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Fishkin Prize 2025
Introduction to "A Tireless Laborer: Reappraising Anna Richardson"

Honoring the foundational scholarship of Professor Fishkin, the Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International Scholars of Transnational American Studies recognizes significant contributions to transnational American studies by scholars outside the United States. The prize is adjudicated by the International Committee of the American Studies Association, in 2025 chaired by Jasmine Mitchell and Zifeng Liu, and was awarded to Bridget Bennett for her book *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic: Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776–1865*, published by Louisiana State University Press (2025). *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic* is an exceptional work of dwelling in the archives, begun during the pandemic lockdown but transforming that constraint on mobility into a wealth of new connections in the field of transatlantic slavery studies. It looks deeply at the materiality of sources, centers the role of women and children in Quaker antislavery work, and brings into conversation antislavery figures in the nineteenth century in the US and UK. Above all, Bennett has the ability to work at the granular level, lingering for instance on the moments when the archive reveals a scrap of cloth carefully saved and handed down and then zooming out to intuit a complex picture of relational activism. Not much is known about the cloth aside from its provenance, being a product of free Black labor, but in the excerpt chosen for *JTAS*, Bennett situates the activism of Anna Richardon's tract writing within the transatlantic exchange on the "moral commerce" (Holcomb) of buying goods not produced with the violence of labor by workers who are enslaved, thus charging the tiny scrap of cloth with meaning and affect that brings us into the territory of the unquiet. *JTAS* is honored that Bridget Bennett has provided a brief commentary on the motivations behind her research in the introduction that follows below.

BRIDGET BENNETT
University of Leeds

I'd like to offer my profound thanks to the American Studies Association for the award of the 2025 Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic*. It is a significant honor for which I am sincerely grateful. The invitation to write something about the book in this journal provides the opportunity to reflect on its gradual development and aims, something which is itself a privilege. It reminds me that in the early period in which I was developing my ideas I had not planned to write the book at

all, not least because I was trying to write a different monograph. Though that still hasn't been written (and I suspect never will be), I no longer mind.

The early research for what would eventually become *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic* was undertaken as part of a project I worked on, together with an undergraduate student at the University of Leeds, shortly after public commemorations marking the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (1807). The project aimed to help develop public understanding of the rich histories of abolitionist and antislavery activism in Leeds and elsewhere in Yorkshire and their transatlantic dimensions. We organized workshops with schoolchildren, focusing especially on the Black abolitionists who had visited Leeds and given public lectures in the city. These included William Allen, Henry "Box" Brown, William Wells Brown, Ellen and William Craft, Frederick Douglass, and Sarah Parker Remond. We put on an exhibition at the Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, combining books from the university's Cultural Collections and items borrowed from the National Collection. We also used posters from nineteenth-century theater productions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), reminding audiences that Stowe had visited Leeds as part of her extended visit to the UK in 1853. The project's success showed that there was an appetite for learning about the impact and representation of slavery and abolition in nineteenth-century Leeds.

While the book was a natural development of this earlier work, I also undertook other related projects during the writing of the book. In 2024, together with the Leeds Civic Trust, I organized the erection of a commemorative blue plaque on a hall of residence at the University of Leeds. The Victorian building was originally a house built by a local tobacco trader whose wealth came from enslaved labor in Virginia. This fact alone revealed the deep and entangled impact of slavery on the city. In an intriguing twist, however, the house was subsequently purchased by a Quaker family with strong abolitionist beliefs and became the base from which they carried out abolitionist activities. Wilson Armistead wrote antislavery books and pamphlets and corresponded with abolitionists and activists. Mary Armistead collected goods to be sent across the Atlantic to support formerly enslaved individuals, or freedmen, as they were called (a term also encompassing women and children). They also hosted abolitionist lecturers, including Ellen and William Craft. It was important that the plaque should commemorate their work and that of other abolitionists, especially the Black abolitionists who were such a vital part of transatlantic activism. But I also wanted the plaque to draw attention to an event I write about in detail in Chapter Three of the book, an extraordinary piece of abolitionist activism centering on the UK census of 1851. The text of the plaque gestures to this while also reaching beyond it to the wider history I have outlined above. It reads, "Virginia Cottage, now Lyddon Hall, was the home of Quaker abolitionists Mary and Wilson Armistead—leading members of the Leeds Anti-Slavery Association. Ellen and William Craft, who stayed with them, were described as 'fugitive slaves' in the 1851 census. African American abolitionists who

campaigned in Leeds also include Henry 'Box' Brown, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Sarah Parker Remond and Moses Roper."[1]

As all of this suggests, the experience of working with different kinds of audiences was rewarding and made me realize that I wanted to contribute to the excellent existing body of work on nineteenth-century transatlantic abolition. I wrote a book proposal (from which the eventual book departed substantially) and had the great good fortune to be awarded a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust. The fellowship started in the autumn of 2020 when the impact of the pandemic meant that travel was restricted, libraries and archives were closed, and the research I had hoped to do was impossible. In consequence the book changed shape, rearranged itself in my mind, and became the manuscript published by Louisiana State University Press in 2025. The difficulty of travel during long periods of writing the book enabled me to think deeply about the experiences of the nineteenth-century individuals I was writing about. My sense of time, immediacy, and geography all changed during the multiple periods of lockdown and disruption, giving me more insight, I now believe, into the ways these figures experienced their daily lives. By the time the plaque was unveiled, the book was in production and the different parts of the overall project had come together.

So—to the book itself. As I planned *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic*, I sought to make an intervention in the fields of antislavery studies, transatlantic history, and material culture. Through a combination of archival recovery, theoretical reframing, and material-cultural methodology, I aimed to provide an innovative model for understanding how antislavery activism was formed, sustained, and transmitted. Its interdisciplinary methods enabled the reconstruction of transatlantic antislavery networks by drawing on diverse forms of evidence—from archives and material objects to print culture, pedagogy, and community practices—that have often been overlooked in traditional abolitionist histories.

The book investigates the emotional labor underpinning antislavery work, revealing the importance of qualities of solidarity, compassion, and care and the agency of women and children. I turn my gaze to the everyday and the quotidian, to the impact of brief encounters and community traditions. Integrating print culture, material culture, oral traditions, scribal practices, and especially stitched and sewn objects created by women—including samplers, workbags, and other handmade materials—the book reveals the ways quieter, domestic forms of antislavery work underpinned the work of the public speeches and printed texts that so often demand our attention. Such creative artifacts show how women, both free and enslaved, Black and white, used textile work to communicate political ideas, build networks of care, and materially support and lead the movement. Treating textiles as historical documents, the book expands the field beyond textual sources and demonstrates how material objects embodied political ideals and fostered transatlantic connections. This approach brings fresh readings to familiar texts while also elevating the everyday, often invisible, female labor that sustained antislavery efforts.

Rather than relying on well-established and familiar US abolitionist archives, the book draws extensively on British collections that have been neglected or underexplored, especially those connected with religious nonconformists (notably Moravians and Quakers) in Yorkshire and Pennsylvania. These two Protestant communities were closely tied across the Atlantic and beyond, having allegiances that mean that the nation-state is not the most appropriate analytical framework through which to understand them. Yorkshire had a large Quaker community with family and business ties to Pennsylvanian Quakers, while the Moravians of Bethlehem and Nazareth in Pennsylvania and Fulneck and other settlements in Yorkshire understood themselves to be part of a diaspora, the word they used for their scattered communities. The book's archival and methodological shift uncovers previously overlooked actors and materials while repositioning British-based dissenters including women and children at the center of transnational antislavery networks. It proposes a substantial remapping of the antislavery landscape. By showing that the ways that locally situated communities maintained an outward-looking international connectedness, the book repudiates the idea that the local is parochial or provincial. It reappraises transatlantic grassroots abolitionism and demonstrates how domestic, local actions became economically and politically meaningful within the global antislavery movement. This underscores the way the book reimagines and rethinks the structures, scales, and agents of transatlantic antislavery activism.

A key question for me was that of structure. How could I tell the story I wished to tell in a way that was readable and engaging? By what kind of organization could I move from chapter to chapter such that while each part of the book was separate, they all worked together to produce a coherent whole—much like the social actors I was describing were doing themselves? I decided to start each chapter with a text or object or objects from which I could open up a set of arguments. In this way I imposed a pattern on the book that readers would recognize and anticipate. In addition, there are a number of motifs—something like those within a piece of music or a literary text—that also make their way through the book. Some are oppositional—noise and silence, for instance. Some are visual—stitches on fabric, marks on paper, carvings on a rock. Defining the parameters of the project, I coined a term—the *unquiet library*—suggesting what the book as whole seeks to undertake. As I write in the prologue, "[b]y invoking the unquiet as a category of investigation, I reimagine the contemporary scholarly relationship to archival material and what it speaks to, thus opening up dialogues that emphasize the 'speakerliness' of archival material rather than what might otherwise be framed as long-standing silence."[2] I use that term in the subtitle of a book whose title includes the word *dissenting* to encompass those who dissented from received opinion (dissidents) and those whose beliefs emerged from the Protestant Reformation.

The prologue opens in a deliberately conventional manner, with a newspaper description of an antislavery meeting that took place in Leeds Town Hall in the winter of 1858. By starting with a meeting attracting newspaper coverage and then asking

why it was given such coverage and what that does to our historical understanding of antislavery, I gradually, as the prologue continues, undo the story it had seemed I was starting to put together. It ends with a resonant extract from Charles Babbage's *The Ninth Bridgewater Address* in which he seeks to understand how sound travels. Following his argument that sounds exists in perpetuity, I end the prologue with a quotation from his work and an opening up to what will follow: "'The earth itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man ever said or women whispered.' Sounds from the past, present and future reverberate as 'ululations of the air,' hovering in our midst. If we listen hard enough, we can surely hear the echoes of this acoustic world, an unquietness worth hearing."[3] Chapter One then starts with a reading of a late eighteenth-century embroidered sampler, made by a Quaker schoolgirl at Ackworth school in Yorkshire. The chapter stitches together a transnational antislavery story grounded in materiality, childhood, and the education of girls and women. In Chapter Two, I open with a different kind of material object, namely a piece of paisley cloth produced from free labor in the US and sold in the grocery store belonging to George Richardson, a former Ackworth scholar. The chapter then moves outwards from this commercial outlet to consider the antislavery work of Anna Richardson, who had met her future husband, Henry, while she was also at Ackworth. While she is best known as one of two women who purchased the manumission of Frederick Douglass, the full extent of her work as a transnational organizer and correspondent is often overlooked. The chapter seeks to redress this, as I show below. Chapter Three starts with the census activism mentioned in the blue plaque on the former home of Mary and Wilson Armistead. It moves on to outline the achievement of Wilson Armistead, a remarkable abolitionist activist and author. Finally, in Chapter Four, I turn to three beautiful string instruments—objects created by John Antes, a Pennsylvanian Moravian. Antes was of German origin and was most comfortable speaking German, though he was, like many Moravians, accomplished in more than one language. Born in Pennsylvania as a first-generation colonist, he studied in Germany and worked as a missionary in Cairo before moving to England, where he eventually died. He was an exemplary transnational figure yet at the same time had a close and vital connection to a community of the like-minded, meaning he was connected both to the local and global like the other figures I study. By ending the book with a discussion of the Moravian presence in Britain, I wish to draw attention to an area requiring considerably more scholarship, a still unfamiliar story needing to be told.

What follows at this link is Chapter Two, my reappraisal of the labors of a remarkable woman, Anna Richardson.

Notes

[1] For more on the installation of the blue plaque at Lyddon Hall, see "Blue Plaque Highlights Anti-Slavery History of Leeds," *University of Leeds*, October 2, 2025,

https://www.leeds.ac.uk/news-university/news/article/5658/blue-plaque-highlights-anti-slavery-history-of-leeds.

2 Bridget Bennett, *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic: Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776–1865* (Louisiana State University Press, 2025), 15.

3 Bennett, *Antislavery in the Dissenting* Atlantic, 22.

Selected Bibliography

Bennett, Bridget. *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic: Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776–1865*. Louisiana State University Press, 2025.