

[LeBlanc on Ogborn, 'The Freedom of Speech: Talk and Slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean World'](#)

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Miles Ogborn. *The Freedom of Speech: Talk and Slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. x + 309 pp. \$35.00 (paper), [ISBN 978-0-226-65768-4](#); \$105.00

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The Stakes and Sounds of Talk in Atlantic Slavery

This book is a crafty reinterpretation of the spaces of Atlantic slavery as soundscapes of power. In general, Miles Ogborn argues that “talk”—the aggregate and discrete dynamics of speech and speaking—both reinforced and had the potential to undermine slave societies. Much of the book develops the distinct dimensions of “talk” as an analytical category, one that helps reveal and explain many of the more subtle yet salient aspects of white supremacy and organized violence that defined Atlantic slavery. In this sense, Ogborn joins a number of important works that have rethought slavery through vital themes: for example, Vincent Brown’s view of slavery and death (*The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* [2008]), Terri L. Snyder’s deconstruction of suicide (*The Power to Die: Slavery and Suicide in British North America* [2015]), Kevin Dawson’s study of “aquatic culture” in the African diaspora (*Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* [2021]), and Neil Roberts’s interpretation of “freedom as marronage” (*Freedom as Marronage* [2015]). And Ogborn adds another interpretive tool to which historians might turn as they examine slavery’s myriad contexts, which itself is a valuable contribution.

A geographer by training, Ogborn is attuned from the outset to “the relationship between speech and space” and the “microgeographies of speech.” This leads him to consider the ways talking is local and to reconstruct when possible the “courtrooms, taverns, and parlors, as well as the coffeehouses, parliaments, and doorways” in which speech took place, the “words spoken in confidence, overheard through windows, or stated out in the fields in front of everyone” (p. 20). It is in this context of slavery that talk always conveyed politics and power relations charged with racialized violence, and claims to domination or claims to freedom. Further, in considering the enslaved populations of Barbados and Jamaica, Ogborn charts a new course between two common interpretive emphases in the historiography: on the one hand, silences enforced through oppression and, on the other, “the astonishing and inventive proliferation of creolized sonic forms,” such as creole languages, folk music, and the voices of enslaved preachers (p. 28). Herein lies an important contribution. Ogborn’s sounds almost always arise in moments of encounter between the enslaved and the enslaver, humanizing and animating both in insightful ways. In Ogborn’s terms, “who can speak and what they might say is a crucial question for the history of slavery in the Caribbean,” and this emphasis on

possibility, on ability, involves a critical grappling with the structures of movement, thought, and agency at the points where the oppressed and the oppressor met (p. 34).

The book is organized in five chapters, with a meditative introduction and conclusion. Though Ogborn does speak to change over time in some areas, the structure is mostly thematic, which will perhaps enhance its usefulness and adaptability as an interpretive tool with which to approach other contexts of Atlantic slavery. Ogborn begins with oaths as a window into understanding the dynamics of talk in slave societies. The act of giving one's word was fundamental to Anglo-European legal regimes for centuries and the English were no different when first colonizing the Caribbean, but as Ogborn describes, the presence of a racialized and enslaved population changed the stakes and the meanings of oath taking in the Caribbean. In law, only free white men could make oaths and give evidence in court, thereby excluding the voices of the enslaved and raising troubling questions about the need for enslaved testimony in criminal investigations. Further, the negotiations regarding oaths sometimes became as important as the commitments one made when giving an oath. For this, Ogborn turns to the treaties that heralded an end to the Maroon Wars that raged in Jamaica throughout the 1730s. On the British side, the conflict ended and the Maroons gained conditional freedom by treaty; the Maroons, however, insisted that the British also engaged in an oath-taking ritual that the Maroons recognized as binding: a mingling and drinking of blood and rum. By consenting to "swallow the oath," the British in their negotiations with the Maroons participated in a legal and cultural form that harkened back to similar oath-taking practices in some west African societies (p. 47). Ogborn elaborates with his descriptions of such practices among the Asante peoples and discusses Edward Long's own treatment of "Coromantin" oaths, elements of which the Maroons might have carried on.

Ogborn's subsequent analyses echo many of the core themes evoked in the study of oaths. In chapter 2, "The Deliberative Voice: Politics, Speech, and Liberty," for example, Ogborn adds a new wrinkle to the now canonical understanding that slavery heightened the sensitivity of white colonists to their own prerogatives and liberty. Interpreting the often indignant approach of the Jamaican assembly to relations with Whitehall in the light of colonial paranoia regarding slave rebellion, Ogborn writes: "Freeborn Englishmen ... would never be slaves if they spoke out to defend their liberties. This view, in turn, shaped the ways in which the voices of the enslaved were heard and misheard as they discussed and protested slavery's violent oppressions" (p. 105). In investigations of supposed conspiracies, Jamaican slaveholders wanted to demonstrate that the enslaved had in fact conspired, that they had used the "deliberative voice" proper to political action (in assemblies and the like) to plot against their enslavement. White colonists thereby stubbornly asserted their own liberties and the speech practices they used onto the actions of the enslaved, whose speech practices they never fully understood, which created a tense environment of mutual suspicion and resentment. Among the enslaved, this mishearing or selective hearing was often paid for in blood.

While Ogborn relies much on the tensions between the enslaved and the colonial regime in Jamaica and Barbados in his early chapters, later chapters include more elements of collaboration and exchange through speech across black and white communities. In the realm of botany, for example, talk about the medical value of plants between the enslaved and free helped produce botanical and medical knowledge. Ogborn relates instances in which the enslaved healed ailing planters, accompanied amateur botanists like Thomas Thistlewood on foraging expeditions in the woods, or contributed to the development of early botanical gardens on the sugar islands. A similar process of exchange through talk occurred in the spiritual domain, in which the proselytizing work of both

Anglicans and non-conformists in the Caribbean hinged on speaking with the enslaved. In religion, however, talk was often less useful than in botany. For instance, Ogborn employs the reflections of the Moravian missionary Zacharias George Caries to illustrate the collaboration but also ambiguity of slave society speech, as Caries bemoaned the fact that the enslaved could “imitate our language without feeling it in their heart” (p. 163). In this way, speech and talk evoked the ultimate incommensurability of the enslaver and enslaved worlds in the Caribbean. Hardened racial attitudes, even among those British who never stepped foot in a slave society, often rendered the enslaved permanent “others,” no matter what kind of speech they spoke. Ogborn’s interpretation of the free black Jamaican poet Francis Williams illustrates this well. Whereas Williams drew a distinction between a “white negro” and a “black negro” on the basis of speech, David Hume considered Williams a “parrot,” unable to comprehend black eloquence even within European aesthetic paradigms.

The range of topics that Ogborn details all hang together under the framework of talk-as-power, with power understood as multidirectional, leaving even the most oppressed a modicum of agency to seize the means of shaping the world around them. For the enslaved in places like Jamaica, the most ubiquitous and iconic of these means, aside from violent resistance and rebellion, was linked closely to speech in the practice of obeah. Turning to the rituals, spells, incantations, and protections that black practitioners of obeah used, the enslaved might undermine slave society—for they certainly saw it this way. But as Ogborn recognizes, drawing on the important work of Diana Paton on the meanings of obeah in the age of European “enlightenment” (*The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity in the Caribbean World* [2015]), from the planter perspective, much of obeah was just words, even if it still worried them: for “obeah’s orality [was] both everything and nothing” (p. 160). In much of the book, then, Ogborn maximizes this ambiguity of speech practices in slave societies to useful effect.

Throughout the book, Ogborn also confronts the evidentiary problem at the core of all studies of slavery: the systems of power and violence designed to keep people in bondage but who also conspired to obscure many of the traces that the enslaved left behind on their own terms. Ogborn’s solution is less about “reading against the grain” or “between the lines” or “listening for silences” as it is about identifying traces of speech left in plain sight, or reading old sources in new ways. In general, Ogborn succeeds in revealing the many ways speech demarcated lines between freedom and slavery, and how talking blurred or crossed these lines with great frequency. He deconstructs an eclectic mix of topics to do this—oaths, formal politics, botany and medicine, spiritual practices—through sources that, for the most part, will not be new to historians who have worked on Jamaica and the Anglo-Caribbean. Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774) and Long’s papers in the British Library, for example, do a significant amount of the evidentiary lifting for Ogborn in some chapters. However, Ogborn’s heavy reliance on theory, and at times tedious rendition of the theoretical literature, might frustrate some readers. The book devotes almost as much space to discussing other people’s arguments as it does to Ogborn’s own evidence. For example, the work of Bruno Latour is discussed in each chapter and to excessive depth, and with often greater critical attention than Ogborn pays to the richness (and fraught complexity) of Long’s writings.

Historians will without a doubt take inspiration from Ogborn’s method and interpretation of “talk,” and future studies of the sonic dimensions of the Atlantic world will follow his cues. As a work situated within the historiography of Atlantic slavery, however, the flexibility of Ogborn’s category

“talk” does perhaps less original work than it claims to. The book’s thematic organization means that Ogborn addresses a slightly different dimension of talk and speech in each chapter, but orality in most cases tends only to reveal the fundamental power dynamics of slavery that historians already understand well. Talk and speech may very well be one of the most effective frameworks through which to study slavery, perhaps better than most frameworks, but Ogborn does not spend much time effectively making this case. Indeed, in the conclusion he writes that this “book does not claim that the history of slavery can be reduced to a history of orality, but considering talk as practice, or as many differentiated practices, can offer a way of rethinking that history” (p. 233). This is fair enough as a claim but also represents a missed opportunity. Too often the reader is left making extrapolations and connections between the many “differentiated practices” of talk between the chapters and/or case studies through implication rather than by following an overarching specific argument. In other words, what Ogborn reveals about the world of Atlantic slavery itself might only go as deep as the reader’s own prior knowledge of that world, and those revelations may not always be made apparent in the book. It seems plausible, then, that Ogborn might have developed a stronger “through-line” of argument about talk in Caribbean slave societies while also avoiding reducing slavery to mere orality.

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