***An exploration of the ways in which slaveholders and abolitionists similarly objected to polygenism.***

*In 1819,* America had eleven slave states, and eleven non-slave states. When Missouri applied to be the first state west of the Mississippi River, a congressional battle ensued over whether or not the new state could allow slavery. The Missouri Compromise (1820) admitted Missouri as a slave state, but carved present-day Maine out of Massachusetts to create a new non-slave state. A line was drawn west from the Atlantic coast, stopping at the Spanish colonies that included present-day Texas. Any new state north of this line would not have slaves, and vice versa.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*In 1836,* Mexico was an eight-year-old independent nation when Sam Houston gained Texas’ independence by forcing the Mexican president to sign a treaty under duress.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*In 1844,* the British wanted to prevent Texas from entering the union as a slave state. In response, Secretary of State John C. Calhoun decided that the best way to ward off the British and peacefully admit Texas as a slave state was to argue based on “the radical difference of humanity’s races.” Accordingly, Calhoun read the publications of Samuel G. Morton, M.D., which asserted that the races were so dissimilar that they were in fact distinct species with separate origins. This view was called polygenism.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*In 1845,* America admitted Texas, as a slave state.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*In 1854,* The Kansas-Nebraska Act replaced Missouri Compromise with “popular sovereignty,” which dictated that those inhabiting a territory applying for statehood would vote on whether the new state could allow slavery. The same year, some of Dr. Morton’s most diligent students published a book in his memory, outlining and defending polygenism.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This paper explores the interactions between the emerging concept of polygenism and the simultaneous, nation-splitting controversy over slavery. Yes, many southern slaveowners, such as Calhoun, studied polygenism “with no less pleasure than profit”[[6]](#footnote-6) because it lended scientific authority the racial hierarchy which justified slavery. For the same reason, abolitionists detested the theory. But perhaps the story is more complicated. In fact, polygenism posed a huge challenge to the biblical origin story, making polygenists the enemies of orthodox Christians as well. Many of these Christians owned slaves, and even saw polygenism as a threat to slavery “‘more dangerous than the abolitionists.’”[[7]](#footnote-7)While people have outlined the southern Christian attacks on polygenism, convoluted as they may be, a less-discussed matter is how their arguments related to those of abolitionists who hated polygenism as well.[[8]](#footnote-8) How did people who would eventually form two separate countries before they reconciled their beliefs find themselves arguing the same point? I argue that the southern clergy and abolitionists both spoke out against polygenism on the grounds that it threatened biblical authority, dehumanized black people, and depicted them as having no intellectual potential. What differs is that the members of each ideological camp believed that this was offensive for different reasons. For the abolitionists, polygenism was simply a defense of slavery thinly-veiled by the scientific establishment. For the southern clergy in contrast, polygenism was not only a false science, but a false defense of slavery as well; the Bible was slavery’s best and only true justification.

**One Genesis Couldn’t Explain it All: The Origin Story of Polygenism**

In the beginning was Dr. Samuel George Morton (1799-1851), “the father of our cis-Atlantic school of Anthropology.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In addition to founding American anthropology, Morton was a hugely famous American physician and anthropologist from Philadelphia who made a life of sorting human skulls by race, measuring them, and drawing conclusions. Due to his own poor health, Morton had a large team of collectors who ravaged burial grounds, battlefields, and cemeteries to deliver him unearthed heads from all over the world. In 1846, he had procured over 600 skulls, and his collection was known as “The American Golgotha.” Morton firmly believed that there were 5 races that each represented a separate species intended to live on separate continents. This proved incredibly controversial, especially for the church which propagated that all men were descended from Adam.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) was a Swiss-born physician who made his career as a naturalist and a zoologist. His initial visit to Dr. Morton, and the discipleship that followed, stemmed from what biographer Edward Lurie described as Agassiz’s internal turmoil over his “special creationist” ideology, which maintained that rather than creating each species independently, God created a series of laws by which speciational variation took place over time. Agassiz essentially believed that Darwin had not come up with anything novel, but rather that evolution fit perfectly into the biblical creation story. As far as implications for racial diversity, this ideology put Agassiz in the camp of those ascribing to transmutation--the idea that one original man was created and that factors such as climate caused varying degrees of degeneration over time.[[11]](#footnote-11)

After observing black people for the first time on a trip to America in 1846, Agassiz’s struggle deepened as he aimed to account for his certainty that black people were not originated from the descendents of Noah, but instead arose from a separate creation event. In a letter to his mother, Agassiz expressed pain and pity as he found it increasingly impossible for him to ignore “‘that they are not of the same blood as we are.’”[[12]](#footnote-12) The purpose of his visit to the United States was to make a name for himself in the American scientific network, in pursuit of which he paid Morton a visit in Philadelphia. He ended up spending most of his time with Morton during this trip, and within months was converted to polygenism. His ideological shifts are best typified by the fact that in December 1846, Agassiz delivered his inaugural lecture in Lowell, MA and announced for the first time that black and white people had separate origins, though they belonged to the same species. Ten months later, he repeated the lecture in Charleston, SC and amended his stance to say that black people were in fact a distinct species.

Josiah Clark Nott (1804-1873) was yet another physician who became an outspoken polygenist. Anthropologist C. Loring Brace called Nott “one of the most distinguished physician-surgeons of the time.” He was born into the part of South Carolina with the largest proportion of slaves in the nation, and grew up taking racial hierarchy as a fact of life. In fact, he believed that “‘a labored argument on the subject would be an insult to the understanding of the reader.’” According to Brace, “Nott’s writings on race began in a formal sense in 1843 and continued to the outbreak of the Civil War.” Indeed, this work, which he called his “Niggerology,” drew major pushback from the southern church for his explicit critiques of the biblical origin story. Rather than back down, Nott thrived off of the controversy he had created,[[13]](#footnote-13) and even called the Christians “bigoted” for opposing his science. By the end of the 1840s, both Morton and Agassiz had taken a liking to Nott.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As Brace put it, Morton provided the “‘scholarship’” behind polygenism, Agassiz “gave it the endorsement of the scientific establishment,” and Nott largely gave it a voice. Yet, the fame of polygenism did not really take off until these three physicians collaborated with the British-born George Robins Gliddon (1809-1857). Gliddon was not a man of science, but rather was a poor merchant with experience in Egypt who took to the lecture circuit as a way to earn extra money, and eventually began travelling to speak about his experiences in Egypt. His role in this story is explicitly tied to his experience in Egypt, because he procured Egyptian skulls for Morton and had made the physician’s acquaintance as early as 1837. This gave him a contact in the highest circles of American science, and Gliddon was “instant friends”[[15]](#footnote-15) with Nott by 1848. Before long, Gliddon convinced Nott to co-author a book, and Agassiz eventually committed to contributing a chapter. The book, published just three years after Morton’s death, was dedicated in his honor and included excerpts from his unedited papers. According to Gliddon’s prelude to the book, “throughout this volume, Morton speaks for himself.”[[16]](#footnote-16) By publishing with three such prestigious men of science, Gliddon had finally made a name for himself, and had made perhaps an even bigger name for polygenism.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Types of Mankind appeared in March 1854, and sold out immediately. By July, 3,500 copies had been sold despite the fact that the book was over 700 pages long and cost $5.00 a copy. Nott wrote the majority of the book, including an introduction to the polygenism concept and an extensive defense of its validity as supported by contributions from Agassiz and the late Morton. Gliddon’s section was a close reading of Genesis chapter 10 (the account of God separating men into nations, scrambling their language, and scattering them across the Earth). The book includes sketches, maps, and charts to aid in the assertion that each “species” resulted from a separate creation event and was created to live in certain regions of the world. In all, there were over 300 illustrations. Its academic breath crossed myriad disciplines including history, archeology, craniometry, and zoology.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Frederick Douglass put it four months after publication: “perhaps, of all the attempts ever made to disprove the unity of the human family...the most compendious and bare-faced is the book, entitled ‘*Types of Mankind*’”[[19]](#footnote-19) Types of Mankind was meant to be more than just a public introduction for polygenism. The authors acknowledged that their work would be consequential in many regards beyond the realm of science: “The grand problem... is that which involves the *common origin* of races; for upon [this] deduction hang not only certain religious dogmas, but the more practical question of the equality and perfectibility of the races.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

**“Let there be slaves:” The mental gymnastics of biblically-sanctioned slavery**

As polygenism’s visibility increased with Types of Mankind’s rapidly growing readership, southern Christians took a staunchly defensive stance. In *Slavery’s Champions Stood at Odds: Polygenesis and the Defense of Slavery*, Christopher A. Luse examined “a little-studied anomaly of American race relations: the opposition by white, Southern Christians to the growing power of scientific racism.” In the slaveholding south, hatred for polygenism among Christians extended beyond the fact that polygenism undermined the biblical creation story. The much larger, more infuriating issue was the fact that polygenism, in challenging the bible, was poised to de-legitimize their justification for slavery. Accordingly, as Luse pointed out, the crux of the debate between polygenists and Southern christians rested in which party offered the *true* defense of slavery: “within the ‘cotton curtain’ an acrimonious debate raged over the nature of slavery, race, religion, and science. Southern ethnologists and clergymen argued over how to defend slavery.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

From the clergy’s perspective, “scripture represented the chief and sole legitimate defense of slavery.” They believed that the bible provided instructions for a paternalistic master-slave relationship. According to Luse, pro-slave paternalism centered around the idea that slaves were extensions of the southern family. This was especially salient to them because the bible is littered with patriarchs who had scores of servants, and God-given instructions on how to properly treat said servants. In this light, it was possible for them to uphold this “paternalistic relationship as the foundation of a Christian society.”[[22]](#footnote-22) One of the sermons analyzed in this paper even includes a plea to “receive [the negroes] as bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This is a striking reference to the second chapter of Genesis, where God calls Eve the bone of Adam’s bone and the flesh of Adam’s flesh, after creating Eve as a “suitable helper” for Adam out of one of Adam’s ribs. This evokes the idea that the slaves were in fact created by God, came directly from Adam, and were created to be “suitable helpers.” It also epitomizes the paternalistic view of slavery upon which the Southern church’s entire opposition to polygenism was built. Ultimately, southern christians knew that their biblical defense of slavery was only as strong as “American reverence for the Bible as the preeminent authority not only in religion but in all questions of morals, politics, and society.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Polygenism posed a serious threat to the church’s ability to convince people that slavery was religiously acceptable, a threat even more concerning given the growing abolition movement and heated political controversy over the future of slavery in America.

**Where Plantation Meets Pulpit: A pastor convicts polygenists in the name of good, Christian slavery**

To represent the arguments posed by southern christians in opposition to polygenism, this paper analyzes two sermons by Reverend James Henley Thornwell, D.D. Luse noted that Thornwell was considered “‘the Calhoun of the church,’” and included his sermons among his primary source base. Both sermons analyzed here castigated the teachings of polygenism with a common argumentative arc: slaves must be descended from Adam, because only descendants of Adam were eligible for salvation, and slave masters were called to lead their slaves to salvation.

The first sermon, entitled “The Rights and Duties of Masters,” was preached on May 26, 1850 at a church dedication in Charleston, South Carolina. The new church was created by the white congregation of Presbyterian Church and intended for use by the congregation’s slaves. This particular dedication service was not intended for the slaves at all, but was presumed to be for their benefit nonetheless. Thornwell made a point of reminding the slaveholders that slavery, like all other Biblically-sanctioned institutions, was intended to be practiced in a particular way that was pleasing to God; as exemplified by the occasion of the day, slave masters were to lead their slaves on the path to salvation. Thornwell detested polygenism, not only because it threatened to shatter his ideal of slavery, but because he also believed that it had the potential to destroy the union: “the utter ruin of this vast imperial Republick [sic], is to be achieved as a trophy to the progress of human development.” In other words, he saw the paradigm shifts of his time that challenged long-standing manners of thinking about black people (where they came from, what they were capable of, and how they ought to be treated), as a threat not only to the biblical sanctity of slavery but also to the fate of the United States at large.[[25]](#footnote-25)

On November 21, 1860, Reverend Thornwell’s concerns were unfolding into reality. Just one month later, on December 20th, South Carolina would be the first state to secede from the nation in rebellion to the election of President Abraham Lincoln. At this point in the third week of November, Lincoln had been elected, and the nation was in political distress. As such, the state government of South Carolina implored its citizens to set aside Sunday, November 21, 1860 “as a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer.” The people were to bring their sins and the sins of the nation before God. Accordingly, before Presbyterian Church, the same all-white congregation which dedicated a church to the instruction of their slaves in 1850, Reverend Thornwell preached a sermon entitled “National Sins: A fast-day sermon.” At the beginning of the sermon, he took special care to acknowledge that it was beyond the authority of a pastor to make comments about politics, and that he was therefore apprehensive as he began to preach. As a result, he wanted all in attendance to know that his aim was “not to plead the cause of States’ Rights or Federal Authority, but to bring [his listeners] as penitents before the Supreme Judge.” Among the sins that Thornwell wanted to bring to light in the 1860 Fast-Day Sermon was the “infidel science” which posed “a fatal blow to the institution” of slavery.

**When Fugitives Discuss Right and Wrong: Abolitionists’ arguments against the credibility of polygenism**

Two articles published in William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper the *Liberator* will help to represent the abolitionists’ arguments against polygenism. One article is a review of Types of Mankind published in the *Liberator* in June of 1854, three months after the book first appeared. The review, as well as a letter to the editor published that October, expressed scathing discontent with the content of this book, not only because it could be read in defense of slavery, but also because they deemed it unworthy of scientific authority. As noted by historian David A. Copeland in The Antebellum Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1820 to 1860, “William Lloyd Garrison promised to be heard on the evils of slavery in America, and he continued to advocate manumission for slaves...in his Boston-based newspaper, the *Liberator*, until the end of the Civil War.”[[26]](#footnote-26) A largely influential newspaper, the *Liberator* played a key role in pushing slavery to the forefront of American press. The paper was so vocally abolitionist that “America’s postmaster general allowed Southern postmasters to halt delivery of the Liberator in the South.” In fact, hatred for Garrison and his paper was so strong in the slave states that “Georgia offered a $5,000 reward for Garrison’s arrest shortly after the *Liberator* started publication, and South Carolina offered $1,500 to anyone who could provide information that could lead to the arrest of anyone distributing the *Liberator* within the state.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Given how much attention this newspaper was getting, it is safe to assume that articles published in the *Liberator* carried a certain degree of influence that allows them to represent the abolitionist viewpoint for this project.

I also include a commencement address by the escaped slave Frederick Douglass, “the best-known African American abolitionist, renowned for his impassioned speeches.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Douglass was the son of a slave mother and her master in Maryland, and escaped to Massachusetts in the 1830s. He began public speaking in the early 1840s, quickly caught the attention of white abolitionists including Garrison. He was hired as the first ex-slave to be a full-time lecturer for the abolitionist organization the American Anti-Slavery Society. Historian Allen Carden wrote that “his lectures were so eloquent that doubts were expressed by many of his hearers that he had ever been a slave.” Rather than let people believe that ex-slaves could not achieve his level of success, Douglass risked re-capture and published three autobiographies to make clear that he had in fact been raised in bondage.[[29]](#footnote-29) This demonstrated that Douglass was unwaveringly committed to convincing the American public that black people, if given a chance at freedom, could accomplish just as much as white people could.

To round out the abolitionist viewpoint, I analyze a speech given by Douglass at the commencement of Western Reserve College, in which he aimed to offer “a few thoughts on the subject of the Claims of the Negro, suggested by ethnological science, or the natural history of man.” Douglass noted the existence of “various theories, which have, of late, gained attention and respect in many quarters of this country,” one of which, and the one with which he took particular issue, being polygenism. He noted his particularly unique perspective on the topic as a black person, acknowledging that he approached the speech with “hesitation, if not serious doubt,” because he felt as though he himself were “somewhat on trial.” He realized that in discussing polygenism as a black person, he was trying to persuade his audience regarding how they would think about *him*, a position that was almost unheard of at a time when most black people were slaves. Once a slave himself, Douglass held a unique sense of urgency to advocate for racial unity. For him, it was not abstract or moral, it was personal. As such, Douglass pointed out that “views and opinions, favoring the unity of the human family, coming from one of lowly condition, are open to the suspicion, that ‘the wish is father to the thought.’” Nevertheless, Douglass proceeded to lay out his deep frustrations with polygenism, polygenists, and Types of Mankind, a book which he characterized as riddled with “unsoundness, if not...wickedness.” [[30]](#footnote-30)

**Connections in the Crossfire: Analyzing how both abolitionists and slaveholding christians argued against polygenism**

Despite being ideological rivals, abolitionists and slaveholding Christians found some common ground in their hatred of polygenism. Remarkably, both parties objected to polygenism on the grounds that it threatened biblical authority, dehumanized black people, and depicted them as having no intellectual potential.

*The King of Kings Dethroned?: Polygenism as religious infidelity*

Both the abolitionists and the southern clergy acknowledged polygenism’s potential to de-legitimize the authority of the Bible. The abolitionists spoke more broadly, of the general ways in which polygenists challenged the Bible, and also touched on the ways in which this posed a threat to the biblical defense of slavery. Thornwell, on the other hand, was exclusively concerned with the ways in which polygenism undermined his authority as a pastor to convince people of his particular understanding of slavery.

For example, Douglass quoted a scripture: “‘God has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell upon all the face of the earth,’” and noted that scriptures like this “must all get a new interpretation or be overthrown altogether, if a diversity of human origin can be maintained.” On a similar note, he pointed out that polygenism “materially affected” the Bible’s value “as a record of the early history of mankind.” The letter author agreed: “Dr. Nott entirely repudiates the hitherto-received idea of the common origin of mankind, as detailed in Genesis.” Such repudiation jeopardized the Bible’s respectability, not just as a historical record, but as a sacred text with the authority to condone, or admonish, slavery. The author simultaneously stated that Types of Mankind aimed to “invalidate the testimony of the Bible so far as it can be brought to truthfully support the case of freedom,” *and* that “slavery at one time was defended from the Bible. Mr. Gliddon has cut away that prop.” He was careful to clarify that Gliddon did not invalidate the biblical sanctity of slavery out of abolitionist motives, but probably did so because he found it “no longer serviceable.”

Perhaps, in Gliddon’s eyes, his empirical, objective defense of slavery was convincing enough to stand without any religious backing. In fact, the letter author had a lot to say about Gliddon’s close readings of Genesis in Types of Mankind. He asserted that Gliddon “explodes the Biblical chronology” before going on to say that it is not an exaggeration to claim “that he cuts up the Bible, root and branch, and that with a good-will evidently prompted by a desire to do something more than throw light on the origin of mankind.” Without further specification from the letter author, we can assume that this ulterior motive of Gliddon’s involved providing a new, more robust defense of slavery.[[31]](#footnote-31) A similar line of thought allowed southern Christians such as Thornwell to see polygenists as attempting to replace the biblical defense of slavery with their “infidelity.”

In Thornwell’s 1860 Fast-Day Sermon, he expressed alarm not only that polygenism existed, but also that some people within what he already called “the Confederacy” believed in “the conclusions of this vain deceit.” They believed it, and furthermore viewed “the grounds which make the slave a different kind of being from his master” as a defense of slavery. The fact that people were adopting polygenism as defense of slavery meant that he and his ideology were losing influence. Thornwell needed to convince people to believe him instead of the polygenists. As such, he set out to prove that adopting this viewpoint was unwise because it undermined Bible, and in doing so, could not be a valid defense of slavery.[[32]](#footnote-32)

In fact, in his 1860 sermon, Thornwell went so far as to assert that accepting polygenism was not only unwise but also sinful. He stated that such beliefs had “grave consequences.” Ensuring that people understand the enormity of their actions is crucial to making people feel convicted, and Thornwell spared no words in insisting that his listeners take this sin seriously. In discussing the aforementioned “grave consequences,” Thornwell noted that “if the African is not of the same blood with ourselves, he as no lot or part in the Gospel” and therefore could never be redeemed by Jesus Christ. He later rephrased the same idea: “if he is not descended from Adam, he has not the same flesh and blood with Jesus, and is therefore excluded from the possibility of salvation.” This repetitive “if-statement” sentence structure made explicitly clear that there was no alternative way to apply polygenism to slavery. In case the mere assertion that slaves cannot be saved by Jesus is not enough to convince the polygenists of Presbyterian Church that they are in the wrong, Thornwell eliminated uncertainty by stating that “nothing but the word of God can justify us in shutting the gates of mercy upon any portion of the race.” Manmade science could not simply decide that the biblical promise of eternal life only applied to certain people. If the 1860 members of Presbyterian Church proclaimed to believe in the Bible, they could not believe in polygenism. To hammer in the point that believing in separate origins was, in fact, sinful, he explicitly stated that “no christian man...can give any countenance to speculations which trace the negro to any other parent but Adam.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

*Whether ⅗ or 100%, slaves were people too: Polygenism as dehumanizing*

While polygenism technically maintained that, despite being different species, all races fell into the human genus, it became evident to abolitionists and slaveholders alike that this theory attempted to relegate black people to subhuman status. Naturally, abolitionists found this implicit dehumanization abhorrent, and argued vehemently against it. More curiously, southern clergy such as Thornwell needed slaves to be considered human in order for their justification of slavery to hold. If slaves were not human, how could they accept Jesus Christ? In 1850, Thornwell he was careful to remind his congregation that true godly slave masters “have not sought the protection of our property in the debasement of our species,” despite the fact that the proponents of polygenism “may be seeking eminence and distinction by arguments which link [the negro] with the brute.”[[34]](#footnote-34) In strikingly similar language, our representatives from both camps communicated their discontent with the dehumanizing aspects of polygenism.

One noteworthy point raised by the letter was that polygenism had implicitly dehumanizing undertones, especially with regards to black people: “[Nott] does not, however, deny that the negro is a man, in so many words, but would only place him so low in the scale as to leave doubts in the reader’s mind whether he is or not!” The letter author elaborated, pointing out that the authors of Types of Mankind, when discussing the brain of a black adult, noted a “‘marked resemblance to the orang outang.’” In the same vane, Douglass expressed that “common sense itself is scarcely needed to detect the absence of manhood in a monkey, or to recognize its presence in a negro.” Douglass went on, pointing out that in “the days before the Notts, the Gliddons, the Aggasaz, [sic] and Mortons,” there was no way to argue that two groups had separate origins while maintaining that they were both men: “if you established the point that a particular being is a man, it was considered that such a being, of course, had a common ancestry with the rest of mankind. But it is not so now.” He considered this reasoning “remarkable--nay, it is strange.” Douglass also noted that “[the negro’s] heaven-erected face, his habitudes, his hopes, his fears, his aspirations, and his prophecies, plant between him and the brute creation, a distinction as eternal as it is palpable,” and exclaimed his frustration with the idea that “humanity...is a sort of sliding scale, making one extreme brother to the ou-rang-ou-tang, and the other to angels, and all the rest intermediates!” Especially in the second quote, Douglass used the contrast between angels (superhuman) and primates (subhuman) to show just how far out of proportion the polygenists had taken their efforts to contrast white and black people.

Interestingly, Douglass and Thornwell, the two authors in this analysis who had first-hand experience with slavery, showed a convergence of ideas about why slaves should not be dehumanized in the way polygenism suggests. For one thing, both Douglass and Thornwell underscored that considering black people human did not require anyone to see black people as perfect, but actually quite the opposite. Rather, Douglass asserted that what proved a black person’s humanity was precisely “his good and his bad, his innocence and his guilt.” He was very passionate about this, arguing that when “tried by all the usual, and the *un*usual tests, whether mental, moral, physical, or psychological, the negro is a MAN--considering him as possessing knowledge, or needing knowledge, his elevation or his degradation, his virtues or his vices--whichever road you take, you reach the same conclusion the negro is a MAN.” Thornwell expressed the same idea but with a more religious undertone: “the Negro is of one blood with ourselves...he has sinned as we have.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Although they were making the same claim, these authors most likely had different motives for doing so. As a pastor who firmly believed slaves would benefit from salvation, Thornwell needed to get across that black people, just like white people, had sinned and were in need of Christianity. This aligns with his paternalistic biblical defense of slavery, because if the standard for black humanity was that black people had to be without sin, there was no reason for black people to be enslaved and force-fed the religion of their masters. In contrast, as an ex-slave who had made a career of convincing white people that people like him should not be enslaved, Douglass likely wanted to highlight that black people, albeit imperfect, were just as human as whites and therefore did not deserve to be in bondage.

Not only did both parties detest that polygenism was dehumanizing towards black people, but they also expressed that humankind should alternatively be viewed as a family. Thornwell’s 1850 sermon exemplified this by asserting that white slaveholders should not be “ashamed to call [the slaves] our brothers.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Black people should not be degraded to a lower status, as polygenism suggested, but rather viewed as brothers with their masters. “Brothers” was a potent choice of word because it emphasized the common parentage. It also was probably meant to strike a chord with audience, who would recognize the strong biblical significance of word brother. Throughout the Bible, brotherhood is revered as a relationship characterized by mutual interest in one another. For Thornwell’s purposes, asserting that masters and slaves were brothers indicated that just as the slaves benefited the masters, the masters ought to benefit the slaves by leading them to salvation. In 1860, when Thornwell aimed to convict certain listeners for believing in polygenism, the brotherhood rhetoric returned with a sense of urgency: “it is no light matter to deny the common brotherhood of humanity.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Douglass’s speech featured very similar language. He stated that “that which are called the negro race, are a part of the human family,” and derided polygenists’ aims “to forbid the magnificent reunion of mankind in one brotherhood.” For Douglass, this language served the purpose of trying to implore his white audience to acknowledge a sense of kinship between themselves and black people.

*Education is key, but who owns the lock?: Polygenism’s denial of the intellectual potential of black people*

Recall that at the beginning of Types of Mankind, the authors listed the “perfectability of the races” among topics which polygenism could potentially resolve. As far as Nott, Gliddon, and company were concerned:

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 of the present day. 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; and the nature of the one cannot be altered without a corresponding change in the other.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Essentially, they assumed that his audience would take for granted that certain “moral and intellectual peculiarities” existed between the races, and that these were a direct result of the racial differences. The abolitionists sought to discredit polygenist claims to inherent black inferiority, and both abolitionists and slaveholding Christians argued that slaves had some degree of intellectual potential.

For instance, the book critic for the *Liberator* took great issue with the use of craniometry in Types of Mankind: “I believe that the entire assumption on which craniological investigation has for some time proceeded, namely—that mental power and elevation may be measured by the size, form and position of the skull—to be unfounded.” He further claimed that the methods of Morton (the leading contributor of craniological evidence to the project) “cannot be safely trusted,” and stated that facial angle was “fallacious, and sometimes even foolish as a test of ability.” In challenging the scientific validity of craniometry, the book critic de-legitimized this method as sufficient “proof of the radical and hopeless inferiority and unimprovability [sic] of the Negro,” which, according to him, was the ultimate motive for including this evidence in Types of Mankind. The letter author conveyed a similar sentiment, citing Nott’s claim that “‘A peculiar conformation characterizes the brain of an adult negro. Its development never goes beyond that developed in the caucasian in boyhood’” and deducing that “Dr. Nott looks upon the improvement of the negro race as an impossibility.” While the book critic stopped at calling this science unfounded, the letter author challenged the evidence directly by pointing out that Nott “should never have heard of Samuel R. Ward or Frederick Douglass.” Douglass also cited “[the negro’s] speech, his reason, his power to acquire and to retain knowledge,” as evidence of black peoples’ intellectual potential.

According to the abolitionist authors, comparisons between black and white ability or potential were inherently invalid not only because the methodology was unsound, but also because because they were based on insufficient evidence that black people, given opportunity, would still fail. Under slavery, black people had no opportunities to educate themselves or cultivate any intellectual skills, yet, as Douglass pointed out: “[the negro’s] faculties and powers, uneducated and unimproved, have been contrasted with those of the highest cultivation, and the world has then been called upon to behold the immense and amazing difference.” The legal framework of slavery included measures to keep slaves from learning to read or write; naturally, comparing them with any educated person, let alone “those of the highest cultivation,” would reveal an “immense and amazing difference.” Polygenists were not unearthing new conclusions but rather pointing out the obvious. Nonetheless, according to Nott, black people were incapable by nature, not for lack of opportunity. The letter author discussed Nott’s claim that black people, “‘when given every opportunity for culture,’” (at which the author inserted “O, ye gods!” in parenthesis, and called the statement “apocryphal”) could not make drawings as well as white people. In critique, the letter author noted that the dissection of white and black hands demonstrated that the thumbs were the same, presumably in order to show that the dexterity should be the same. In case the dissection seemed too remote for some readers, the letter then pointed out the clear observational evidence that if slaves were not as dexterous as white people, then Nott “and his fellow man-theives would be badly off for corn, not to speak of other work.” This author interestingly pointed out that if polygenist reasoning were true, slaves would actually be ineffective servants. Not only were these conclusions of black inferiority based on insufficient evidence to support them, but they also lost significant weight in light of more holistic, falsifying evidence.

Douglass continued to point out contradictions and oversights when he made use of historical evidence to refute the polygenist assertion that black people had relatively limited potential for intelligence or civilization.[[39]](#footnote-39) His major point was that “Egypt was one of the earliest abodes of learning and civilization,” which he acknowledged as universally accepted. Sarcastically, he called it a “pity” that Egypt was in Africa, and an “unhappy circumstance” that “the ancient Egyptians were not white people.” He even posited that the polygenists would prefer if Egypt “had been in Europe, or Asia, or better still, in America!” With this rhetoric, Douglass accomplished two things: 1) he ridiculed the idea that polygenists “unfortunately” overlooked the location of Egypt while drawing conclusions about black capabilities, and 2) he suggested that, by making this huge oversight, the polygenists were intentionally constructing the narrative in a way that was most convenient to them. By exclaiming that the best case scenario for the polygenists would have Egypt located Egypt in America,, Douglass communicated that the polygenists’ efforts “to separate the negro race from every intelligent nation and tribe in Africa” were really all about perpetuating an Americanized version of racial essentialism. Douglass then expanded upon the convoluted logic of this oversight by stating that Morton himself described Egyptians as having brown skin, wide, flat noses, black curly hair, and thick lips, and pointing out that someone with these physical characteristics “would, I think, have no difficulty in getting himself recognized as a negro!!” The frequent use of exclamation points in this discussion indicated that this issue was very emotional for Douglass. As one of the most highly-regarded black people in America at the time, Douglass expressed that “to be intelligent is to have one’s negro blood ignored,” which was exactly what polygenists perpetuated by stating that a change in intellectual character could only come from a change in physical character. Douglass lamented the assumption that intelligence could only come with contact with white people, and was excited to point out that Egyptians, who were indisputably great and also indisputably black, made remarkable strides without white guidance.

For the purposes of the southern clergy, black people needed to possess intellectual potential because they had to be taught Christianity. Accordingly, Thornwell argued that, despite polygenist claims, slaves had to be descended from Adam because their “moral, religious, and intellectual nature” reflected the image of God.[[40]](#footnote-40) By virtue of the fact that Thornwell preached at the 1850 church dedication, he believed that black people should be taught religion, and that they therefore had the ability to learn. With his sermon, Thornwell aimed to congratulate the slave masters of Presbyterian on making a profound effort to religiously educate their slaves. The new church would provide slaves with religious instruction, and even included a Sunday school ministry. In fact, his entire conception of biblically-sanctioned slavery depended on slaves being able to learn the foundations of Christianity, and internalize them enough to accept Jesus Christ and be saved. If slave masters were obligated to lead their slaves to salvation, slaves needed to be qualified to go the intellectual distance.

This idea that biblically-sanctioned slavery depended on slaves’ intellectual potential elucidated a remarkable irony about the southern Christian mindset. People who supported a system which prohibited black people from learning to read or write also insisted that they could, and must for that matter, be taught. Thornwell and his ideological peers believed that institutions should be set up for the purpose of slave education, so long as it was on their terms. Evidently, their logic must have been deeply convoluted to how deeply convoluted to allow for the idea that slaves should be taught, to even argue that slaves had intellectual potential, but to simultaneously operate within a framework that kept them from cultivating that potential in a manner that was not meticulously controlled. Clearly, abolitionists and southern Christians agreed that black people were intellectually capable. The difference lies in how each group proceeded with that information. For the abolitionists, debunking the “unimprovability” of black people meant not that they were merely deserving of instruction, as Thornwell and company argued, but that they were deserving of freedom.

**Post-Racial Society?: Why this matters now as much as ever**

Often in discussions of the history of science, theories that turn out to be unfounded were widely believed at the time of their conception. Polygenism distinguishes itself in that abolitionists and southern clergy alike understood that polygenism was psuedo-science. It seems as if the unscientific nature of the theory was almost taken for granted in investigation of a more interesting question: *why* would the polygenists propagate these claims? What were they trying to stir up in a time already riddled with political and social upheaval? Each group decided that polygenists were after those who held their specific beliefs about slavery, and both groups were right. By further fueling the already burning fire over slavery, polygenists successfully got two of the fiercest rivals in American history to agree on how wrong they were.

Through illustrating that abolitionists and slaveholders were capable of such similar arguments, and at times even expressed them using mirroring language, this paper elucidates a series of important points. Namely, we see here that the difference between two opposing viewpoints is never as clear-cut as one would hope. Especially when considering the complications and nuances of the pro-slave viewpoint, it becomes clear that these people held very tightly to an incredibly narrow understanding of slavery that left little room for challenges such as polygenism. It is therefore reductive to say that slaveholders were merely blatant racists who wanted to have slaves at any cost, and were desperately grappling to defend their practices. This consideration suggests a lot about the nature of racism in general, as slavery remains one of the most unreconciled issues in the country. After emancipation, it took a full century for the descendants of slaves to prove themselves worthy of drinking out of the same fountains as their former masters. Even to this day, many people still fly confederate flags. When we remember that a certain sect of American slaveholders were capable of remarkably similar lines of thought to those of leading abolitionists, it shows us that the history of race and racism in this country deserves to be treated with a much nuance today as was present while the institution of slavery was actually in existence.

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1. Copeland, David A. *The Antebellum Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1820 to 1860*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003., 21-23 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Carden, Allen. Freedom's Delay: America's Struggle for Emancipation, 1776-1865. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014., 160* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Nott, Josiah Clark, George R. Gliddon, Samuel George Morton, Louis Agassiz, William Usher, and Henry S. Patterson. Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches: Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological and Biblical History, Illustrated by Selections from the Inedited Papers of Samuel George Morton and by Additional Contributions from L. Agassiz, W. Usher, and H.S. Patterson. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Grambo, 1854.,* 50-51 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Copeland, *The Antebellum Era,* 267 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Copeland, *The Antebellum Era,* 349-350; Nott, *Types of Mankind,* dedication page [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nott, *Types of Mankind,* 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brace, C. Loring. *"Race" Is a Four-letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005., 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Historian Christopher Luse briefly pointed out, but did not attempt to prove, that similarities existed between the arguments used by southern Christians and abolitionists in their objections to polygenism. Luse, Christopher A. "Slavery's Champions Stood at Odds: Polygenesis and the Defense of Slavery." *Civil War History* 53, no. 4 (2007): 379-412. doi:10.1353/cwh.2007.0080. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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12. Lurie, Edward. *Louis Agassiz, 257* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In, Keel, T. D. "Religion, Polygenism and the Early Science of Human Origins." *History of the Human Sciences* 26, no. 2 (04, 2013): 3-32. doi:10.1177/0952695113482916. Keel offered a perspective on the relationship between Nott’s polygenism and christianity. He argues that “despite his rejection of monogenesis, Nott’s racial theory remained squarely within the tradition of Christian ideas about the natural world.” For example, Nott firmly believed that the earth was only about 6,000 years old (as suggested in the Bible), and operated on the premise that it was impossible for humanity to manifest such diversity in so little time. Rather than rejecting the Biblical age of the Earth, he rejected the idea of a creation event. Yet, his ideas were not entirely in opposition to Christianity as many of his time (including him) may have believed. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brace, C. Loring. *"Race" Is a Four-letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005., 112-114 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nott, *Types of Mankind, ix* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brace, *"Race" Is a Four-letter Word,* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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26. Copeland, *The Antebellum Era,* 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Carden, *Freedom's Delay,* 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Carden, *Freedom's Delay,* 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Douglass, Frederick. *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered*  [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. To echo the sentiments of the other two authors, the book critic also points out that: The support which slavery has long derived from the authority of old Hebrew customs and records, now fails.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Thornwell, James Henley. *National Sins: A Fast-day Sermon* [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Thornwell, James Henley. *The Rights and the Duties of Masters* [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Thornwell, James Henley. *The Rights and the Duties of Masters* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Thornwell, James Henley. *National Sins: A Fast-day Sermon* [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Nott, *Types of Mankind, 50* [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Though it did not come up in the two sermons analyzed here, it is worth noting that Luse cited some examples of southern Christians similarly drawing upon examples of great African civilizations when arguing against polygenism. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Thornwell, James Henley. *The Rights and the Duties of Masters* [↑](#footnote-ref-40)