not eat any thing but what they forced into his mouth."[42] The visual images present in the text are extremely dramatic. To say in the first sentence that he and his sister were initially holding onto each other before separated shows the inhumane force that adult slave traders used against children. This makes the act physical as well as emotional. Their prone position as with the word "lay" also shows their helplessness and vulnerability. When discussing his grief over the loss of his sister, Equiano adds sound to his portrayal when he says he "cried and grieved continually". Every adult is familiar with the sound of a child crying and would be able to perhaps hear their own child crying

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[40] Ibid., 66.
[41] Olaudah Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African," *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1987), 26.
[42] Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 26.

when reading this. He then returns to the imagery of force, directly using the word as he described what they did to him when his grief took away his appetite. Also, by explaining that this occurred over "several days", he shows that the grief of a child is not short lived and that they are aware enough of their surroundings to lose their appetite and be physically affected for more than a day. The free will of his was gone, replaced by control of men who decided it was in their best interest to make sure he remained healthy, not because he was a person, but because he was worth money.

As poignant as his words are, he then pleads to his readers to help end slavery asking:

> "Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates, distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery."[43]

The use of the rhetorical question shows how Equiano could as easily be asking this to God as he could be asking it to another person. The passage shows a questioning of any authority that would allow such a system to exist that is not just about unpaid labor, but about causing pain to families. He lists parents and children first in the question, demonstrating their importance in society as brothers and sisters and husbands and wives are not dependent upon each other as children are on parents. With the continuation of the quote, Equiano suggests the slave system could still exist as an economic system without the separation of families when he insists that there is "no advantage" in family separation. This is his most arguable point of contention with slavery supporters such as Henry Hughes, who argued that owners only separated families out of financial necessity.

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[43] Ibid., 38.

However, this could also be read as a challenge to slavery supporters to adjust slavery so that families are not harmed, which would make the system more humane.

Though well known, Equiano was not the most famous escaped slave. Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery in 1838, was one of the most influential ex-slave abolitionists of his time. His narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* sold 30,000 copies between 1845 and 1860.[44] Reprinted in four different versions over time, Douglass' narrative attained much acclaim, one female reader exclaiming in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, "never before have I been brought so completely in sympathy with the slave...May his narrative incite us to renewed diligence in our labors for the slave!"[45] In Douglass' autobiography he explains how he and his mother "were separated when [he] was but an infant--before [he] knew her as [his] mother."[46] The words themselves in this quote are not exceedingly strong, but this in turn benefits the overall feel of the line. The word "separated" does not inspire aggressive mental imagery and he uses almost a distant tone when explaining that he and his mother were never given time to bond. However, this tone and word choice is beneficial to the argument as it sets up the reader to think that the act of taking a baby out of a mother's arms in routine in slave society. Douglass then elaborates on the separation of mothers from their infants:

> "It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor."[47]

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[44] "Slave Narratives and Uncle Tom's Cabin." *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service. Web. 12 Apr. 2010. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2958.html>.
[45] Starling, *The Slave Narrative,* 251.
[46] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Dover Publications, 1995. 26
[47] Ibid.

This passage only serves to confirm and explain the first sentence, which is actually the most important. There is a combination here of the imagery and fact as Douglass combines quantitative numbers with subjective explanations. Because children walk around the age of one year, to take a child from their mother before that shows how the slaves were forced to be at their masters' complete mercy beginning almost at birth. Moreover, this passage shows that the slave owners are purposefully cruel as they intentionally hire out the mothers, preventing mother/child bonds from forming. However, it is the phrase "common custom" that attacks the slavery system the most as it goes counter to the slavery supporters' argument that family separation was rare. With the name of the state given and the practice described in detail, it would be possible for someone to look at Maryland plantation records and discern the truth about the frequency of babies being separated from their mothers.

Douglass lost his mother forever when he was seven years old and she passed away. He said,"I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it…I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger."[48] Douglass breaks down the separation from his mother from their initial separation at his birth to the permanent separation of death, made more heart wrenching by his young age. His grief over not being there for her during her last days is compounded by the realization that he never actually had her as a mother. He ends the passage by saying that she was like a "stranger", showing that even though she tried to compensate for the distance between their plantations, visiting whenever she could, it was not enough to

[48] Ibid. 28.

build the mother/child bond. Douglass' use of the word "stranger" also shows that he understands that he should have grieved more, should have felt more at her loss. This lack of emotion is itself a testament to the grievances of slavery while the recognition of the lack of emotion demonstrates Douglass' inteligence. Additionally, if compared to William Harper's idea that the slaves were not affected by separations, one could argue that any indifference that Harper saw was due to the slaves' inability to form the relationships in the first place due to inconsistent relations with their family members.

Following Frederick Douglass' narrative in popularity was the narrative of William Wells Brown.[49] According to slave narrative historian, Marion Starling, "though [Brown] was never actually to supplant Douglass as the popular idol in the antislavery movement, Brown did become the official slave-spokesman for the American Anti-Slavery Society in the summer of 1847."[50] However, Douglass remained number one in the eyes of the public, as demonstrated by an English newspaper article in 1853 that read, "Mr. Brown occupies a position in public esteem only second to that of his powerful-minded compatriot, Frederick Douglass."[51] Brown relays a horrifying instance whereupon a slave child cried and bothered the slave owner enough for the owner to give the child away. "The mother, as soon as she saw that her child was to be left, ran up to Mr. Walker, and falling upon her knees, begged him to let her have her child; she clung around his legs, and cried, 'Oh, my child! my child! Master, do let me have my child!" For any mother or anyone who has known the love of a child, this is a difficult scene to read and then mentally visualize. The reader can immediately see a slave woman on her

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[49] Starling, *The Slave Narrative,* 138.
[50] Ibid., 143.
[51] Ibid.

knees, begging for her child back. But beyond the visual imagery, this passage demonstrates how families could be separated on a whim with no rational reasoning needed. Eastman claimed that only inferior masters separated their slave families and that it almost never occurred. Her argument has been refuted already by ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass, leading the reading of Brown's narrative to beg the question, if the lowest of southern society are those who separate families, where does that place owners who give their slave babies away because of normal baby behavior? Continuing with the narrative, the mother then promises to keep the child quiet if he is returned to her. This idea itself is ridiculous enough to demonstrate the unreasonableness of the slave system as keeping their babies quiet was a problem for mothers of all colors and all social classes. The horror of this incident remained with Brown, leaving him with a feeling he conveyed at the end of the passage saying, "When I saw this woman crying for her child so piteously, a shudder— a feeling akin to horror—shot through my frame. I have often since in imagination heard her crying for her child:"[52] These lines tell the readers that not only did family separations hurt the families, but they affected the entire slave community, once again refuting William Harper's argument.

Brown also gives an example of how the separation of families made its way into the slave songs. One stanza of a song goes:

> "See wives and husbands sold apart,
> Their children's screams will break my heart;
> There's a better day a coming—
> Will you go along with me ?
> There's a better day a coming,
> Go sound the jubilee!"[53]

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[52] Brown, William Wells. *The Narrative of William W. Brown: A Fugitive Slave*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003. 71-72.
[53] Brown, *The Narrative of William W. Brown,* 73-74.

The slaves tell people to look at what is in front of them in the first line, emphasizing that not only were they separated, but they were sold, thus stressing their position as chattel. The next line portray the sympathies of the slaves themselves. A scream is a physical exhibition of pain, therefore, by using this textual imagery, the song tells the listener that the pain felt by slaves over losing their families was true pain. The following line, "There's a better day a coming", is a prayer for hope, a declarative sentence that insists that slaves' lives have to get better. After showing the listener what they slaves are suffering, the song then asks for Americans' support. "Will you go along with me?" does not mean for people to join them in their current state, but refers to the "better day" ahead. Slaves knew that day could only come by the abolition of the slave system but they insist that that day will come. The last line of this stanza is a reference to religion, but is also a call to action. It is as if the slaves are saying now that you have heard about how families are separated and children must suffer the loss of their parents, do something about it help the slaves find salvation, just as the Bible says will happen. This song provides ammunition against slavery supporters characteristic of William Harper and others who used the ethnological argument. To create poetry and then ascribe it to a tune requires intelligence, especially as the words here are all symbolic of broader meanings. Therefore, this song answers the question of science with science, proving that slaves have extensive intelligence, and thus most likely have mature emotions as well.

Because *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was so influential in the abolition crusade, even inspiring slavery supporters to write entire novels to refute it, it is important to address the slave who inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe. The slave whose narrative inspired the character Uncle Tom in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* was Josiah Henson, a fugitive slave

from Kentucky.[54] Stowe revealed the connection in her book, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin,* published in 1854 where she discussed the sources she used in her book to minimize southern criticism.[55] The narrative, *Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Related by Himself,* appeared in 1849 after Henson was encouraged to write his story by Congressman and abolitionist, Samuel A. Eliot. Aside from his inspiration to Stowe, what Henson's narrative provides in the debate over the separation of families is his quote about the fear that slave auctions incited among the slaves. "The first sad announcement that the sale is to be; the knowledge that all ties of the past are to be sundered; the frantic terror at the idea of being sent 'down south;' the almost certainty that one member of a family will be torn form another", this is how Henson describes the atmosphere on a plantation when slaves are sold.[56] Notice that it does not refer to a specific slave sale, but slave sales in general, refuting yet again the slavery supporters' arguments that separating families was uncommon. The strongest part of this phrase is the last section, "the almost certainty that one member of a family will be torn from another". Though it does not say which member is typically sold, this phrase makes the Louisiana law used as a defense in the previous chapter seem insignificant. However, the next part of Henson's narrative erases all doubt about the impact of one state's law. "My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand."[57] Henson never states how old he was, however, his says earlier in the narrative that there were seven children in the family. It is extremely probable, therefore, that at least one of the children was under the age of ten.

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[54] Starling, *The Slave Narrative,* 158.
[55] Ibid., 239.
[56] Wish, *Slavery in the South,* 25.
[57] Wish, *Slavery in the South,* 25.

As encouraging as the existence of Louisiana's law was, it did not apply in other states, and therefore, families such as Henson's could be legally separated.

Almost every slave narrative includes an instance of family separation. These are included for their significance during the antebellum era and their demonstration of how the slavery supporters' argument was countered. While often contested for their legitimacy and accurate portrayals of slavery, the antebellum slave narratives were vital to the antislavery cause. The abolitionists and slavery supporters were essentially arguing over their differences in beliefs, with neither side ever suffering slavery themselves due to the ethnic nature of the American slave system. However, these narratives provided first person accounts of the pain and suffering caused by family separation. The frequency of the topic in the narratives helped negate the slavery supporters' arguments that family separation was infrequent. Additionally, the grief portrayed in the narratives attacks the idea of slaves as property that is unaffected by the loss of loved ones. These ex-slaves may have used the rhetorical imagery style similar to the style used by abolition supporters such as Garrison and Stowe, however, the first-person perspective enables them to respond to the slave owners on their own terms.

Conclusion

In 1883, James Freeman Clarke published a book titled, *Anti-Slavery Days: A Sketch of the Struggle Which Ended in the Abolition of Slavery in the United States.* This was a unique portrayal of historical events because Clarke lived through the events himself and admittedly "dwelt mostly on the events with which [he] was personally familiar, and the persons with whom [he] happened to be best acquainted."[58] He consequently states that his book is not a history book, but "a contribution to the future history of [the antislavery] days."[59] When discussing the slavery debates within Congress, he recalled that:

> "Sometimes a man would innocently beseech them to be mild and calm in their treatment of slaveholders. The answer to this would be, "Suppose, sir, *your* wife and child were taken form you, and sent to Alabama to be the slaves of any brute who had money enough to buy them, would *you* be calm then? Would you speak gently, and say that in your opinion this was an unise course, and not altogether desirable? We are arguing the cause of thousands of husbands and fathers, liable at any moment to have their families torn from them. To be calm in such a cause would be a sin."[60]

This historian's remembrance of the inclusion of the separation of families within the slave debates is just one example of how this part of the slavery debate was important enough to last in people's memories. However, it is the modern historians, those who were not at the events themselves, who can truly examine the minute details of how these debates unfolded and how they impacted the broader picture of the antebellum era as America approached the Civil War. This research thus provides understanding about how the debate surrounding the separation of slave families was initiated and then played out.

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[58] James Freeman Clarke, *Anti-Slavery Days: A Sketch of the Struggle Which Ended in the Abolition of Slavery in the United States* (New York: AMS, 1972), 7.
[59] Ibid. 8.
[60] Ibid. 74.

If I applied this same method of analysis to all of the specific topics found within the slavery debates, Americans would better understand how the institution of slavery evolved from a legally widespread and peaceful practice, to a war that killed thousands of Americans.

Due to the legality of slavery, it is understandable that the slavery debate began with those in favor of abolishing slavery. Many abolitionists soon realized that since the law was on the side of slave owners, they needed to rely upon Americans' emotions to build support. The separation of families was a natural rallying point for abolitionists because it violated a principle that most people viewed as central to society. This argument also brought the idea of slaves as property under direct scrutiny, an idea which was fundamental to the slave system. If slaves suffered human emotions in inhumane circumstances, then the morality of the white man's complete power of them could be heavily disputed.

To draw out sympathy and empathy towards the slaves, the abolitionists filled their tirades against the separation of families with imagery that evoked disturbing mental images. The images were intended to recreate the cries and screams of parents and children as they were separated. The quotes also depicted the slave owners as wicked because of their ability to perpetrate such crimes against humanity. Although the abolitionists were diverse in their ideas about how slavery should end and how the slaves should be incorporated into society, their methods for attaining support through the use of slave family separation was uniform and simple.

Because of the abolitionist argument's simplicity and reliance on emotion, it was difficult for the slavery supporters to combat. Slave owners turned to logic to argue that

slave family separation was neither immoral nor common and turned to multiple ideologies that argued the racial inferiority of the slave. However, their diversified arguments contained disunities and were confusing in their complexities. This weakened the slavery supporters' overall argument in the face of the abolitionists' unified tactic of emotion.

Perhaps the slavery supporters' logical arguments would have been stronger had it not been for the slave narratives. The slave narratives that became famous in the antebellum era provided first-hand accounts about the horrors of the family separation for the American public. While the abolitionists beseeched the public to support the helpless, the escaped slaves put human faces and voices to the victims of slavery. Men such as Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano did not simply convey stories about faceless people suffering under these foreign circumstances, but they told their own stories, and the stories of the people they loved, attempting to make them real enough for people to fully identify with.

Additionally, the narratives added another element to the slavery debate because they were able to confirm or deny many of the claims made by the slave owners. The debates were limited when confined to men in different parts of the country yelling about what the other was supposedly doing. The slave narratives therefore deepened the debates when the slavery circumstances could be confirmed. The slave owners' insistence that family separation was rare had little value when the slave narratives conveyed first-hand accounts of these separations. The insistence that the slaves were not bothered by the loss of their families was countered by ex-slaves who said they cried and mourned for lost family members and comforted those in their community who suffered similar afflictions.

The slave narratives were thus essential to the abolition cause; the narratives improved abolitionists' minor arguments, and perhaps ultimately helped push the country into the war that ended slavery.

Ultimately, the unified tactic of appealing to emotion proved stronger than the logic of the slavery supporters because their logic could be disputed by the slave narratives, where as the suffering caused by the separation of families from each other could not. The abolitionists' powerful imagery served them well when confirmed by the slave narratives as each quote strengthened its own affect when they layered upon each other. It was the slave owner's differences in their defenses, with areas that could be argued against, that hurt them the most. This is not to say that the entire pro-slavery argument was weaker than the entire abolitionist argument, but that it was simply less effective at addressing the separation of families.

Though the debate over family separation was only part of the dispute over the institution of slavery, it represented the clash of human values with the economics of property and the science of race. The collision of these values is one that this country and others continue to face, well past the age of slavery. The tactics used in the antebellum era are strategies still in practice today as activist groups and political groups attempt to gain support for their causes. However, each cause is different and there is no guarantee that this strategy will work in a different situation. One thing it does not change, however, is the past and the fact that regardless of the arguments surrounding it, there were families separated because of slavery, families who never saw each other again, simply gone for good.

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