

## **A Response to Karen Anton**

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Throughout the essay “‘My Country! ’Tis of Thee, Strong Hold of Slavery’: The Musical Rhetoric of the American Antislavery Movement,” Karen Anton discusses the rhetorical significance of music among the community of American abolitionists. Anton acknowledges that music was often overlooked as a rhetorical feature of this controversial period. She draws attention to its impact by examining a variety of rhetorical songs, including hymns and parodies of familiar selections. Though she suggests that the “spirit of music” is combined with logic to form a powerful statement against slavery, she more specifically addresses pathos throughout her essay (30). While antislavery music may “stir the emotions” or evoke a feeling of empathy, greater attention to the rational argument in the musical lyrics similarly demonstrates the rhetorical value of music during the abolitionist period (33).

Anton accurately notes that antislavery music possessed an emotional appeal for listeners, and thus was an appropriate technique to support emancipation. She references songs such as George W. Clarke’s “A Vision” and J. Simpson’s “Away to Canada” that demonstrate the ability of antislavery music to move the audience, precipitating feelings that generate a negative view toward slavery. However, the rational argument imbedded within the poetic nature of abolitionists’ lyrics deserves similar consideration. As one of multiple examples, Anton highlights the song “America!—A Parody,” a satirized version of the patriotic selection “America.” In what Anton describes as “emotionally charged” lyrics, “Theta,” the author, focuses on the contradictions inherent in the juxtaposition of the rights of man and the oppression of enslavement (36). Anton references Theta’s reasoning behind her mocking parody and hints at the rhetorical significance of its rational argument. Yet, further attention to the implications of the lyrics as they were changed from the lines of the original song, “America,” is necessary because they lead the audience to deduce that all men, including slaves, deserve freedom.

The injustice of slavery in a “land of liberty” illuminates the irrationality of African American subjugation. Theta appropriately rewrites the lyrics “My Country! ’tis of thee, / Sweet land of liberty” to become “My Country! ’tis of thee, / Strong hold of Slavery.” While white American citizens can enjoy their freedom, black individuals are being oppressed by slavery. This particularly resonates with Americans because of the country’s history with its own oppressor—Great Britain. America’s past experience with this oppressor influences the Declaration of Independence’s statements on equality and liberty. Thus, the inconsistency Theta illustrates between America’s claim to liberty and African Americans’ bondage underscores the logical flaw in the institution of slavery. A rational analysis of these two lines is important because even if pro-slavery advocates are not moved emotionally by the horrors of slavery, they may be convinced intellectually by slavery’s challenge to America’s standard of equality.

Moreover, Anton implies that the familiar tunes of antislavery songs or hymns reinforce the pathos. This is apparent in C. W. Dennison's "Our Countrymen Are Dying," because the traditional church hymn juxtaposed with the "horrors of slavery is poignant" (Anton 34). Yet, as historian Caroline Moseley admits, "the average antislavery hymn . . . 'is simply not very singable'" (4). Likewise, writer Troy Smith in his article "Antislavery Songs" states that white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who collected antislavery music, described the songs as "lengthy, wordy, and difficult to sing" (163). Naturally, the melodious appeal of some songs stirs some type of emotion in listeners. However, the difficulty in singing many of the abolitionist hymns emphasizes the importance of examining the music's rational appeal. Garrison's "Hymn 7" demonstrates lines that are difficult to sing:

Christians—boast not the name you bear,  
While you that sacred name deprave; Oh!  
Hear a suppliant brother's prayer—  
In mercy spare the kneeling slave . . .

What you profess by works proclaim,  
And be the Negro's guiding friends;  
Nor them from home and kindred tear  
And with a lawless curse pursue . . . (12)

While Anton states that composers chose common melodies that made their audience feel comfortable, this was not always the case, suggesting that "[t]heir message was the important thing" (Smith 163). In the hymn above, rational deduction is essential to understanding the lyrics. The hymnist syllogistically argues that Christians are morally obligated to support their "brother." Because the slave is their "brother," slave owners, known for using the Bible to justify slavery, must instead acknowledge the equality of all men and guide slaves out of captivity. Nevertheless, while familiar songs created a sense of comfort and reinforced the emotional connection between the listener and the music, the enthymematic deduction enabled "a judicious . . . descript[ion] of the wrongs and sufferings of our slave population" to conjure "a deep sense of [each listener's or reader's] obligations to assist in undoing every burden, breaking every yoke, and setting every captive free" (Garrison, qtd. in Smith 163).

At any rate, the emotional and rational appeals serve as essential tools to advocate emancipation, and when combined, they create an even stronger antislavery statement. Further examination of "Our Countrymen Are Dying" illustrates this point. Based on the popular church hymn "From Greenland's Icy Mountains," the song exhibits "patriotism and pathos" but then employs enthymematic reasoning through the lyrics to support the antislavery argument. Anton highlights how the lyrics "our country-men are dying" invoke patriotism by urging listeners to think of the men as individuals who must be protected for the good of the nation (34). As the listeners realize their patriotic pride and duty to guard their "country-men," the rational argument strengthens the abolitionist rhetoric by suggesting that these "men," actually slaves, deserve freedom. The term "country-men," in characterizing slaves as "men," implies the premise that if all men are created equal, as the Declaration of Independence states, it is wrong for any man to be a slave. In describing slaves as "countrymen," the rational argument challenges the reality of slavery as contradictory to the Declaration of Independence, thus indicating that abolition is necessary. Though antislavery music appeals to pathos, the lyrics further advance the rhetorical significance of the

music by also appealing to reason. “Our Countrymen Are Dying” serves as a primary example of how pathos and rational argument may mutually work together to strengthen antislavery advocacy.

As Anton suggests, the ability of antislavery music to evoke emotion within the listeners was an important rhetorical strategy. However, analyzing the rational premises and implications is equally appropriate. While the “spirit of the music” tugs on the hearts of those listening to promote the emancipation of slaves, the reasoning targets the audience’s ability to deduce that slavery is unacceptable. Furthermore, because antislavery songs often lacked rhythm or a familiar tune, abolitionists could not rely on the melody to heighten the pathos. Therefore, understanding the enthymematic, rational argument becomes particularly important. Thus, the appeal to rationality was an essential component in music’s rhetorical significance during the abolitionist movement, as it combined with pathos to advocate the end of slavery.

### Works Cited

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