

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Joshua McCarter Simpson's Songs and Mid-Nineteenth Century Antislavery Activism

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Abstract

The Ohio-based Black songwriter, Joshua Simpson, published two books of antislavery songs in the mid-nineteenth century, *Original Anti-Slavery Songs* in 1852 and *Emancipation Car* in 1854. Unlike most other known songsters, which were compilations of poetry from several authors, Simpson authored original lyrics for borrowed melodies, and he did so with extraordinary care, engaging the original song to enhance his activist messages. Employing the rhetorical practice of signification, his linkage of new lyrics with pre-existing songs sometimes builds upon meaning from the original text, reusing it to add weight to the moral and political arguments against slavery. He also extends nature imagery and lyrics about the comforts of home and family in traditional ballads and contemporary sentimental songs to his new lyrics, but more often his signifying practice is ironic. He inverts the original song's sentimentality in deliberately discomfiting ways that could persuade Americans to assist self-emancipating people and work toward wholesale abolition of slavery. Simpson's most radical songs talk back irreverently to the originals, especially minstrel tunes containing degrading caricatures and proslavery propaganda as well as patriotic anthems proclaiming hypocritical platitudes. Simpson did not simply write new songs; he transformed some of the most popular and beloved songs of his era, harnessing their renown to sharpen his activist messages.

Born outside of slavery in the United States in about 1820, Joshua McCarter Simpson attended Oberlin College and later settled in Zanesville, Ohio where he worked as a businessman, physician, teacher, elder in Zion Baptist Church, antislavery activist, and song writer.¹ He published two books of antislavery songs in the mid-nineteenth century, *Original Antislavery Songs* (1852) and *Emancipation Car* (1854), as well as a few others that survive in separate extant sources. Dozens of antislavery songsters existed by the time Simpson published his, but unlike most other known songsters that were compilations of poetry from several authors, Simpson wrote new lyrics and set them to borrowed melodies. In a field otherwise dominated by white songwriters and editors of antislavery songsters, Simpson is the only Black American currently known to have authored and published such an extensive body of activist songs in the Antebellum period. William Wells Brown's *Antislavery Harp* (1848) is the only other known contemporary collection of antislavery song attributed to a Black American, but Brown seems to have authored only two songs in his anthology.² As Kristen M. Turner has noticed, Brown's publication is valuable and distinct from white editors' publications. It portrays actual enslaved voices and experiences while also satisfying expectations held by white Americans who may have been more familiar with the sentimentalized caricatures and comic tropes of enslaved people, free Black people, and activists that circulated via blackface minstrelsy and contemporary

¹Vicki L. Eaklor, "Introduction to Joshua Simpson's Original Antislavery Songs," *The Journal of Black Sacred Music* 3, no. 1 (March 1989): 14–50; Joshua McCarter Simpson, *Emancipation Car, Being an Original Composition of Antislavery Ballads, Composed Exclusively for the Underground Railroad* (Zanesville: n.p., 1854; Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing Company, 1969), III–VI. Citations refer to the Mnemosyne Publishing Company edition.

²Aaron D. McClendon, "Sounds of Sympathy: William Wells Brown's Antislavery Harp: Abolition and the Culture of Early Antebellum American Song," *African American Review* 47, no.1 (Spring 2014): 83–100; Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 32–43.

literature.³ Simpson may have had Brown's collection in mind as a model for his, and his lyrics demonstrate that he balanced similar contradictory expectations. For example, sometimes Simpson's songs replicate abolitionist paternalism and stereotypes of enslaved people as pitiable, and other songs empower the enslaved toward self-emancipation and argue for equal rights. Like other songster composers and editors, Simpson drew from the popular song genres of his era—hymns, sentimental parlor song and traditional ballads, minstrel tunes, and patriotic anthems. Employing borrowed melodic material for his new lyrics, he presented antislavery messages with the familiar packaging of popular tunes. He varied his treatment of source material and tone of his lyrics to appeal broadly to both political moderates and more radical antislavery activists who would have been motivated by a range of moral and political arguments. The resulting intertextual meanings would have facilitated the expansion of the abolition movement of the 1850s, promoted resistance to laws that protected slaveholders' interests, encouraged direct aid to those seeking self-emancipation, and sharpened the political arguments for legal emancipation.

Even in this nineteenth-century American context when it was common to write new political and social reform-oriented lyrics to fit preexisting popular songs, Simpson's songs are especially interesting and worthy of study. Indeed, most songsters of Simpson's era contained contrafacta, which also filled out the performance repertoire for the most famous musical social reformers of the age—the Hutchinson Family Singers.⁴ There are various potential explanations for this regular practice of tune borrowing, including the financial desire to capitalize on a well-known popular hit, the technological and economical ease of printing lyrics without musical notation, political expediency, and accessibility to a wide audience inclusive of those who did not read music notation. Simpson may have been motivated by some or all of these factors, but he also conformed to the practice to enhance the songs' meaning and function in the abolition movement. Simpson's strategic process of melody borrowing strengthened the contemporary influence of his songs. When considered alongside the melody source, one can appreciate his careful attention paid to time and pitch organization, as evidenced by his replication of text painting from the original. Reuse of popular melodies enabled singers, listeners, and even readers who recognized the melody to hold two sets of lyrics together in their mind. The resulting intertextual relationships added rhetorical weight, created tension, undercut propaganda, and underscored hypocrisies in American society.

Simpson approached different genres of source material in distinct ways, resulting in a body of work that argues against slavery and motivates politicized action from different complementary perspectives. Employing the rhetorical practice of signification, his linkage of original lyrics with preexisting songs sometimes built upon meanings in the original text, extending it to add weight to the moral and political arguments against slavery. He used hymns in this way, for example, in tribute to nineteenth-century abolitionism's religious foundations and to utilize Biblical allegories linking enslaved people's suffering to Christ's and escape from slavery to Exodus. He also occasionally extended natural imagery and comforts of home and family from traditional ballads and contemporary sentimental songs to his new lyrics, but more often his signifying practice was ironic, employed to redirect the original song's sentimentality in deliberately discomforting ways that could persuade Americans to assist those fleeing enslavement and work toward wholesale abolition. Simpson's most radical songs talked back irreverently to the original, especially minstrel tunes containing degrading depictions of free and enslaved Black people and patriotic anthems proclaiming hypocritical platitudes. Simpson did not simply write new songs; he transformed some of the most popular and beloved songs of his era, harnessing their renown to sharpen his social criticisms and calls to action.

³Kirsten M. Turner, "The Slave Cannot Speak for Himself: William Wells Brown, *The Antislavery Harp*, and the Depiction of Enslaved People in the Abolitionist Movement" (paper presented at Nineteenth-Century Studies Association, Kansas City, MO, March 9, 2019); and "'Dandy Jim' and Racialized Abolitionism" (paper presented at Society for American Music, online, March 12, 2022).

⁴Scott Gac, *The Hutchinson Family Singers and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Existing scholarship

Only minimal scholarship about Simpson currently exists, but it provides a foundation for this study. As a poet, Simpson has a small presence in the field of literary studies, but he is still a marginalized figure according to Lauri Ramey who characterizes his work as an “incendiary body of abolitionist protest poetry,” important for helping establish the historical lineage of African American protest poetry that predates the twentieth century.⁵ Simpson’s lyrics can certainly be interpreted poetically and may have been read as poetry in the nineteenth century, but there is no doubt he also intended them also to be sung. With few exceptions, Simpson’s songs circulated with instructions for employing a specific pre-existing melody. Matt Sandler includes Simpson in his book about Black Romantic abolitionist poets, and although musical aspects of the songs are not Sandler’s focus, he does acknowledge that singing Simpson’s songs could have reached audiences less influenced by other forms of abolition rhetoric.⁶ In musicology, Vicki Lynn Eaklor’s contextual introduction to Simpson’s first publication and her important reference work for antislavery songs were authored in the predigital age, but nonetheless remain valuable today.⁷ Perhaps the nonoriginal music frequently used for antislavery songs or general lack of music notation in the published songsters explains why musicologists have not yet given this music much attention, but as Eaklor argued, “what the songs lack in originality render them even more valuable documents of the era.”⁸ Recent research about antislavery song by musicologists Kristen M. Turner and Erin Fulton has built upon Eaklor’s contributions.⁹ Musician and activist Mat Callahan’s recent book and album anthologizes a few of Simpson’s songs, presents them as evidence of Black resistance to and rebellion against slavery and makes the case for the songs’ relevance as activist music today.¹⁰ Considering the historical sources of Simpson’s melodies and interpreting them as part of the rhetorical power of Simpson’s songs is not part of Callahan’s project, however.

Historians and scholars of Black Studies have recently expanded knowledge of Black political discourse, protest, and activism in the United States by tracing the roots of twentieth century social movements and political work to much earlier points in the nation’s history.¹¹ This enlightened view of the Antebellum roots of more recent Black activism points to potential interdisciplinary interest in Simpson’s songs as primary source material. Although historians and Black Studies scholars have interpreted texts representing a wide array of published and nonpublished nineteenth-century genres of Black writing and oration, nineteenth-century song has mostly been overlooked in these fields. This is especially surprising given the interest in poetry and domestic spaces where participation in political discourse was more fully open to women.¹² I hope to draw attention to Simpson’s songs as rich sources of new perspectives on Black abolitionism as well as provoke consideration of how performance of Black-authored song in private and public settings could have influenced social movements and political action.

⁵Lauri Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 38, 61.

⁶Matt Sandler, *The Black Romantic Revolution: Abolitionist Poets at the End of Slavery* (New York: Verso, 2020), 89.

⁷Vicki Eaklor, *American Antislavery Songs: A Collection and Analysis* (New York: Greenwood, 1988); Eaklor, “Introduction to Joshua Simpson’s Original Antislavery Songs,” 14–50.

⁸Eaklor, *American Antislavery Songs*, 21.

⁹Turner, “The Slave Cannot Speak for Himself; ‘Dandy Jim’ and Racialized Abolitionism”; Erin Fulton, “‘The Year of Jubilee Is Come’: Metatextual Resonance in Antislavery Hymn Parodies,” in *Sonic Identity at the Margins*, eds Joanna Love and Jessie Fillerup (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 75–96.

¹⁰Mat Callahan, *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2022).

¹¹Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, introduction to *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, eds Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: Norton, 2006), xv–xvii; Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 1–5; Van Gosse and David Waldstreicher, introduction to *Revolutions and Reconstructions: Black Politics in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds Van Gosse and David Waldstreicher (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 1–3; Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 1–14.

¹²Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 89.

Simpson's political activity

Readers might be frustrated by attempts to glean nuanced perspectives about Simpson's personal politics from his songs that contain the stereotypes of enslaved people common in white abolitionist literature along with portrayals of African Americans claiming *American* identities, bravely pursuing self-emancipation and levying radical demands for equality. However, Simpson's localized grassroots activities and his connections to nationally renowned Black political leaders suggest he was a religiously minded abolitionist committed to political organization and direct action. His home state of Ohio was a hotbed for antislavery activism and geographically situated so as to be well-traveled by people leaving enslavement—those deemed “fugitive slaves” by the law. Simpson lived in the midst of this activity, part of the large free Black community of Zanesville in Muskingum County, Ohio, which had its own antislavery society, as did the neighboring counties. Local historians there have connected Simpson to underground emancipatory routes extending from Deavertown to Putnam, underscoring that Simpson was one of the southern Ohio residents familiar with safe havens in this region well-traveled by those leaving enslavement in the South,¹³ but it is likely we will never know the extent of his involvement in clandestine illegal networks that intentionally kept few written records. Many self-proclaimed abolitionists had little interest offering direct aid to those considered “fugitive slaves” by the law because it put themselves in legal jeopardy, and in this context Simpson's known commitment to dangerous and risky work places him on the more radical side of the abolition spectrum.¹⁴

Living in Zanesville would have provided opportunities to connect with nationally renowned abolitionists who held a range of positions within the movement. The pastor of nearby Putnam Presbyterian Church was Harriet Beecher Stowe's brother, William Beecher, and his church served as a gathering place for abolitionists during the time Simpson lived nearby. For example, Frederick Douglass spoke there in the fall of 1852.¹⁵ More importantly, Simpson's participation as a delegate to Ohio state conventions between 1851 and 1865 and the National Convention of Colored Men held in Syracuse, New York in 1864 demonstrates his direct involvement with Black American leaders.¹⁶ Frederick Douglass presided over the meeting in Syracuse, and Simpson was also in the company of other Black leaders from political, religious, literary, and musical realms including William Wells Brown, Peter Clark, Henry Highland Garnet, Thomas J. Bowers, and Elisha Weaver.¹⁷ Although state-level “colored conventions” grew in number during the 1850s and were sometimes open to the public, Simpson served as an official delegate for events that had a credentialing system requiring a local selection process.¹⁸ Thus, his level of participation as indicated in the published proceedings demonstrates his prominence among the politically active Black elite at state and national levels. The issues discussed at the conventions included the cultivation of white abolitionist allies, political action against slavery including direct action by enslaved people, and interpreting the pro/antislavery bias of the U.S. Constitution.¹⁹ Debating these issues may have motivated Simpson's song writing, because his works engaged with these concerns and his songs were sung at conventions.²⁰ He knew his audience of white allies, free Black people, and those in the process of escape from enslavement, and he would

¹³Wilbur Henry Siebert, *The Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroads* (Columbus: Long's Book Company, 1951), 214–15.

¹⁴Cheryl Janifer La Roche, “Secrets Well Kept,” in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, eds P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 247–50.

¹⁵Siebert, *Ohio's Underground Railroads*, 217.

¹⁶The following convention proceedings have been digitized as part of the Colored Conventions Project and are available at the open access database <https://omeka.coloredconventions.org>: *Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio* (Columbus: E. Glover, 1851); *Proceedings of a Convention of the Colored Men of Ohio* (Cincinnati: A. Moore, 1865); *Proceedings of the National Convention of Colored Men* (Boston: Rock and Ruffin, 1864).

¹⁷Eric Gardner, “A Word Fitly Spoken,” in *The Colored Convention Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*, eds P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 72–73.

¹⁸Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 87–88.

¹⁹Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self Making in Nineteen-Century America*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 2022), 158.

²⁰At the 1851 convention, Simpson offered a resolution to appoint a committee for preparing antislavery music for the opening and closing of each session. *Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio*, 4.

have been familiar with what ideas, details, and themes motivated them. He had knowledge, insight, and leadership skills that enabled him to speak—and sing—persuasively to different constituencies who had contrasting levels of investment in antislavery activities and were motivated by a range of moral and political arguments.

Simpson's surviving songs appear to respond to the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850, which was a frantic period for abolitionists. Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law meant that the Northern states were no longer a safe refuge for those fleeing enslavement; individuals would then need to cross into Canada to ensure their safety from kidnapping and re-enslavement. The law compelled Northern state and municipal governments to serve slaveholders' interests, with federal marshals and even the general public serving as "*de facto* slave catchers," to borrow the wording of Cheryl Janifer LaRoche.²¹ Julie Winch describes the law as "broad in its scope and truly terrible in its impact."²² Manisha Sinha writes that the Fugitive Slave Law "wreaked havoc in northern Black communities" and "crystallized abolitionists' commitment to direct action."²³ To the extent that some Northerners remained ambivalent toward Southern slavery before the Fugitive Slave Law, after its passage and enforcement, positions of neutrality became untenable. More Americans felt pressed to choose a side, and the abolition movement grew. Northerners protested against the Fugitive Slave Law, formed vigilance committees to undermine local enforcement and outwit kidnappers, built underground networks, and facilitated increased emigration to Canada. The passage and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law also pushed more enslaved people to seek self-emancipation and encouraged more abolitionists to accept and even advocate for violence against slaveholders and their enablers.²⁴ Mid-century was also a turning point for the trans-Atlantic abolition movement, with British activists focusing their attention on the American South since slavery had been abolished in the British colonies two decades earlier. The changes in federal and local law enforcement, increased international collaboration, and the growing popularity of autobiographical narratives and fictional stories about slavery contributed to creating a broader awareness of abolition activism in mid-nineteenth-century United States and heightened the sense of urgency among those already devoted to the cause. Simpson wrote and published songs that represented these developments of the 1850s, built momentum toward eventual abolition of slavery, and laid the foundation for the long haul toward equal rights.

Hymn *contrafacta* and abolitionism's religious and moral foundation

Hymns are probably the most obvious source material for Simpson to have worked with because he could tap into established religious traditions, appealing to "old fashioned moralizers," to use historian Manisha Sinha's phrase,²⁵ and ecclesiastic abolitionists. The first antislavery songs had borrowed musical and lyrical structures from existing Protestant hymns. By the 1830s, singing against slavery became prevalent among Garisonians, who preferred moral suasion over political involvement when calling for an immediate end to slavery.²⁶ The practice of writing new antislavery lyrics for preexisting hymn melodies increased in the 1840s and was well established by mid-century.²⁷ The inclinations toward hymn *contrafacta* remained popular even when the movement and its musical styles diversified by the 1850s.²⁸ Dozens of collections published between 1834 and 1856, including those by William Lloyd Garrison, used hymns to reinforce the religious and moral foundation of the movement and its

²¹Cheryl Janifer La Roche, *Geography of Resistance: Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 120.

²²Julie Winch, *Between Slavery and Freedom: Free People of Color in America from Settlement to the Civil War* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 86.

²³Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 500–1.

²⁴David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 266.

²⁵Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 3.

²⁶Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Antislavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1–3.

²⁷Eaklor, *American Antislavery Songs*, xvii–xviii.

²⁸McClendon, "Sounds of Sympathy," 83–100; Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 32–43.

common use of singing to spread the antislavery messages.²⁹ Arthur Tappen's evangelical faction also embraced antislavery hymn singing while urging gradual change and willingness to work within the political systems instead of demanding immediate action.³⁰ When reusing hymns for the basis of new antislavery songs, Simpson invoked the historical weight of these established traditions. As Erin Fulton writes, the hymn repertoire offered "a readymade set of textural tropes that already spanned political, geographical, theological, and racial barriers."³¹ Practically speaking, Simpson's reuse of familiar hymn melodies and meters also rendered his songs easy to sing, because many communities, especially those involved in or adjacent to abolitionism, already sang Protestant hymns in churches and homes.³² Nineteenth-century Anglophone hymnodists typically employed only a limited number of poetic scansion, which meant most hymn texts could be sung to one of a large body of tunes that shared a corresponding meter.³³ Many amateur singers were well accustomed to substituting one melody or one hymn text for another. Still, Simpson's repurposing of hymns demonstrates more than a passive continuance of mix-and-match practices or accessibility.

Simpson reused the text painting and original lyrics in existing hymns to build upon the foundational themes of the antislavery movement. With "Freedom's Cause," the opening song in his first published songster, Simpson appealed to religiously motivated abolitionists and their traditional preference for moral suasion when he used the melody from "We'll Not Give Up the Bible" by J. A. Anthes and invoked W. Meynell Whittemore's original hymn poetry.³⁴ "Freedom's Cause" is a rallying cry that depicts abolition as religion. Simpson exploited the theme of steadfast religious devotion in the source hymn, extending it to frame abolition as a religious calling. Simpson's lyrics fit the hymn melody elegantly, taking advantage of the emphasis brought by longer note durations sung at the ends of phrases and the original hymn's common meter, with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Especially striking is the first line "Our cause is just and holy" with a melodic contour that reaches the phrase's highest point on "holy" ("Bible" in the original) and then marches downward, mostly syllabically, until the last word, "stand," which moves stepwise up to the tonic:

*Our cause is just and holy--
To it we'll ever stand;*
(Simpson's lyrics)³⁵

*We won't give up the Bible--
God's holy book of truth;*
(borrowed hymn)³⁶

The original hymn expresses an evangelical pledge to bring the Bible to more people and Simpson, likewise, pledged in the final verse to spread the messages of abolitionism: "We'll plead our cause where ever we go/Till all mankind shall see." He promised conversion: "And Slavery's friends shall feel and own/That God made all men free." In this song, Simpson incorporated the theme of redemptive suffering and connected it to the trope of enslaved people as Christ-like figures from nineteenth-century abolitionist literature.³⁷ The theme of suffering is present in the original hymn's line "We'll suffer all that men can do." Simpson's poetry in the third verse conveys vivid imagery of physical

²⁹Spencer, *Protest and Praise*, 36.

³⁰Cima, *Performing Antislavery*, 10–12.

³¹Fulton, "The Year of Jubilee Is Come," 91.

³²Peter Mercer-Taylor emphasizes the popularity of hymn singing and the functioning of church music as popular music in the Antebellum period in *Gems of Exquisite Beauty How Hymnody Carried Classical Music to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 26–36.

³³Fulton, "The Year of Jubilee Is Come," 76.

³⁴Joshua McCarter Simpson, *Original Antislavery Songs* (Zanesville: n.p., 1852), 25. "We'll Not Give Up the Bible" is included in several contemporary hymnals, including William B. Bradbury, *The Singing Book for Boys and Girls Meetings* (New York: Ivison and Phinney, 1854), 84.

³⁵Simpson, *Original Antislavery Songs*, 25.

³⁶Bradbury, *The Singing Book for Boys and Girls Meetings*, 84.

³⁷The characters of Tom and Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are examples. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*, eds Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007).

suffering that he hoped might not be necessary in the fight against slavery: “And this we fancy not to do/by shedding human blood.” In the fourth verse, Simpson depicted Jesus’s bloodshed for the sake of saving all men from “misery, sin, and chains.” By presenting abolitionism as religion and Christian suffering as redemptive by representing enslaved people as Christ-like figures, Simpson harnessed well-established traditions.

“Freedom’s Cause” also calls directly for political action, which was not commonplace in older anti-slavery hymns. His third verse exhibits political pragmatism: “We wish to pull down Tyranny/And laws of justice make.” Simpson added a patriotic component that was not present in the text of the borrowed hymn with the lines “our country’s good at stake” (third verse) and “we are friends of Liberty” (fifth verse). His fusing of Protestant religiosity with patriotism symbolizes the joining of the religious moralist and political pragmatist factions of the movement. Simpson reflected this reality of the early 1850s,³⁸ and by weaving in patriotism in this first song of his 1852 collection. Here, he acknowledged the historical practice of singing antislavery hymns, underscoring the contemporary joining of religious and political factions. Historically, the religious abolitionists and their focus on moral suasion may have been the least likely to challenge legal systems and work politically, but Simpson spoke to them by infusing his hymns with political discourse.

Several of Simpson’s hymn-based songs position Canada as the Promised Land, applying Biblical themes to contemporary legal and political realities. In the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law, when Northern states could no longer provide reliably safe havens for those fleeing enslavement, Canada became the ultimate destination—even as it became more dangerous to travel the long distance from the American South. Canadian communities of free Black people, including many who had emigrated from the United States in the previous decade, received more newcomers and more attention in the abolitionist literature. In Simpson’s “Parody,” a rewrite of the hymn “Come to Jesus Just Now,” Queen Victoria “stands upon the frontiers of Canada inviting the slaves to fly to her embrace.”³⁹ “Her Majesty,” with her promise of freedom, stands in the position occupied by Jesus in the original hymn. Simpson paid careful attention to the melodic arch of “Come to Jesus Just Now” melody, reusing the slowing of rhythmic momentum at the end of phrases to emphasize the text nearing the cadence (see [Figure 1](#)); the line “Come to Jesus” becomes “Come to Freedom.”

Another of Simpson’s hymn-based songs, “Albert Morris,” was set to the melody for “We’re Travelling Home to Heaven Above,”⁴⁰ and also frames Canada as the Promised Land that is protected by a benevolent matriarch. When singing, one embodies those positions traditionally conceived as powerless and powerful, as the singer transitions between singing as the enslaved person’s voice: “I’m going to see Victoria’s face ... At her right hand I’ll find a place,” and the Queen’s: “my son, I’ll set you free.” The paternalism evident here in the Queen’s lines was common in antislavery literature, and it motivated many white abolitionists, particularly those persuaded by morality and religiosity. However, paternalism could erase the humanity, individuality, and agency of enslaved people, emphasizing their pitiable condition and reliance on white benevolence. Simpson nonetheless leaned into this theme because when singing the Queen’s hymn-like verses, white abolitionists could embody the righteousness and power that would motivate them to provide aid for those escaping enslavement or participate in other forms of direct abolitionist activism.

³⁸Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 470–73.

³⁹“A Parody” is in Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 81; “Come to Jesus” is in George N. Allen, *Oberlin Social and Sabbath School Hymn Book* (Oberlin, OH: James N. Fitch, 1846), 32 and, with music notation, in Horace Waters, *Zion’s Refreshing Showers* (New York: C. M. Tremaine, 1867), 9.

⁴⁰“Albert Morris,” is in Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 25; “We’re Travelling Home to Heaven Above” is “Will You Go?,” in Rev. D. H. Mansfield, *The American Vocalist: A Selection of Tunes, Anthems, Sentences, and Hymns, Old and New: Designed for the Church, the Vestry, or the Parlor; Adapted to Every Variety of Metre in Common Use* (Boston: Thompson, Bigelow & Brown, 1849), 336. It appears as “Invitation” in earlier hymnals such as *Revival Melodies or Songs of Zion* (Boston: John Putnam, 1842), 12, and Joshua V. Himes, *Millennial Harp: Designed for Meetings on the Second Coming Christ* (Boston: n.p., 1846), 67.



Figure 1. "Come to Jesus Just Now," excerpted from Horace Waters, *Zion's Refreshing Showers* (New York: C. M. Tremaine, 1867), 9.

Simpson's careful presentation of paternalism in his hymn-based songs demonstrates both awareness of its appeal to white abolitionists and desire to humanize enslaved Black people as capable of and determined to shape their destiny. Through most of "Albert Morris," singers portray the world of the enslaved person who makes the difficult decision to escape, joining in their decision-making process and eventual journey. Several different melodies exist for the hymn "We're Travelling Home to Heaven Above," which is the basis for Simpson's "Albert Morris." All versions, however, share the common refrain, "Will you go?" Simpson reused this refrain, which connects his setting to multiple contemporary hymns. For him, it is not a rhetorical question about religious devotion as it was in the original hymns, but an immediate practical question pondered by enslaved people, especially given the significant consequences of the Fugitive Slave Law. The reoccurring question, "Will you go?" is eventually answered by the enslaved persona of his lyrics whose emphatic statement, "I must go," appears in the final two stanzas. Simpson here provides a brief sketch of the route from "Upon Lake Erie's northern shore" to "Chatham," where many formerly enslaved Black Americans had resettled in West Canada. Such geographically specific details reflect Simpson's and his potential audience's familiarity with 1850s travel, particularly the escape routes and the Black settlements just north of the United States border with Canada. Embodying an enslaved person's voice in these ways would have been a powerful strategy for encouraging not mere sympathy for enslaved people, but also direct aid to those seeking emancipation. Simpson balanced religious paternalism in his hymn-based songs with humanizing verses sung from the perspective of an enslaved person who was determined to self-emancipate.

Simpson's primary audience is likely to have been white abolitionists, but at times he directly encourages those escaping enslavement. "Queen Victoria Conversing with Her Slave Children," sung to the melody of the "Oh Come, Come, Away," references both a secular song and a hymn with lyrics about renewal, reunion, and evening rest after the day's labors.⁴¹ Several lines of the hymn "Oh Come, Come, Away" published in *The Advent Harp* align with Simpson's aim to encourage fugitive enslaved people to escape and inspire white allies to help them. The second verse warns "Awake ye! Awake! No time now for reposing/The Lord is near! Breaks on the ear," whereas the third verse refers to "pilgrims" and the fourth promises "Night soon will be o'er and endless day appearing."⁴² In Queen Victoria's voice, singers would invite "slaves" to escape "tyrant Columbia's land" for her "open arms and stretched out hands." She promises a "free, and happy home" in the third verse. Simpson's verses alternate between the Queen's imagined address to enslaved people and their response, which reveal the realities about their enslavement that inhibit escape, such as in the second verse: "We're watched by day and chained by night./Both robbed of liberty and right,/ While crushed by the oppressors' might!" The stanzas sung from the enslaved people's perspective end with a reply to the Queen's beckoning: "We can't come away!" The Queen's sentimental and lofty promises contrast sharply with the "slaves'" perspective, which includes "bloodhounds," "patrols,"

⁴¹Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 59–63.

⁴²Himes, *The Advent Harp: Designed for Believers in the Speedy Coming of Christ* (Boston: n.p., 1849), 374.

slaveholders that “Sleep on their swords and Bowieknives,/and swear they will take our lives” (fourth verse). The lyrics reveal the real-world dangers of escape such as the threat of recapture, even in the Northern states (eighth verse), and punishment for failed attempts: “They’ll either hang us on a tree,/ Or sell us down to Tennessee/Into endless slavery” (tenth verse). The verses display a disconnect between the paternalistic and romanticized invitation to escape and the challenges that inhibit such an illicit journey, but the Queen eventually suggests tangible assistance in response to hearing about the fears and inhibitions: “You’ll meet with many a northern friend” (ninth verse). Simpson was of course trying to inspire more “northern friends” to aid those escaping enslavement. The song ends with a triumphant escape: “We’ll all come away!” (twelfth verse). In reality, those who attempted escape usually did so under the cover of darkness, and Simpson must have wanted listeners and readers to recall the peaceful night imagery at the end of the hymn and secular source song: “The bright day is gone,/the moon and stars appearing,/With silver light illumine the night/Come, come away.”⁴³ Simpson wrote this song from experience with the challenges and practicalities of self-emancipation. This knowledge informed those song lyrics that tempered the dehumanizing paternalism and limited the romanticization of escape.

Given the taste for paternalism and its prevalence—along with other well-worn tropes of white abolitionist literature—some of Simpson’s hymn contrafacta might be considered fairly conservative within abolitionist discourse, but he also employed hymn melodies to issue explicit condemnation of slaveholders as anti-Christian while insisting that singers and listeners choose a side in the national debate over slavery. In “A Journey Through the Wilderness,” Simpson aligned slaveowners with those who persecuted and crucified Christ, invoking the text and music from the hymn “Go to Dark Gethsemane.”⁴⁴ The original hymn text invited those who feel “temptation’s power” to consider Christ’s agony in biblical Gethsemane: “Watch with him one bitter hour” rather than turn away. Simpson’s first verse quotes the “bitter hour” phrase when addressing “Sons and daughters of the free/You who love the Tyrant’s power” who he implores to “Take a view of slavery/Go with me one bitter hour.” Here, Christian singers accustomed to singing their prayer and devotions employed familiar religious melodies to chronicle vivid accounts of family separations, violence, and torture of enslaved people before transforming the hymn line “Learn of Jesus Christ to die” into “Learn like the poor slave to die.” Of all the hymn-based songs discussed, this would have been the most provocative for mid-nineteenth-century Christian abolitionists. Simpson recirculated the tropes of redemptive suffering and enslaved person as Christ-like, but he demanded both singers and listeners choose sides, just as the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law compelled those who held moral objections to slavery to enter the political and legal realms with decisions about whether to comply with the law or not.

Creating affective tension with sentimental song

Most of Simpson’s melodies come from secular songs, including sentimental ballads of the British Isles and parlor songs. In the nineteenth-century contexts where sentimental literature and music was enjoyed, readers and musicians valued the sincere and spontaneous emotional reactions produced socially. Nineteenth-century musicians expected listeners to share in the vicariousness of sentimentality, embodying the emotions of the song’s persona as a way to identify with others, even across gendered, classed, and racialized lines. Sentimentality did ideological work in service of abolition, but scholars have criticized sentimentality in antislavery texts for evoking sympathy for the white abolitionists’ own feelings rather than the oppressed, thereby causing the erasure of the enslaved person. As Derrick R. Spires argues, sentimentality can also create an “affective tension” that causes readers and listeners to reject existing social patterns as desirable. Although antislavery sentimentality typically

⁴³“Oh Come, Come, Away” (Baltimore: F. D. Benteen, 1844).

⁴⁴“A Journey Through the Wilderness,” is in Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 36–38. Contemporary hymnals including the source hymn “Go To Dark Gethsemane” include Edward L. White, *The Sunday School Singing Book: Being a Collection of Hymns with Appropriate Music, Designed as a Guide and Assistant to the Devotional Exercises of Sabbath Schools and Families*, 3rd ed. (Boston: William Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1845), 64, and R. Storrs Willis, *Church Chorals and Choir Studies* (New York: Clark, Austin and Smith, 1850), 135.

aims to bridge the “experience gap” between white abolitionists and enslaved people, it also reveals that divide between free and enslaved—a liminal state held by those in the process of self-emancipation.⁴⁵ Simpson rewrote and transformed familiar sentimental songs, redirecting their themes of warmth and comfort in order to humanize enslaved people and provoke outrage over enslavement and its enablers.

In “The African Girl,” set to the melody of the English country ballad “Long, Long Ago,”⁴⁶ Simpson created affective tension by inverting expressions of love and devotion to humanize an individual and proclaim the atrocity of slavery. In the text of the borrowed secular song (itself drawn originally from a hymn), a reunification of human connections that make home comforting and warm align with the mid-nineteenth-century taste for sentimentality. Simpson, however, used the source material to provoke discomfort in the singer and listener with themes of alienation, relentless toil, and pain sung to precisely the same melody that previously represented comfort. The first stanza of Simpson’s song describes the loneliness of the enslaved girl: “Here I’m forsaken and left all alone,” and “Far from my country, my friends and my home.” The refrain of the original song “Long, Long Ago” suggests a lullaby characterized by a stepwise melody descent with simple rhythmic subdivision in common time; sung twice with the second figure ending on tonic, it resolves gently and definitively. Simpson’s reuse of this melody for the refrain text “There is no rest” ironically inverted the original sentiments, replacing them with an unsettled pain because the enslaved girl’s entrapment seems settled and conclusive—it is inescapable. The only rest for her comes in Simpson’s last verse, which imagines her death. Referencing her place in heaven, Simpson’s song concludes with an altered refrain: “There, there is rest. There is rest.” Simpson alluded to another hymn source, sharing the melody of the secular ballad “Long, Long Ago” with direct resonance with the hymn “Here is no rest”: “Here is no rest. Here as a pilgrim, I wander alone.”⁴⁷ Reuse of the familiar ballad and its closely related hymn helped Simpson engage singers and listeners in contemplating death as a potentially welcome rest from otherwise inescapable hardships imposed by enslavement.

Simpson manipulated the romanticized natural imagery and bucolic pastoral scenes of sentimental ballads, transforming the once comforting sentiment to jarring political statements. For example, his “Anniversary,” celebrating emancipation in the British West Indies, reuses the melody from “Sweet Birds are Singing.”⁴⁸ The original is a celebratory ode to springtime, which Simpson applied to a rebirth for newly freed enslaved people of the Caribbean. In this case, he extended the sentimental natural imagery of the original to his new song, where it takes on political significance. He frequently transformed the natural imagery detailed in the original text from carefree simplicity to something menacing. For example, in his “The Little Maid on Her Way” set to the tune of “Buy a Broom,” the Bavarian girl working as a broom seller in England is reimagined as a young enslaved person on her way to Canada.⁴⁹ In the original, the broom seller is poor but still able to enjoy “England’s summer’s gay bloom.” In Simpson’s song, that line changes to a “cold winter day.” Simpson’s song pairing provoked singers who pitied the broom seller to realize the fate of the enslaved people who have “little to eat” and who need to be “distrustful of one who offers food and shelter” as far worse. He repurposes sentimentalized natural imagery again when using the melody from another popular ballad, “The Last Rose of Summer.”⁵⁰ For lyrics drawn from a journal of someone fleeing enslavement in Kentucky, the melody previously associated with nature’s enduring beauty became ominous when applied to lyrics about dark clouds and a night forest of “wild beasts.”⁵¹ With song, Simpson revealed details from lived experiences of actual enslaved people and those fleeing enslavement, and thus presented

⁴⁵Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 214–19.

⁴⁶Simpson, *Original Antislavery Songs*, 27; Thomas H. Bayly, “Long, Long Ago” (Philadelphia: George Hewitt and Company, 1839).

⁴⁷The hymn “Here is no rest” appears in Mansfield, *The American Vocalist*, 253. As Erin Fulton notes in “The Year of Jubilee Is Come,” the ballad “Long, Long Ago” also shares the melody with the hymn “Here o’er the earth as a stranger I roam,” 8.

⁴⁸Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 18–19; J. Moscheles, “Sweet Birds Are Singing” (Philadelphia: G. Willig, n.d.).

⁴⁹Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 9; George Lee Alexander, “Buy a Broom” (New York: E. S. Mesier, 1830).

⁵⁰“The Last Rose of Summer” (New York: J. L. Peters, 1867).

⁵¹Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 20–22.

alternatives to the shallow stereotypes and naïve sentimentality otherwise framing enslaved people in mainstream U.S. culture of the 1850s.

Simpson's use of sentimental song as melodic source material created intertextual relationships that transformed the original song from comforting to disconcerting, which he channeled into outrage against enslavers and the circumstances of slavery. With "Brother's Farewell: A Scene at the Slave Pen" sung to Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More," Simpson provided individualized detail and prioritized the voice of an enslaved person.⁵² Simpson's opening line "I am sold down to Georgia—my grief none can tell" invokes the pensive mood of the opening line of Foster's well-known song: "Let us pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears." Simpson asked his singers and listeners to take a moment away from the happiness in their lives to consider those less fortunate. Borrowing Foster's melody ensured that singers and listeners paused and held longer the note value of "sold" just as is done when singing "pause" in Foster's original. Whereas Foster invoked general consideration for "the poor," Simpson demanded consideration for a specific case of forced family separation. Foster's general plea for better days ahead would have resonated with many Americans who suffered financially during a time of economic depression. In Foster's chorus, singers cast off the difficulties with the line "Hard times, come again no more," but Simpson revises the text to "Farewell we'll meet on earth no more." Foster's song themes resonated with a wide audience of Americans experiencing economic or other hardships; the chorus casting off "hard times" was relatable and potentially comforting. Using Foster's melody set a solemn tone for Simpson's song, but also sharpened the antislavery argument, pointing out that even hard times for poor white families are not as brutal as enslavement, with the finality and pain of family separation being linked to death.

Redirecting the influence of blackface minstrelsy

Simpson engaged with both sentimental and comic minstrel music, and given its dominance as popular entertainment, blackface minstrelsy was an unsurprising source for borrowed melodies—even for antislavery lyrics. At the time Simpson published his first songster, blackface minstrelsy was at its height of popularity in the urban North and in the midst of a stylistic transition toward inclusion of more sentimental song. The repertoire of the Hutchinson Family Singers and Brown's *Antislavery Harp* both include songs set to minstrel tunes.⁵³ Some have argued that sentimental plantation songs that portrayed enslaved people's emotions may have humanized enslaved people more than comic minstrelsy songs did,⁵⁴ but the range of emotions displayed in these songs was limited. Most importantly, when caricatured enslaved people were presented as seemingly content with enslavement, this obviously fed proslavery propaganda. Simpson navigated through this territory with the defiant reappropriation of minstrel songs, dropping the racist dialect and rewriting stories to subvert the stereotypes. Simpson made clear his intent to "kill the degrading influence" of minstrel music and "change the flow of those sweet melodies into more appropriate and useful channels."⁵⁵ He employed minstrel songs strategically, dwelling on sentimentality and death as themes in a number of songs marking the mid-century shift in minstrel style and eliminating the humor in some of the most popular comic minstrel songs.

Simpson reframed slavery in several of Stephen Foster's most popular minstrel songs in the same era that Foster shifted to a compositional style in line with a "tasteful" sentimental approach deemed appropriate for the middle-class parlor.⁵⁶ For example, Simpson used the melody from

⁵²Joshua McCarter Simpson, "A Brother's Farewell," D06262, Civil War Collection B547, Missouri Historical Society; Stephen C. Foster, "Hard Times Come Again No More" (New York: Firth, Pond, and Co., 1854).

⁵³McClendon, "Sounds of Sympathy," 87.

⁵⁴Charles Hamm noted both the sympathetic portrayal of the enslaved in "Massa's in de Cold Ground" and the politically unpalatable portrayal of sentimental attachment to the slaveowner in *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: Norton, 1979), 214.

⁵⁵Simpson, *Original Antislavery Songs*, 24.

⁵⁶Steven Saunders, "The Social Agenda of Stephen Foster's Plantation Melodies," *American Music* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 275–89.

Foster's "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground" for his song "To the White People of America."⁵⁷ Foster's song, popularized by Christy's Minstrels, depicts enslaved people mourning the death of their benevolent "master." This and similar songs perpetuated inaccurate propaganda-fueled beliefs that enslaved people were well cared for and in familylike relationships with kind owners. Saidiya Hartman highlights Foster's "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground" as a particularly potent example of sentimentality in plantation nostalgia.⁵⁸ Simpson countered the propaganda, using the minstrel melody to call out the hypocrisy of Christian slave owners, and warned that the "wicked" will be judged by God. Four mostly descending melodic lines shape Foster's chorus set with racist dialect that was common to minstrel music: "Down in de corn field/hear dat mournful sound:/All de darkeys am a weeping/Massa's in de cold, cold ground."⁵⁹ The descending phrase pattern is interrupted dramatically for the word "weeping" sung high on tonic an octave above the final pitch of the chorus and emphasized with half-note duration after five eighth notes preceded it (see Figure 2). Simpson altered his chorus slightly throughout his version, but he maintained his new first line and the structure, which aligned with Foster's and reused simple text painting from the original. The first line of Simpson's chorus, "Hear ye that mourning?" engages rhetorically with the theme of mourning present in Foster's song and helps maintain the intertextual relationship in the minds of singers and listeners. Simpson's third chorus line is "O! ye wicked men take warning," with "warning" replacing Foster's "weeping." Simpson extended the mourning theme from Foster's song but made clear that enslaved people are mourning their enslavement and attendant violence. They call for mercy in the third verse but are not pitiful. In the fourth verse, Simpson demanded equal rights for African Americans as citizens. The enslaved people in his lyrics mourn not for a dead "master"; rather, they long for his death and anticipate his final judgment. Simpson's word substitutions in his chorus, calling enslavers "wicked" and "hypocrites," make clear that he anticipates damnation for slaveowners and those in the U.S. who side with them. This song blames the individual slaveholder of the lyrics, who symbolizes all who enable the institution generally. Simpson used the death of an enslaver as a metaphor for the demise of the institution, which he invited his audience to envision.

Simpson took the idea of a slaveholder's death symbolizing an end to slavery a step further in "The Slaveholder's Rest," which recalls Foster's "Uncle Ned."⁶⁰ Foster's original is a sentimental elegy for an elderly "slave" mourned by the slaveholders with this chorus: "Lay down de shubble and de hoe,/Hang up de fiddle and de bow/No more hard work for poor Old Ned/He's gone where good Niggas go."⁶¹ In contrast, Simpson's lyrics resist mournful sentimentality while recounting the occasion of a cruel slaveholder's death as a cause for celebration. Simpson's chorus is "Hang up the shovel and the hoe/take down the fiddle and the bow/Old master has gone to the slaveholder's rest/He has gone where they all ought to go." In other words, Simpson said the enslaver has gone to hell—where they all belong! The "slaveholder's rest" in the title brings rest for the enslaved people, but moreover it brings escape from violence and family separation, which is detailed in this song and elsewhere throughout Simpson's repertoire. It is notable that Simpson did not replicate the racist dialect common to minstrelsy, even here when crafting a line that very closely mirrors some words from the source song. He wanted his revision of the racist dialect to be readily apparent to his audience. Foster's minstrel tune flows with eighth notes and syncopation, which could provoke a lively dance on the minstrel stage. Singing this buoyant melody for a celebration of death would have defied the normal mourning rituals of nineteenth-century society, and thus was likely uncomfortable even for a staunch abolitionist. Simpson probably hoped such discomfort would provoke not mere pity or sympathy for enslaved people, but outrage and action.

⁵⁷Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 13–15.

⁵⁸Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 43.

⁵⁹Stephen C. Foster, "Massa's in de Cold Ground" (New York: Firth, Pond, and Co., 1853).

⁶⁰William W. Austin, *Susanna, Jeanie and The Old Folks at Home: Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 11.

⁶¹Stephen C. Foster, "Uncle Ned" (Cincinnati: W. C. Peters, 1848).

The image shows a musical score for the song "Massa's in de cold ground" by Stephen C. Foster. The score is written for two voices and a chorus. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are: "Down in de corn-field Hear dat mourn-ful sound: All de darkeys am a weep-ing— Mas-sa's in de cold, cold ground." The notation includes treble clefs for the voices and a bass clef for the chorus, with various musical notations such as notes, rests, and chords.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Stephen C. Foster's "Massa's in de cold ground" (New York: Firth, Pond, and Co., 1853).

Yet another minstrel song that sentimentalizes the death of an enslaved person, G. W. H. Griffin's "The Poor Old Slave Has Gone to Rest,"⁶² provided the melody for Simpson's "Song of Our Sentiments." Whereas Griffin's song perpetuates the stock minstrel caricature, Simpson's lyrics present details about an actual person escaping enslavement. "Song of Our Sentiments" is uniquely important because it survives as an engraving on a silver pitcher presented to a white abolitionist, L. G. Van Slyke, on June 10, 1855 at a ceremony honoring him for his work on behalf of Rosetta Armstead, who succeeded in her self-emancipation in Canada.⁶³ Ohio newspapers reported details of Armstead's case during the spring of 1855.⁶⁴ In Griffin's source song, death is the only escape from toil and enslavement for the elderly man. Lyrics depict his daughter weeping for him, and then the narrator weeps for her, upon her death. Simpson's lyrics commemorate Armstead for not accepting death as her only escape and heroizes Van Slyke for assisting her. Simpson transformed a line about the slaveholder in the original song, "But now he's dead and in his grave/No master does he fear"; into praise for Van Slyke, "The man who gave that soul relief/That is the man for me." Here Simpson juxtaposes two powerful white men who leverage their privilege differently. Simpson probably hoped this memorial in song would inspire other white allies to aid those whose journeys north became more perilous because of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Simpson reappropriated comic minstrel songs too, strategically rewriting the most popular ones with humorless lyrics that clash with the original ditties. For example, he constructed a powerfully ironic relationship between his "Away to Canada" and the melodic source, Foster's very well-known "Oh Susanna," in order to provide realistic details about an enslaved person's journey toward self-

⁶²G. W. H. Griffin, "Poor Old Slave" (Boston: G. P. Reed, 1851).

⁶³Simpson, "A Song of Our sentiments on the Silver Pitcher Presented to L. G. Van Slyke, Columbus, June 10, 1855," MSS 6678, fol. VFM 4131, Ohio History Connection.

⁶⁴"Fugitive Slave Case," *Ohio State Journal*, March 12, 1855; "The Late Slave Case," *Ohio State Journal*, March 16, 1855; "The Rosetta Armstead Case," *Ohio State Journal*, March 24, 1855.

emancipation.⁶⁵ This had been the first of Foster's songs to be associated with the famous Christy's Minstrels,⁶⁶ and the song's popularity grew with its association with the California Gold Rush and the '49ers, as it became an anthem for "manly" western adventures, free from feminine influence and East Coast rules of social decorum.⁶⁷ Twenty editions were published by 1851;⁶⁸ based on popularity alone, it seems a natural choice for Simpson's reuse in 1852. Both are first-hand accounts sung by travelers who reference an absent love called "Susanna." Simpson provided enough parallelism between Foster's version and his to recall both texts in the minds of singers and listeners. Although Foster's song uses dialect and nonsense comedy, Simpson's song is a serious and dramatic tale of actual risks, dangers, emotional turmoil, and the motivating prospect of freedom. Foster's song is fictional, fantastical, and easily adapted by minstrel performers for a skit or dance; Simpson's is intended to reflect on the reality of a fugitive enslaved person's experiences. In Foster's song, the speaker might be understood to be freely traveling from Alabama to Louisiana to see his love, and if enslaved, this presents a benign view of slavery compatible with the reunification of loved ones. Simpson's protagonist makes the difficult decision to leave enslavement, and although he successfully reaches Canada, the song ends sadly as he remembers his wife, who remains enslaved in the American South. Simpson transformed Foster's refrain "Don't you cry for me" variously to follow different verses.⁶⁹ It becomes an appeal to "O righteous Father" at the end of the first verse: "Will thou not pity me?" At the end of verses two, five and seven, he says farewell to the slaveholder as "Old Master!" In the two verses ending with a remembrance of his "Susanna," he asks her not to "cry" or "grieve" for him, but in the end, he is also crying for her. Singing Simpson's words to the buoyant polka rhythm of Foster's melody would enhance the uncomfortably ironic relationship between his and Foster's songs. Simpson's publication specifies that his lyrics were adapted to fit a particular case of a "fugitive from Tennessee."⁷⁰ Widely reported in newspapers, the details of this case were legendary among abolitionists, and thus Simpson, while powerfully reversing the comedy of Foster's original, also replaced racist stereotypes with realism.

When using the melody from "Old Dan Tucker" for "Emancipation Car," Simpson not only redirected the minstrel comedy of the original, he engaged directly with Jesse Hutchinson's version, "Get Off the Track," which was probably the most well-known "Tucker" contrafacta.⁷¹ Like Hutchinson's, Simpson's lyrics for "Emancipation Car" are motivated, energetic, and could easily be sung with the tempo and energy of a comic minstrel song to further their effect, but there is no comedy or racist dialect in Simpson's song. Simpson reused the Hutchinson's train engine metaphor, invoking it in his first verse where it describes the Underground Railroad's route to freedom. Simpson also repeats their lyric "put on the steam," which could be interpreted both as a hurried call to aid those leaving enslavement and the acceleration of the abolition movement generally. When singing Simpson's lyrics, one conveys the perspective of a formerly enslaved person *en route* from Alabama to Canada, embodying the strength, determination, and resolve in the face of many dangers. The obstacles faced by travelers are not vaguely alluded to, but detailed specifically as he has done elsewhere. For example, his second verse clearly references the "laws against the Fugitive" and systems of bribery that incentivize participation in kidnapping efforts. The final verse ends with "Put on the steam/and off she goes/Huzzah for Liberty," which references both the personal story unfolding in this song and the

⁶⁵Simpson, *Original Antislavery Songs*, 24; Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 60–61. "Away to Canada" was also reprinted in the *Liberator* (Dec 10, 1832) and elsewhere without attribution to Simpson, as documented by Sandler in *The Black Romantic Revolution*, 13.

⁶⁶Hamm, *Yesterdays*, chapter 10.

⁶⁷Brian Roberts, *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 181; Ken Emerson, introduction to *Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

⁶⁸Austin, *Susanna, Jeanie and The Old Folks at Home*, 8–11.

⁶⁹Stephen C. Foster, "Oh Susanna" (Baltimore: F. D. Benteen, n.d.).

⁷⁰Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 60.

⁷¹Dan Emmet, "Old Dan Tucker" (Boston, MA: C. H. Keith), 1843; Jesse Hutchinson, "Get Off the Track" (Boston: n.p., 1844).

momentum of the abolition movement. Simpson's "Emancipation Car" delivers urgent political messages to resist the Fugitive Slave Law and aid those individuals deemed "fugitives."

Finally, Simpson's song "Old Liberia is not the Place for Me" is particularly important because we know it was sung at the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio and thus his audience for at least this song was fellow politically active Black Americans.⁷² His choice of the comic minstrel song, "Come to the Old Gum Tree," for his message regarding anticolonization seems particularly apt; the song is laden with pro-slavery propaganda images.⁷³ By linking Liberian colonization to a minstrel song that served as pro-slavery propaganda, Simpson sharpened the point of his argument against displacement of Black Americans to the Liberia colony. Published in 1848 as R. O. Wilson's dialect song for the "Ethiopian Serenaders," the minstrel lyrics string together racist tropes of the happy, carefree, musical enslaved people with fiddle and tambourine always close at hand. The chorus of "Come to the Old Gum Tree" beckons others to join in the "jovial dance." References to "cotton plants" makes clear that the location is the plantation South, conventionally romanticized and exoticized for Northerners on the minstrel stage, often defending slavery as benign or even beneficial for people who were supposedly content with enslavement. Simpson's 1852 lyrics set to this minstrel music acknowledge the promises made by proponents of Liberian colonization, including those made by Moses Walker, who had just returned to the U.S. from Liberia to project a rosy picture of life for the African Americans who resettled there. For example, "You say it is a goodly land,/Where milk and honey flow" (fourth verse). Simpson's verses acknowledge the claims made by advocates of Liberian colonization, but the refrain still resists: "Old Liberia is not the place for me." Although sung to the comic syncopated minstrel melody, Simpson's message is sober and serious. Simpson warned against being seduced by promises of freedom and plenty for Black people in Liberia and likens such portrayals of West Africa to the minstrel practice of using nostalgic song and dance to present plantation life in the southern U.S. as benign. Like most abolitionists in the 1850s, Simpson believed that removing free Black people from the U.S. would weaken antislavery activism just as it was gaining momentum. The majority of Northern Black Americans were against Liberian colonization by the 1830s, and anti-colonization can be understood as the roots of twentieth-century Black Nationalism.⁷⁴ Although opposition was still strong in 1852, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law caused some to reconsider emigration even to West Africa, but Canada was the more widely accepted destination.⁷⁵ This was an issue debated at the conventions Simpson participated in, and the performance of this song at such a convention heightens the relevance of the issue. Because white abolitionists were not unanimous in their opposition to colonization schemes, Simpson's message proved to be important for that audience as well.

Transforming patriotic anthems into Black political discourse

Simpson used patriotic melodies to encourage political engagement at a time when the political factions of the abolition movement were gaining ground,⁷⁶ and more Black Americans were arguing for and participating in citizenship despite not having equal legal rights.⁷⁷ The Fugitive Slave Law caused free Black people to reconsider their relationship to the United States, and as Black political discourse focused on citizenship, legal protection against kidnapping, and legal treatment of accused fugitives,⁷⁸ Simpson rewrote patriotic anthems of the United States as a form of Black political

⁷²Minutes of the State Convention of the Colored Citizens of Ohio, 6.

⁷³R. O. Wilson, "Come to the Old Gum Tree" (Baltimore: F. D. Benteen, 1848).

⁷⁴Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 210.

⁷⁵Darryl Pinckney, "Invisibility of Black Abolitionists," in *Abolitionist Imagination*, ed. Andrew Delbanco (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 116–21; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 331; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 163–65.

⁷⁶Jodie Zdrok-Ptaszek, *The Antislavery Movement* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2002), 20, 115; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 260; Thomas G. Mitchell, *Antislavery Politics in Antebellum and Civil War America* (Westport: Praeger, 2007), 69.

⁷⁷Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship*, 3–18.

⁷⁸Andrew K. Diemar, *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free African Americans in the Mid-Atlantic Borderland 1817–1863* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 152, 183.

discourse. A long history of political repurposing of familiar patriotic songs predated Simpson's song writing, and he joined this practice with lyrics that sharply undercut original intent and connotations.⁷⁹ In the 1850s, songs such as "Hail Columbia" and "America" circulated widely as sheet music, arranged variously, and were ubiquitous in mid-century American society, especially integral to Independence Day commemorations of freedom and independence. Simpson's versions of these anthems celebrate freedoms only outside of the United States where slavery had been abolished and levy sharp criticisms against American hypocrisies.

"Hail Columbia," which in Simpson's time was recognized as the national anthem of the United States, was a logical choice for highlighting hypocritical celebrations of American freedom. With music by Philip Phile, it originally functioned as "The President's March" to honor George Washington at the time of his inauguration. The "Hail Columbia" title and lyrics provided by Joseph Hopkinson about a decade after Washington's inauguration celebrate the American victory in the Revolutionary War. Since the 1840s, it had been used by abolitionists to point out hypocritical claims of American freedom.⁸⁰ Simpson's song, "The First of August in Jamaica," borrows the "Hail Columbia" melody and describes the emancipation celebrations in the British West Indies.⁸¹ His lyrics commemorating the 1833 abolition of slavery in the British colonies contain many themes drawn from the American context for "Hail Columbia." The two texts are brought together with the regal dotted rhythm of the "President's March," symbolizing a formal celebration of liberty and tribute to those who fought for it. Likewise, both texts evoke religious imagery of celebration, with heaven as a place of escape from tyranny and bondage and the final resting place for righteous heroes. Sacrifice and bloodshed are themes of both texts, too. In fact, once one reads or sings Simpson's version, some of Hopkinson's lyrics are equally applicable to the enslaved people's successful fight for freedom in the Caribbean as they are to the patriots during the Revolutionary War. Simpson likely established this continuity in order to highlight the incongruity of singing praise to the United States as a land of freedom and American heroes as defenders of freedom while slavery exists. In setting an antislavery message to music functionally serving as the national anthem, Simpson declared abolition as the most important issue facing the country. He also communicated a sense of patriotic duty to improve the nation through abolition and belief in the historical inevitability of emancipation, encouraging people to remain committed and connected in their efforts, with the line "Firm united may we stand" that directly parallels Hopkinson's "Firm united let us be." The "firm united" lyric common to both songs is sung with obvious text painting—as straight quarter notes on a repeated pitch for three of the four beats. Besides encouraging grass roots unity and broadening of abolitionism among ordinary Americans, Simpson appealed to national leaders as ultimately responsible. Whereas Hopkinson's text praises George Washington directly, Simpson reached beyond American shores, crediting Queen Victoria for releasing enslaved people in the British-controlled Caribbean. The irony of singing praise for the British monarch to the tune of the American anthem would not have been lost on nineteenth-century singers and listeners—it both intensifies his criticism of the United States and pays tribute to transatlantic abolition work.

Simpson borrowed the melody from and parodied the anthem "America" in a couple of new songs that defy the sentimental patriotism of the original and highlight the false pretense of celebrating freedom in a country with slavery.⁸² His "Aliened American" builds justification for rebellion with each verse.⁸³ The opening lines of Samuel Smith's 1831 lyrics of "America" ("My country 'tis of thee/sweet land of liberty/of thee we sing") become in Simpson's voice: "My country 'tis of thee,/Dark land of slavery/In thee we groan." The first verse describes chains, grief, and human flesh torn from bones. The second verse explains the political inequality of slavery: "The white man rules the day/He bears despotic sway/O'er all the land." Rhetorical questions shape the third verse: "O! shall we

⁷⁹Laura Lohman, *Hail Columbia!: American Music and Politics in the Early Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 275–76.

⁸⁰Lohman, *Hail Columbia*, 277.

⁸¹Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 53. "Hail Columbia!" (Philadelphia: G. E. Blake, 1840).

⁸²Eaklor, *American Antislavery Songs*, 538; Fulton, "The Year of Jubilee Is Come," 80.

⁸³Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 17–18. Samuel F. Smith, "America" (New York: Hitchcock Publishing Co., 1892).

longer bleed?/Is there no one to plead/The black man's cause?" The final verse expresses the immediate need to realize and apply the strength of enslaved people and abolitionists. It begins with "No! No! the time has come/When we must not be dumb,/We must awake." The last line is a well-reasoned, solemnly delivered call to direct action: "Our chains must break." Simpson also recast "America" in the song "Fourth of July in Alabama," expressing a sentiment similar to Frederick Douglass's famous July Fourth address and other forms of Black resistance to Independence Day celebrations.⁸⁴ The preface, which is published in *Emancipation Car*, describes the song as a "meditation and feelings of the poor Slave as he toils ...while his master, neighbors, and neighbors' children are commemorating that day which brought life to the whites and death to the poor African."⁸⁵ Simpson highlighted the falsity in celebrating freedom while "four million slaves/remain in living graves" (seventh verse). Each verse details the sights and sounds of white Americans' celebration, heard as wildly inappropriate by Simpson, writing throughout from the first-person perspective. The melody for "America" (itself borrowed from "God Save the Queen") is traditionally sung in a slow, solemn, reverent manner suited to Simpson's arguments in both these songs.

Conclusion

Historians of abolition may know Simpson for his underground abolitionist work in Ohio, and scholars of African American literature rightly consider him a poet.⁸⁶ However, much of his profound cultural work was done through music. He intended his verses to be sung, and melodies provided for rhetorically powerful intertextual meanings. He employed popular tunes as a tool to bind two or more texts together in the minds of singers and listeners, politicizing the moment of musical performance and the memories of it. He transformed the meaning of these popular songs, redirecting them toward abolitionism. As a musician, Simpson knew that through singing, one enacts and embodies emotions more fully than when reading literature, and he provided opportunities for white Americans to sing both from the enslaved person's perspective and from positions of power over the enslaved. When hymn melodies provoke sympathy for abolition, moral suasion and religious righteousness leave no room for a neutral position on slavery. When the hymn melody links Biblical allegory with detailed routes to Canada, Simpson forces singers and listeners to apply religious ideals to the immediate context of the Fugitive Slave Law. When verses about the violent realities of enslavement are sung to a simple sentimental melody previously associated with love, nostalgia, and enduring human connections, this could be a moment of productive emotional dissonance. When dance rhythms associated with comic minstrel stereotypes accompanied actual accounts of escape, the stereotype has been called into question. Moreover, when patriotic national anthems are linked irreverently with damning criticism of American hypocrisy, patriotism could motivate abolition work.

The movement against slavery was larger than any one organization or strategy; it was an ideology, a belief system with which more Americans came to identify in the decade leading up to the Civil War.⁸⁷ Even with scholarship now pointing to the importance of Black political activity of the nineteenth century, there is still more work to be done uncovering the voices of Black Americans who may not have been convention headliners and authors of autobiographical narratives, but nonetheless should be credited for their role in building toward emancipation. In this context, Simpson's songs are valuable evidence of creative African American leadership. By using a wide variety of song styles, he likely reached antislavery sympathizers motivated by different affects and arguments. Simpson synthesized factions of the movement by choosing lyric subject matter that would build unity, but he intensified his rhetoric and demands beyond the literary and entertainment tropes commonly shaping mid-nineteenth-century discourse about slavery and abolition. Proclaiming that "you can sing what

⁸⁴Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest*, 78; Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 575.

⁸⁵Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, 40–42.

⁸⁶Bruce D. Dickson Jr., "Print Culture and the Antislavery Community: The Poetry of Abolitionism, 1831–1860," in *Prophets of Protest*, eds McCarthy and Stauffer (New York: Norton, 2006), 220–34.

⁸⁷John T. Cumbler, *From Abolition to Rights for All: The Making of a Reform Community in the 19th Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

would be death to speak,”⁸⁸ Simpson himself acknowledged the unique power of song to levy controversial criticisms and issue radical demands in mid-nineteenth-century society in the U.S. As a whole, his collection represents the history of the movement that preceded his publications, the multifaceted abolition arguments of his contemporary moment, and reaction to the crisis brought on by the passage and enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. The songs display Simpson’s politically astute musical voice, defiantly building resistance to unjust laws and institutions while working pragmatically, harnessing the power of cultural texts that would speak to those who had political and social power.

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⁸⁸Simpson, *Emancipation Car*, iv.

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