

Project Title

Marginal Voices, Miscellaneous Fragments: Black Journalism and the Transatlantic Editing of Abolition, 1850–1860

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Curran Fellowship 2023 Report

With the generous support of RSVP's Curran Fellowship, I was able to travel to Manchester, England, and spend two weeks at the John Rylands Research Institute in July of 2023. While there, I worked with the Rawson/Wilson Anti-Slavery Papers and the Raymond English Anti-Slavery Collection. The collections pointed me to linkages between British abolitionists, especially the way they were organizing and advocating via a network of print—whether clipping newspapers, drafting and compiling collections of fiction and poetry, or sending each other the latest periodical or book on slavery. In my study of these print materials, I was drawn to the way British abolitionists were narrating the experience of enslaved persons and pro-slavery supporters in the United States.

The most intriguing items I investigated were British abolitionist George Thompson's anti-slavery scrapbooks. Stuffed with clippings of pro-slavery and Southern newspapers from his trips to the States, the scrapbooks provide insight into the transatlantic transport of (mis)information generally and Thompson's media techniques used to garner British support for American abolition specifically. The fragments pasted together by Thompson along with his own commentary on them (read implicitly through underlines or explicitly through comments in the margins) then come to tell a different story, unmasking the exaggerated and falsified nature of the pro-slavery news.

Having read the current scholarship on scissor-and-paste in preparation for my research travel, I began thinking about Thompson's scrapbooks as a sort of metanarrative about this method of reporting—one with entirely different results. Thompson was physically cutting out and pasting together pro-slavery news fragments that had been used to further misinformation about enslaved persons and abolitionists. In his reconstruction, Thompson rewrote narratives around American slavery, pointing out its fundamental hypocrisies and positioning British abolitionists as the would-be saviors of democracy in the United States and the globe.

I used these observations as the basis for paper, "Telling the Truth in Fragments: The Transatlantic Editing of Nationalist Abolition Movements" that I presented at the NAVSA 2023 conference. I am currently working on the article version of this paper and will submit it for publication to *Victorian Periodicals Review* in the coming months, likely to. My work in Manchester also significantly informed the trajectory of my dissertation, which focuses on the ways in which hoaxes—and their unmasking—circulated in the transatlantic news at the mid-century. Investigating this Thompson case history prompted me to further investigate the idea of how these hoaxes, or misinformation, were circulated by transatlantic reformers. The fight for abolition was built on claims to truth. However, I am arguing, fake narratives, and their deconstruction, were just as crucial in the period's oversaturated media environment.