Miles Ogborn, *The Freedom of Speech: Talk and Slavery in the Anglo-Caribbean World*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. x + 309 pp. (Paper US\$ 35.00)

Historians mostly work with the traces of the past left in manuscripts and printed texts, yet history happens through all kinds of interactions, few of which involve writing. By attending to the “absent presence” (p. 234) of speech in a wealth of (mainly) written sources, as well as in some images, Miles Ogborn brings a refreshing approach to questions about power, violence, and politics in the world of British Atlantic slavery. He offers a historical understanding of speech that refuses an opposition between analysis of discourse and practice, representation and reality. “Speaking,” he argues, “is simultaneously a practice and a mode of representation” (p. 30). He proceeds, through analysis of some material that is familiar and much that is not, to demonstrate the power of speech and its regulation as a way both of conveying meaning and of making and remaking social relations.

Ogborn’s integrated Atlantic history considers Britain, Jamaica, and Barbados together, and moves beyond critiques of the notion of “agency” to situate enslaved people alongside free as political and intellectual subjects. Each of the book’s first four chapters attends to a category of speech, derived from Bruno Latour’s taxonomy of the overlapping domains in which, he argues, communication takes place: law, politics, science, and religion. This strategy enables Ogborn to place the enslaved and the free within the same analytic field. Within each chapter, he deals with the speech of both enslaved and free people, emphasizing the often analogous modes in which they spoke as well as the highly unequal power relations in which their speech was regulated.

The book’s fifth chapter investigates speech in the context of antislavery movements. It persuasively argues for the importance of everyday conversation, as much as pamphleteering, petitions, newspaper articles, or public meetings, in changing British people’s minds about slavery and the slave trade. Abolitionists discussed the importance of “know[ing] your man and ... how to address him” (p. 206) and paid careful attention to the effect of their varied rhetorical strategies on their listeners. Alongside the metropolitan campaigns traditionally considered “abolitionist,” Ogborn explores the role of talk in generating the armed actions of enslaved people against slavery. The words that enslaved men and women shared about how the king had or would set them free enabled them to mobilize against slavery. These were “anticipatory speech acts,” Ogborn suggests; that is, they helped to bring about the event they discussed. Ogborn’s mosaic-style method produces frequent juxtapositions of this kind, successfully considering British and Caribbean his-

tory “on the same common ground” (p. 228) and in so doing, provoking new ways of thinking about slavery.

As Ogborn acknowledges, his division of material relies on a modern European set of disciplinary categories. As a result, topics often discussed together in studies of slavery are distributed across multiple chapters. Obeah in particular is a repeated theme, appearing in relation to oath-taking in the chapters on law and politics; medicinal and botanical knowledge in the chapter on science; and spiritual work in the chapter on religion. This strategy pays off in pushing readers to look in new ways at what we know as obeah, but also has costs in reinforcing the divisions between domains. How might a book that approached speech through categories derived from African-Caribbean ontologies organize this material?

The Freedom of Speech implicitly participates in an ongoing debate on the politics of historical research, and the attempt to recover and at least partially reconstitute the words and meanings of enslaved people from a past of violent oppression. In particular, Ogborn’s work troubles the opposition Marisa Fuentes establishes in *Dispossessed Lives* (2016) between the interpretive inaccessibility of enslaved people’s voices on one hand, and a bland search for “subversive agency” on the other. His teasing out of the politics, the sociability, the alliance building and breaking, the silencing, and the relations of domination involved in enslaved people’s speech suggests an alternative path that is more optimistic about archival possibilities, without downplaying the violence and terror of slavery. This is an important book that will be essential reading in multiple fields.

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