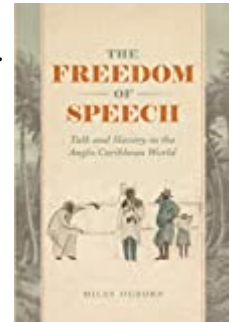




Miles Ogborn. *The Freedom of Speech: Talk and Slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean World.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. x + 309 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-65592-5.



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Miles Ogborn's new book highlights the importance of speech and speech practices in broadening our understanding of slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean and the Atlantic World. By examining how speech in sugar islands like Barbados and Jamaica was policed, attributed force, diminished, held accountable, and discredited, Ogborn delineates the oral cultures that made empire and slavery. By centering speech, he offers new ways of understanding legal cultures of empire, metropolitan and colonial politics, imperial knowledge networks, the negotiation of religion at imperial frontiers, and the abolition of slavery. Ogborn offers scholars an example of how to deliberately consider speech and its meaning in historical context, making the book useful as a methodological intervention. He highlights the ubiquity of words spoken in resistance to or in direct disregard of the power hierarchies of slavery despite repercussions. However, his argument that certain kinds of speech contested boundaries and restrictions in the sugar islands leaves readers wondering whether the measures planters employed when acting on

their fears of this speech can really help us move away from accounts of slavery that center power.

Freedom of Speech argues that “who can speak and what they might say” are central questions for understanding the violent struggle between humanity and freedom that characterized transatlantic slavery (p. 34). By examining traces of speech and silencing in the archives of plantation slavery, Ogborn argues that speech was an “asymmetrical common ground” upon which slavery worked. He claims that his methodology helps tie together “separate accounts” of power and resistance that “emphasize either the extraordinary apparatus of domination brought to bear on the enslaved population or the manifold forms of resistance that those same populations deployed” (p. 17). It remains unclear what specific literature he is responding to, as he does not name any specific works that allegedly build separate accounts of power and resistance. More convincing is his claim that his book moves beyond understanding the Caribbean as “either the silence of slavery or the astonishing and inventive proliferation of creolized sonic forms” (p. 28).

Ogborn reveals the inseparability of British, Caribbean, and West African histories. Ephemeral and mobile speech accompanied by printed materials created conversations that threaded together all sides of the Atlantic. Readers are thus left with the impression that it is impossible to fully understand British legal history, abolition, planter politics, missionary work, or histories of colonial botany without understanding the important ways different forms of speech and silencing were integral to these connections.

This book’s strength and primary appeal is its insistence that historians move away from the divide between orality and literacy, as power was transmitted through forms of speech as well as forms of writing. Ogborn builds a compelling case for why orality and literacy are entwined. He argues that an understanding of empire as the triumph of writing over speaking is inaccurate, as empires are oral cultures too. The oral cultures of both slaves and colonists crossed the Atlantic

through networks of slavery and empire. Imperial power was invested in speech practices, which can be recovered by reading for “the uses of orality” and “instances where speech was required or chosen” in printed materials (p. 28). Instead of “hoping to hear what was really said in the past,” he considers the forms of talk that appear in traces or the “contours of suppressed and unheard modes of speech” (p. 29). What results is an account of both speech practices and their suppression that extends existing scholarship on speech practices in the Black Atlantic.

Ogborn draws from an impressive variety of archival sources, including planter diaries; records from assemblies, laws, and statutes in Jamaica and Barbados; documents from the Royal Society Archive, Edinburgh Botanical Gardens, and London Debating Societies; and missionary records. His understanding of catechisms, imperial botany, and abolition draws from a variety of published works including instruction manuals and pamphlets. This approach offers an intriguing avenue for addressing the importance and place of orality in settler colonialism studies, in which expropriation is perhaps less a product of a clash between literacy and orality and more so a process in which different parties exploited, navigated, and negotiated differences between settler and indigenous oral cultures of law and politics.

The book opens with two chapters detailing the relationship between speech and the deliberation and execution of planter law and politics. The first chapter argues that oath taking and evidence giving were forms of talk that underpinned systems of law and violence in slave societies, thereby making and unmaking the radically unequal social relations of slavery. Oath taking bound judges and juries to the English legal systems that upheld planter rights in the Caribbean. Ogborn uses this analysis of formalized legal speech to build an account of when exactly slaves, people of color, and women were excluded from oath taking and evidence giving, and how the legal sanctioning of dif-

ference within Anglo-Caribbean colonies was displayed through these exclusions. This chapter models for legal historians, especially British legal historians, an approach that moves beyond the assumption of a false divide between oral and written legal cultures. Ogborn demonstrates how important it is to go beyond this divide by delineating how written legal cultures involve orality in important ways. He demonstrates that written legal cultures involve orality in important ways. The second chapter reveals how slavery and freedom were constituted as political conditions through forms of speech. White colonists contested the imposition of metropolitan authority that enacted law in the colonies, such as royal proclamations, and insisted on the necessity of colonial legislative assemblies as spaces where, as free White men, they could deliberate on the application of imperial law. At the same time, colonial legislative assemblies excluded women, people of color, and slaves, while planters policed and suppressed forms of political speech among slaves. Ultimately, Ogborn argues that modes of political speech among the enslaved need to be placed in dialogue with Enlightenment discussions of liberty and arguments made by colonial assemblies over their freedom of speech.

The forms of speech that reinforced difference in the Anglo-Caribbean were shifting and frequently contested. Although people of color were excluded from oath taking, oath swearing was used to make peace between colonial governments and the Maroons. Ogborn points to an 1803 treaty agreed between Maroon Captain Cudjoe and Colonel John Guthrie, both of whom swore oaths to establish a form of restricted sovereignty for the Maroons. In demonstrating the contested boundaries surrounding evidence giving, Ogborn details the fascinating case of Francis Williams, a free Black Jamaican lawyer, mathematician, poet, and plantation owner. Williams, who was proposed as a fellow of the Royal Society when Isaac Newton was its president, was insistent on his status as a propertied man of refinement whose

property rights surrounding slave ownership should be as secure as those of White planters. He fought against the permission of his slaves to give testimony against him in court, defining himself as a “white man acting under a black skin” (p. 62). Unlike White planters, the testimony of slaves could be used against Black planters in court. Williams’s father pushed to rule out slave testimonies from being used against anyone except other slaves.

Although colonial laws excluded, suppressed, and harshly punished slaves who engaged in the “political talk” that proliferated and circulated within inter-island and transatlantic rumor and news networks, the talk continued. Building on scholarship tracing speech in the Black Atlantic, Ogborn argues that these communication networks were polities, spaces in which slaves sought out and engaged in political talk, and that planters were aware of and feared these networks. Planters feared what slaves might overhear and talk about among themselves. While slaves were excluded from evidence giving against Whites, their testimonies were taken into account during conspiracy trials, where they could then be used to legitimate the “deployment of deadly violence” to suppress resistance against slavery (p. 99).

Ogborn’s arguments about speech, power, and slavery are clearest in chapter 3. By examining talk about plants, particularly discussion about their medical properties, scientific conversation, and the formation of botanical gardens as public spaces, Ogborn demonstrates how networks of knowledge and the power structures that defined inclusion and exclusion from these networks depended on talk as much as text. He argues that knowledge and communication in the sugar islands lay at the intersection of appropriation and exchange between slaves and those enforcing slavery. White islanders relied on conversation with slaves and indigenous peoples to learn the medical properties of plants but silenced or diminished the contributions of people of color to their

knowledge networks. This chapter is especially helpful in laying out how epistemological and physical violence took shape through talk and silencing via the deliberate misattribution of botanical knowledge away from people of color. Violence or the threat of it also produced the botanical gardens of White islanders. Slave knowledge about plants as well as their labor maintained Caribbean botanical gardens, even though slaveholders who owned the gardens took credit for knowing how to care for and cultivate the plants it contained and rarely did the work needed to upkeep them. Ogborn draws attention to the centrality of both gentlemanly botanical conversation and written correspondence within imperial knowledge networks, in which White correspondents attributed no credit to their conversations with slaves and indigenous communities on the islands which allowed them to uncover scientific truths about plants in the first place.

Ogborn's argument that his methodology ties together "separate accounts" of power and resistance is most convincingly demonstrated in the final two chapters, both of which elaborate more extensively on what happened when slaves spoke. Chapter 4 argues that forms of spiritual speech differentiated between slaves and non-slaves while also pushing the boundaries between them. Non-conformist missionaries who mobilized emotional sermons and intimate talk that resembled equality were better able to connect with slaves and people of color than missionaries from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), who relied on dispassionate catechisms in their services. Planters saw the words of Obeah men and women, who administered oaths and invoked gods and ancestors to bind people to their word or attribute illness or misfortune to people, as a dangerous, enduring, and powerful force. "Obeah" was the term used in the Anglo-Caribbean to refer to spiritual practices like Vodun or candomblé, which often mobilized speech to challenge plantation slavery and colonial authority. Although planters dismissed Obeah as people who merely professed to have magical or

spiritual powers, they were wary of the hold that they had over their audiences. The word of Obeah could clash with the authority of planters. Obeah speech continued to utter what was unutterable in the sugar islands, even though planters tried to violently repress it. Planters frequently attributed Obeah men and women as the instigators of slave uprisings yet, when convicting Obeah, struggled to discount it as simply a belief with no supernatural cause. Obeah could also incorporate Christianity. Slaves who converted did not always jettison Obeah practices and beliefs, which raised concern among missionaries about what exactly it meant when slaves said they were Christian but continued with syncretic religious practices.

The final chapter, which argues for the centrality of speech to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, argues that slave revolts and conspiracies in the Caribbean involved forms of speech that need to be understood as part of the politics of transatlantic slavery. Ogborn argues that slave uprisings themselves need to be seen as part of a "reciprocal relationship" in which metropolitan abolitionist activism and conversations about abolition among slaves, which circulated between the islands and across the Atlantic, shaped each other (p. 221). He highlights the ubiquity of discussion between slaves about abolition. Some of this talk translated into action, but slaves also regularly talked about their situation—talk that was not necessarily tied to conspiracy or uprisings of any kind. Imperial and colonial authorities tried to manage this talk, persecuting those engaging in "conspiratorial talk" even in cases where slaves were expressing hopes and fears among themselves or discussing rumors with no intention to organize or act. Slaveholders sought to shift the blame for slave uprisings to metropolitan abolitionists and nonconformist missionaries, who they cast as engaging in "dangerous talk." Ogborn argues that talk among slaves about abolition was part of the oral culture of abolition within Britain, in which figures like Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoana, Granville Sharp, an "unnamed lady,"

Thomas Clarkson and his wife, Margaret Middleton, and others accompanied abolitionist print materials with abolitionist conversation. They spoke to private and public audiences ranging from tea-tables, bookshops, public lectures, and debating societies, to Parliament.

The irony of the title is revealing, as it was mainly White propertied men who had their freedom to speak guaranteed in law. Slaves, maroons, free people of color, and women were technically free to say what they wanted to say, but this rarely came without consequences. Ogborn argues that the ubiquity of speech and the facility with which slaves could simply choose to utter the unutterable helps move beyond studies of slavery that focus on either violence or resistance. He emphasizes that slaves always had the option to resist planter rule by saying subversive things, even if doing so frequently brought consequences. The entire book works toward demonstrating that some speech could inspire action while others could be ignored or discounted, depending on who spoke and in what context, but that these boundaries and restrictions could be contested. Ogborn's point that scholars must simultaneously consider both the systematic oppression of slavery and varied forms of resistance to it is an important reminder. However, in the end, the subversive speech of slaves that instilled fear among White people in the Caribbean was always met with violent consequences. Likewise, the speech of White slaveholders always enacted power. Ogborn pushes readers to move away from understanding speech and slavery as a story that is either overwhelmingly about power or overwhelmingly about resistance. However, even his illuminating examples of slave resistance through speech could not avoid the looming question of power and its importance in the backdrop.

This book demonstrates the necessity of understanding what curtailing, policing, suppressing, legalizing, and encouraging speech meant for those enforcing and resisting slavery in the Anglo-

Caribbean. Although Ogborn does not make any claim to the particularity of speech in this particular context, he does not spend any time considering how his methodology for interpreting traces of speech in textual archives, or of reading speech differently from text, may apply to contexts beyond slavery in the British Atlantic World. The book would have benefited from some treatment of the wider application of its methodology. For example, how exactly might the relationship between orality and power feature in the colonial legal landscapes in North America or India? Were the gendered and racial exclusions that characterized oath taking, evidence giving, and proclamation announcing in the Caribbean much different from other colonies or in Britain itself? How might Ogborn's investigation of slave political talk enlighten us about working-class oral political cultures in Britain? What legacies did the relationship between oral and written abolitionist conversation and exchange leave for later anticolonial activism? I am most curious about how Ogborn's methodology would change when applied to later historical contexts, in which telegraph, audio recordings, telephone, and other less ephemeral forms of speech and written communication took hold toward the end of the nineteenth century. Despite these gaps, this book remains a necessary tool in the arsenal of historians considering the relationship between speech, law, knowledge, religion, empire, and resistance.

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