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Francis Williams's Bad Language: Historical Geography in a World of Practice

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Opening: shouts in the street

I want to begin with a particular moment. In November 1724 two men met in the street in Spanish Town, Jamaica: William Brodrick, pillar of the legal and governmental establishment of the island, a former attorney general and the king's appointee as sergeant-at-law; and Francis Williams, a free black man. They traded insults and blows. Brodrick claimed that Williams had come "towards him in a passion." Brodrick had raised a hand to fend him off, and Williams had struck him, torn his shirt and neck cloth, called him a "White Dog" several times and with "many opprobrious words" had told Brodrick that he was as good a man as him. In turn, Brodrick repeatedly called Williams a "Black Dog," and left him with a bloody mouth.¹

What do we have here? An event, a situated moment, a moment that is later retold and written down in dramatic terms in order to address the questions of what happened? Who caused what? And what does it all mean? It was an exchange of words, but there is more going on here than just language. Along with the name-calling, there are passions raised, blows struck, a split lip and torn clothes. There are bad intentions. There is anger. There is damage done. The encounter, the moment, is affective, embodied, situated and dramatic. Borrowing my title from the anthropologist and historian Greg Dening's book *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*, I want to argue that Francis Williams's bad language, and that of William Brodrick, can only be understood if we recognize that it is about more than just

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words. It is a matter of passion, power and performance.²

Exploring that leads to the other part of my title: historical geography in a world of practice. Taking a turn towards practice, or practices, in geography and elsewhere is one important way in which the “more-than-representational” or the more than textual can be thought through.³ I’m not sure that we can devise an entirely adequate definition of “practice” or “practices,” but the term certainly signals a variety of often routine ways of being in the world which are largely taken for granted, frequently based on tacit knowledge, and are certainly material, embodied and spatial.⁴ They exist in routine actions with bodies, spaces and things. They may involve language and other forms of representation, but they are more than that.

I will return to Francis Williams facing up to William Brodrick on the streets of Spanish Town, but I want to do so via a discussion of the challenge to historical geography that thinking about practices entails, and some suggestions of routes forward that might be taken.

Practice and historical geography

There are a variety of sources for this turn to practice. Important among them are science studies and the history of science in their attempts to move the study of the making of knowledge beyond the history of ideas; the investigation of forms of material culture and visual culture in order to assert the importance and specificity of objects and images, and what is done with them; and the turn towards performativity as a way of highlighting the variety and effectivity of modes of embodiment.⁵ Taken together, they question the privileging of the reading of texts as the guiding notion for how the world works and signal a disquiet with theoretical approaches, both structuralist and post-structuralist, which have approached the world as a text to be read.

This questioning has three elements: that texts are not all there is in the world, nor are all things like texts, that reading is not all that is done, nor is it a model for other ways of going on; and that reading the world as a text suggests an undue closure and boundedness of the world (as text) and its separation from those apprehending it (as readers). In historical geography, the limitations of the textual vision have been fruitfully explored, for example, in investigations of the history of geographical knowledge which seek to restore to that history the full range of practices of knowledge production, circulation and use, and in attempts to reconsider the archive as a material space or an affective space which is not just about texts, however broadly conceived, and reading.⁶

So far I have presented things somewhat negatively, emphasising why the world is not just a text, why we inhabit it not just as readers. More positively, the turn to practice offers an opening up to a multiplicity of ways of being and doing. In particular, I would argue, an opening or series of openings to the ongoing making-up of the world, to its continuous fabrication. Thinking through practices encourages us to understand a world that is more unsteady, more continually being made and transformed,

more open to those forms of transformation, and more a matter of being "shored up" rather than stabilized. It argues that what we take for granted as part of the world had to be made, and has to be continually remade, through practice.

What then of historical geography in a world of practice? In one sense we might ask "what's new?" Historical geography's traditions make it attentive, in various ways, to the materiality of the world and its material remaking with tools, techniques and technologies of various sorts; to practical forms of knowledge and action embedded in land and life; and to the constant making of agricultural and urban landscapes.⁷ These traditions can speak to questions of practice as much as, and as well as, newer affiliations with science studies or material culture. Historical geographers might also claim to have been ever alert to the constant remaking of the world. Whilst space and time, geography and history, are not readily separable in any geographical inquiry, historical geography has always been written under the sign "Things Change."

However, in another sense, and for obvious reasons, historical geography has always had a substantial investment in the textual view of the world. Approaching the world via an archive, and via predominantly textual archives, has meant that "reading" those past landscapes, spaces and places seems to make sense.⁸ This has meant a significant embracing of the cultural, and textual, turns within historical geography over the last twenty years or so. Ideas of discourse, textuality and interpretation as reading have all shed much light on the more-often-than-not textual traces of the past through which we study it.

There is, therefore, the challenge to be faced that all of what is interesting to those concerned with practice is only available to historical geographers through the mediation of what remains, textual or otherwise, and that much of that can only hint at the routines, gestures, embodiments, feelings and performances of people in the past. We can appreciate the challenge and appeal of understanding an event or moment such as Francis Williams's encounter with William Brodrick in all its viscerality: the rush of anger, the blows struck, the insults ringing out, the sight and the taste of blood, the shock waves rippling out from these two men's violence. But we also face the impossibility of doing so adequately, and the concern about what can legitimately be drawn from a short written report in an archive. In as much as the turn to practice has, in geography as a whole (and particularly in the United Kingdom), been part of a debate about moving beyond representation, and the costs of simply opposing what is valued by those wishing to think about "practice" against forms of representation, then historical geographers, who must engage with both practice and representation through the archive, would seem to have an interest in finding ways to move forward.⁹

I want to suggest that rather than thinking about the "representational" versus the "non-representational," where anything other than opposition seems doomed from the start, it is best to find some other terms. So, for example, Tim Cresswell has used work on the regulation of ball-

room dancing in early twentieth-century England to argue that bodies are both “representational” and “practical,” and that regulations aiming to shape the movements of the dancing body are best thought of as “representational strategies that seek to colonise the worlds beyond cognition.”¹⁰ In turn, I have framed my discussion so far in terms of “text” and “practice” because that also allows for possibilities other than opposition. The textual practices their combination implies are not simply literary, but bodily, material and spatial. For example, there are many sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century images of the writing body, representations of practices which intended to regulate bodily movements. They aimed to build forms of gender and gentility into the body so that the curious and powerful practice of sitting at a desk, feet planted, and hands steady became felt to be right. Such routinized practices meant that picking up a quill or a pen, and making marks that signify could be done without self-consciously considering how body-parts, tools and language were being assembled into a signifying act.¹¹

I have tried to examine some of these questions in terms of the connections between handwriting manuals and geographical knowledge in Britain’s long eighteenth century. This interpretation of *Geographia’s* pen, showed how commercial forms of handwriting — the round hand — and the knowledge of geography essential to commerce came together and were embodied in forms of polite masculinity.¹² However, most of my recent work has taken a different tack, one that combines “text” and “practice” by investigating the material and practical production, circulation and use of texts. It involves treating texts as material objects, and as matters of practices other than just working with language.

My book *Indian Ink* aimed to bring together two areas of work that seemed to have much in common, at least from the perspective of an historical geographer. The first area is the history of early modern trade and empire which has, along with a cultural turn into the “new imperial history,” taken something of a geographical turn towards networks, sites and landscapes. Second, and perhaps less familiar, is the history of the book.¹³ Rescued from the dust of the libraries, and the restricted questions of conventional bibliography and bibliometrics, the history of the book has been revived by foregrounding questions of materiality within the history of knowledge. Scholars such as Donald McKenzie, Roger Chartier, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Jim Secord and Adrian Johns have sought to demonstrate, in different ways, the difference that socially situated, geographically located and practical acts of making books makes to the history of knowledge.¹⁴ In doing so they have shown that this history is inevitably a geography, whether it is one of the detailed practices of making inscriptions, and making meanings, in printshops run by hand power or steam power; or of the situated reading of books (and historical geographers have been quick to take up Secord’s notion of an historical geography of reading); or the implications of the distributional patterns of works in print or manuscript.¹⁵

My own intention in *Indian Ink* was to bring these new histories of empires and books together to think about how a variety of texts, as ma-

terial objects, were part of the very making of the English East India Company's relationships of trade and empire, not just representations of those relationships. Therefore, the title of one part of that work was "Writing Travels," signalling a shift from studying travel writing to how texts themselves travel, in this case royal letters of introduction carried by East India Company merchants in the early seventeenth century who were seeking to make trading agreements with rulers in the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ Other chapters considered merchants' letters and account books; printed pamphlets attacking and defending the Company; the printing of stock prices for a broad public readership; and the use of printing in making a company-state and empire in late eighteenth-century Bengal. Overall, the aim was to demonstrate the significance of material practices with pens, printing presses, paper and ink in the making of trade and empire. To put it bluntly, to show that what needs to be understood about "texts" is not reducible to how they were read at the time, or how we read them now. More things were done with books, letters and pamphlets than just reading them.

It is worth reflecting on where this sort of work leads, both empirically and theoretically. Take, for example, the chapter on merchants' letters and account books which interpreted the reform of these modes of communication at Fort St. George (later Madras) on the east coast of India in the 1670s by the Company's agent, Streynsham Master.¹⁷ The official letters that went back and forth between England and India were compiled, read and replied to by committee. Their production and interpretation depended upon talk. There was the formalized talk of the consultations at Fort St. George where the very definition of a decision depended upon it having been discussed in the council chamber, voted on where necessary, and inscribed in the consultation book. The nature of this talk was thought about and contested. The Company in London insisted that all matters should be talked through. William Langhorn, Streynsham Master's predecessor as agent and his bitterest rival, set out an alternative model of consultation and emphasized that it was a collective act to be selectively applied:

[M]atter[s] of moment and difficulty requiring Consultation, appearing to him as some solid substance beyond the circuit or penetration of the Eye at once, and w^{ch} [sic] a single man attempting though by degrees shall loose as fast as he changes aspects; But w^{ch} [sic] by multitudes of Councill^{ors} [sic] taken in parts; Collation and discourse shall search & sift out every scruple.

He argued that to subject every issue to such scrutiny would mean that the Company would need two agents and two councils in every place, "the one to consult the other to act."

Master saw things differently. Listening in to Langhorn's organization of talk, and reporting back to the Company in London, he heard laxity and the exercise of illegitimate authority:

[W]hen ye Councill did meet there was nothing done regularly, but one walked one way & another walked another way in ye

Roome, when ye busyness was moved, wch was spoken to but indifferently, afterwards [Langhorn] himselfe drawes up in writinge what he thinks fit, & all the Councill sign it.¹⁸

These disagreements over talk, over the practices of consultation, were part of factional disputes within the Company which were also carried on in London when letters from men like Master and Langhorn arrived. Master's supporters, particularly Sir James Oxenden, a cousin on his mother's side, worked hard to keep him in place. He did so through formal arguments in Master's defence made in Company directors' meetings, but also in informal conversations behind the scenes. For example, he reported to Master that he had been invited to dinner by "mr Brittain and Natt Scotton," two men who needed to be brought round, and where they would "reason the Case & show mee yr Letters."¹⁹ In all cases talk and text worked together.

There are many other examples from *Indian Ink*, and historians of science and the book such as Adrian Johns and Jim Secord have also found the path traced by the materiality of texts leading to the talk which tried to make and stabilize interpretations of these textual objects, in bookshops, printshops, coffeehouses, pulpits, salons or mechanics institute libraries.²⁰ What is surprising to me is how little attention we have given to the historical geographies of forms of talk as practices in themselves. Tellingly, if we go back to Michel de Certeau, the theoretician who has most regularly been drawn upon to underpin ideas of practice, particularly spatial practice, we find that he gave great prominence to talk. The purpose of *The Practice of Everyday Life* was one that has now become very familiar to us: demonstrating the creative and potentially subversive forms of practice (particularly forms of consumption) that make up everyday life. As de Certeau put it, "everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others," and many will be familiar with how he discussed walking in the city in these terms, with its contrasts between the practices of pedestrians and the formalized geographies of urban planning.²¹ Less familiar is that the model for this is a linguistic one which asserts that "the act of speaking (with all the enunciative strategies that implies) is not reducible to a knowledge of the language. By adopting the point of view of enunciation – which is the subject of our study – we privilege the act of speaking; according to that point of view, speaking operates within the field of a linguistic system; it effects an appropriation, or reappropriation of language by its speakers." For de Certeau, these "characteristics of the speech act can be found in many other practices (walking, cooking etc)."²²

It is necessary to be careful here. Criticisms made of de Certeau's overly sharp distinction between strategies and tactics would also apply to distinctions between speech and the formal structures of language, or between talk and text.²³ It is worth noting that historians of the relations between oral and literate cultures have turned away from categorical definitions of their differences and from clear-cut notions of the transition between them. Instead, attention has turned to the ways in which speech,

script and print feed into and out of one another.²⁴ That said, the idea of speech as a practice is worth pursuing and has certainly been the focus of much less direct attention from geographers (including historical geographers) than walking, reading, and perhaps even cooking, de Certeau's other everyday practices. The comparison with the attention paid to writing is even more telling. My perhaps rather unhelpful thought here is of the many, many words that are spoken for every one that is written and especially every one that is printed. This is unhelpful because in historical work we can have almost no access to the vast majority of them.

Let me turn to what has been done. Where geography intersects with the history of science, the importance of talk has been recognized. As David Livingstone has put it, reviewing literature on both polite scientific conversation and popular scientific speech, "the umbilical links between location and locution force us to take seriously what could, and could not, be said in certain spaces, as well as what could, and could not, be heard there."²⁵ Feminist history, in the work of Mary Ryan and Laura Gowing, has also paid attention to the politics of what could and could not be said in private, in public, and across the moving thresholds between them.²⁶ There has also been attention to the geographies of talk that underpin Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere. As part of work on contemporary coffee shop culture and the spaces of public sociability, Eric Laurier and Chris Philo have listened to the noises from the early modern coffee-houses that were so central to Habermas's argument. Instead of overhearing critical rational debate, they are overwhelmed with "a cacophony of competing voices," an "unintelligible buzzing," but one that, they argue, worked to enable the practical conduct of life in public to be carried on.²⁷

In all these cases we can discern an historical geography of talk that needs to be attentive to what is said and where it is said, but which also sees talk as an embodied practice which continuously fabricates social relations as it is conducted, and which takes many different forms. We might, therefore, as Laurier and Philo suggest, learn from ethnomethodology, from Harold Garfinkel, Harvey Sacks and Erving Goffman, about what is happening in talk.²⁸ Even if we can't see or hear talk-in-action in the past, we can appreciate it as part of the action that we want to understand.

So, to return to the words exchanged by Francis Williams and William Brodrick on the streets of Spanish Town in 1724. This is a non-ideal speech situation, an anti-public sphere, and a moment when the tacit rules of civil talk had gone awry. I want to work through it to make an argument about what was at stake in forms of talk in this time and place, and what was being made and unmade through talk and its various historical geographies. Doing so is part of the conceptual foundations for archival work that I am just starting on speech, script and print in the Anglophone Caribbean prior to the ending of slavery there in 1834.

Rhetoric and power in the Atlantic world

William Brodrick was, as we have seen, a man of the law and, as

such, part of the workings of colonial and imperial power in the Atlantic world. While it is important to see that power as enacted in and through texts – and the printing of the laws of Jamaica is another concern of mine – it is also crucial to see power working through speech and gesture, in voices, bodies, forms of dress and comportment. As the historian Michael Braddick argues, the establishment of authority throughout the British Atlantic world depended upon establishing a social order based on “an ill-defined but nevertheless powerful conception of ‘civility.’” This meant that “manner, comportment and gesture” were crucial as those who sought to rule used the “civil” to integrate the political and the social, and the personal and the public.²⁹ Such “civil” presentations of self were best seen where William Brodrick was most at home, in the House of Assembly and law courts of Jamaica. It was also clear in such places that part of the making of forms of rule through embodied and vocalized performances involved establishing distinctions between different practices and different bodies: men and women, black and white.

However, as learned and performed practices, these ways of acting, particularly those based on language, formed an unstable basis for constructing a social order. For example, in 1684, Thomas Tryon, a critic of Caribbean plantation society, published an imagined complaint of a “negro slave” to the Christian God, which he has the enslaved African sum up as follows:

In short, the main Differences between the *Christians* and us, seem to be no more than these, that they are *White* and we are *Black*, because they are born in one Climate and we in another; they have *Learning*, as Reading, Writing, speaking of various Languages, and we have none of these Ornamental Advantages; but they may please to remember that the more Paint Glass has upon it, the more it keeps out the Light....³⁰

Therefore, these forms of distinction are neither positive – via the critique of civility and politeness as affectation – nor definitive, since they are either learned or simply reversible.

Such distinctions were also rendered unstable by Francis Williams (Figure 1). Williams was free, wealthy and well educated. He was the owner of enslaved Africans. He had been sent to school in England, then, it was said, to Cambridge University. He had certainly attended the Inns of Court. Just like William Brodrick, he had learned lessons of manner, gesture, dress and comportment. He knew his way around a courtroom, and how to speak its language. He also wrote poetry. That it was said that his English education had come about because the duke of Montagu was curious to make an “experiment” to see whether “a negro might not be found as capable of literature as a white person” did not make him any less disruptive of the associations between legal rhetoric, civility and whiteness on his return to Jamaica.³¹

After their argument, and suggesting that the affront may have been looked for, Brodrick put a petition before the Jamaican Assembly “set-



Figure 1. Francis Williams, c. 1740s. © Victoria and Albert Museum. This image, painted by an unknown artist, is a curious one. It shows Williams in his study in Spanish Town, surrounded by the stuff of a learned gentleman, including the celestial and terrestrial globes. It has been interpreted as both a celebration and a caricature of Francis Williams's forms of self-presentation, and is perhaps best understood as part of the eighteenth-century genre of conversation pieces, works to be displayed and discussed.

ting forth the manner of Francis Williams, a free Negro man of this town, his insulting him; and that, in regard if such a precedent should pass by uncensored, it might be of ill consequence to the island in general, he conceived it his duty, for preventing the like attempts for the future, to represent the same to this house, to take such measures as they should think best."³² The Assembly agreed, and decided to act against Francis Williams. But what, exactly, did Brodrick and others see the danger as being?

Dangerous conversation: conspiracy and slave society

The Assembly's resolution in 1724, following Brodrick's petition, was that "the said Williams's behaviour is of great encouragement to the Negroes of this island in general, and may be attended with ill consequences to the white people thereof, that leave be given to bring in a bill to reduce the said Francis Williams to the state of other free negroes in this island...."³³ A bill was drawn up obliging free blacks to wear badges distinguishing them from the enslaved, preventing them carrying swords and pistols (unless on militia duty), and restricting where they could live. However, this bill was not passed into law until 1730. This was during the first Maroon War, between the plantocracy's military forces and those who had freed themselves from the plantations and established autonomous settlements in the island's mountainous interior. Submitting the act to the Board of Trade, the Jamaican governor informed them that it was intended "to prevent the rebellious Negroes from mixing among the other inhabitants of Jamaica, frequenting their markets, trading with them and being supplied with arms and ammunition."³⁴ What were being conflated here were various forms of dangerous talk or, to use the broader eighteenth-century term for the mixing of people, "conversation." Even though Williams was a slaveholder, and invested in the property and authority relations of a slave society, his bad language was equated with the mixing of rebellious maroons and free blacks, and with the very conditions of rebellion itself. As the Assembly had said, "Williams's behaviour is of great encouragement to the Negroes of this Island in general...."

What allowed these equations to be made were the definitions of rebellion and conspiracy that were at work here. The 1696 Act for the Better Order and Government of Slaves prescribed the death penalty for any slave striking a white person, for any slave or slaves to "compass or imagine the death of a white person," and for any slave who committed murder, rose in rebellion, prepared weapons, or, crucially, "conspire[s] for that end."³⁵ As the legal historian Thomas J. Davis has put it in relation to the controversy over whether there was a planned slave revolt in South Carolina in 1822, or whether it was just talk, and whose talk it was, "conspiracy is what exists before and without any scheme's being acted out. Conspiracy lies in asserting and agreeing, in 'loose talk' of doing a deed."³⁶

Conspiracy was crucial because slaveholders sought to stop rebellions while they were just talk. They were well aware of all the talk that

went on. For example, the 1822 South Carolina conspiracy trials revealed crucial intersections of talk and print (primarily newspapers) among the enslaved and free in the grogshops and workshops of Charleston.³⁷ The slaveholders and their allies were also well aware of their lack of access to that talk, and the problems of interpreting it. For instance, the Jamaican plantation overseer Thomas Thistlewood had fought with a runaway slave known as "Congo Sam," who had told him "I will kill you, I will kill you now," while many of the other plantation workers had stood by, waiting to see how things turned out. Thistlewood suspected that one man, Quashe, had conspired with Sam, and that Quashe and others "knew that Sam had an intent to Murder me when we should meet, by what I heard them speak one day in the cookroom when I was in the back piazza reading."³⁸ What neither Thistlewood nor we can know is whether he was meant to overhear that conversation, spoken as it was in a language he could understand, as an indirectly delivered threat, and whether a conspiracy case could have been proved. His one snatch of the talk that the enslaved shared among themselves was enough to know that something was afoot but not enough to do anything about it.³⁹

In the context where imagining the death of a white person, conspiracy and physical violence were made equal, at least in the punishment provisions of the slave laws, Francis Williams's assumption of the power to insult and strike out at William Brodrick was enough to provoke fears of "ill consequence to the island in general." In terms of the solution to the problem that Williams posed, he would be subject to the act which constrained the freedoms of the free black population and, in his specific case, there was, as we have seen, a provision in the bill to "reduce [him]...to the state of other free negroes in this island," in particular "to the same state of trial and evidence as other negroes."⁴⁰

Giving evidence: black and white in the courtroom

The 1696 Act had also stipulated that slaves could not give evidence against white people, but they could give evidence against free black people. Such laws on slave evidence were enacted in a variety of forms throughout the slave societies of the Americas. They signalled the deeply problematic questions of truth and power in societies based on racialized forms of slavery. Slave evidence was also called "negro evidence" which indicated the assumed correspondence of liberty, slavery and racial categorizations. What sort of truth could the enslaved, or the "negro," be expected to speak, and how might it be recognised and used by those with the liberty to do so?

As Jill Lepore has shown in her forensic examination of the uses of testimony in the prosecution of slaves and others for conspiracy in New York in 1741, slave evidence was an unstable form of talk. It had to be shored up to make it usable. Thus, the chief prosecutor at those trials, Daniel Horsmanden, needed to use it, and he needed to justify its use. He wrote about how he turned his interrogations of those speaking under the

threat of death into evidence:

The Trouble of examining Criminals in general, may be easily gues'd at; but the Fatigue in that of Negroes, is not to be conceived, but by those that have undergone the Drudgery: The Difficulty of bringing, and holding them to the Truth, if by Chance it starts from them, is not to be surmounted but by the closest Attention; many of them have a great deal of Craft; their unintelligible Jargon stands them in good Stead, to conceal their Meaning; so that an Examiner must expect to encounter with much Perplexity; grope through a Maze of Obscurity; be obliged to lay hold of broken Hints, lay them carefully together, and thoroughly weigh and compare them with each other, before he can be able to see the Light, or fix those Creatures to any determinate Meaning.⁴¹

Yet such procedures and protestations in themselves raised questions about how power found truth as it turned interrogation into text. One critic of the trials compared such practices to the evidence used in the Salem witchcraft trials of the 1690s, judging "that Negro & Spectre evidence will turn out alike," finding only the evidence that the prosecutors wanted to find.⁴²

All slave societies certainly limited the uses of slave evidence to cases involving either other slaves or blacks and native Americans. However, by the early eighteenth century in Jamaica there was one exception. On January 30, 1708, the Jamaican Assembly was presented with a petition from John Williams, Francis's father,

a free negro, setting forth that he was set free for his fidelity and good service, and had by his industry gained some small interest in the world, and, although a Christian and Naturalised, yet both himself and what he hath are liable to utter ruin, in the evidence of slaves that may witness against him on any occasion, and praying leave to bring in a bill to enable him to be tried by a Jury, as a white man.⁴³

John Williams was being modest. He had amassed a substantial fortune. When he died in 1723 he left £12,000 (worth over £1.5 million today). He was using the defense of his property to claim the privileges of whiteness in the limited but important sphere of the law, in particular on the question of "slave evidence." Indeed, by 1716 other legislation had been passed extending the privilege to his wife and three sons. Although neither bill contained the phrase "as a white man," the speech situation that the Williamses inhabited in court was that otherwise reserved for the island's white inhabitants.

It was this exceptional status, and Francis Williams's robust defense of his privileges, that made him such a threat to the ongoing attempts to fabricate a Jamaican social order based on other alignments of freedom, property and race. Williams was judged "haughty," "opinionated" and

"fond of having great deference paid to him."⁴⁴ The Jamaican plantocracy sought to "reduce [him]...to the state of other free Negroes of the island." So the Assembly passed an act which made that law in 1730, effectively re-ordering patterns of speech and power in the island's courtrooms.

Shutting up and carrying on

This was not, however, the end of the story for Francis Williams. His bad language subsequently took on a transatlantic geography that highlights the contested power relations surrounding speech. Firstly, since legislation passed by the colonial assemblies had to be ratified in London, Williams did not give up. He petitioned the Colonial Office against the bill. He did so on behalf of all free blacks and Indians, but also in defense of his particular privileges. And he won. In London, it seems, the defense of property and freedom was more significant than establishing Williams's blackness in Jamaican courtrooms, the priority on the island. The plantocracy had to wait for his death in 1762 to hear the end of his bad language.

Secondly, Williams's reputation also had an Atlantic geography. He was known in New York in 1744. A Dr. Hamilton recorded in his diary an encounter over dinner with two white men from Jamaica "talking of a certain free Negroe...who was a man of estate, good sense, and education." One had "gravely asked if that Negroe's parents were not whites, for he was sure that nothing good could come of a whole generation of blacks."⁴⁵ And he was known in Britain in 1753 when the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume made an addendum to his essay "On National Character" which argued, as he said, that "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites." As he went on, "In Jamaica they talk of one Negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly."⁴⁶ Others defended his reputation, particularly as the debate over slavery gathered momentum in the later eighteenth century. Williams and his forms of language entered the transatlantic discussion over race and freedom: was he a parrot or a poet? What sorts of forms of speech were he and others capable of? What did that mean for human difference and questions of liberty?

So, using the story of Francis Williams's bad language I have tried to suggest what might be offered by considering historical geographies of talk. For Williams, forms of speech, their freedom or regulation, were fundamental. They were just as crucial for those who sought to put him in his place by reordering the relationships between speech, space and power. As I have shown these historical geographies of talk (and of talk about talk) were not simply a matter of the small-scale, face-to-face geographies of interaction and encounter. As well as beginning to examine how forms of talk shaped and were shaped by space and power in the courtroom, on the streets and on the plantation, I have tried to show how they also animated the forces of colonial and imperial power and critique through the networks and circuits of the British Atlantic world. It was through these ge-

ographies that forms of speech were established, differentiated and compared. Different forms of speech in different spaces, regulated and unregulated, gave life to the social relations of the early modern world as they worked into and out of forms of writing — petitions, laws, diaries and philosophical treatises. These forms of talk — the language of power — were, in Francis Williams's case, at the heart of the question of the stability of the equation of race, property and freedom on which the Jamaican plantocracy's social order was based. There is, of course, much more that needs to be said about creolization and the historical geography of languages of encounter and resistance.

It is true to say that historical geographers have not paid enough attention to patterns of talk. But that in itself is not enough. I know that most historical geographers will not be following me down this narrow path. So I have offered these arguments and examples as an exploration of questions of practice that go beyond a textual understanding of the world, one that is sometimes overt, but often implicit. What if we thought in terms of speech, of conversation, instead of text? So that our aim was not to read for meaning, or to establish the rules of a discourse, but to hear the ongoing fabrication of the world as a situated, relational, conversational accomplishment; something that is made and unmade as the ebb and flow of spoken words. That would be to think about identities, positions and relationships — of race, civility, or freedom — as needing continual articulation and reiteration, as they were for Francis Williams and his interlocuters. His blackness and his liberties were not fixed. They had to be spoken for, again and again. It would also reveal power's expression as dependent upon it being heard by those to whom it was addressed, and open possibilities for a response. It would see texts as part of a conversation, as momentarily frozen utterances soon to be reanimated by the talk which must accompany them. If we want to be adequate to a world whose making is messy, ongoing and incomplete then the twistings, branchings, overlappings, mishearings and breakings off of conversation may be better for thinking with than ideas of the text and its readers, even if it is through texts in archives that we are approaching those worlds of the past.

Finally, then, in a world of practice historical geography needs ways of going on that are adequate to both the archive and the worlds of the past; that work between them without conflating them. With that in mind I have explored talk because it is so obviously a communicative practice. Considering it brings to the foreground the relationships between people, the intersubjectivity through which the world is made in whatever way those relationships are mediated. We can examine archives in these terms — asking ourselves, "what forms of communication are they?" — both when they were created, and in communicating between past and present. Focusing on communication can also shape what we listen for in the past and how we listen to it. To the extent that any practice is intersubjective then it is communicative, whether that involves talk, text or not. For the societies in the Caribbean in which Francis Williams lived, dance, music, clothing, labor, violence, punishment and the rituals surrounding death

were all practices through which people communicated as part of the ongoing and asymmetrical struggles over enslavement and freedom.⁴⁷

I want to suggest, therefore, that understanding a world of practice as simultaneously a world of communication (rather, perhaps, than representation) can provide a way forward for historical geographers to explore practices without simply turning our backs on what we have learned about the world through texts.

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Notes

1. Vincent Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" *Early American Literature* 38:2 (2003): 213-37, 222.
2. Greg Dening, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
3. Hayden Lorimer, "Cultural Geography: The Busyness of Being 'More-Than-Representational'," *Progress in Human Geography* 29:1 (2005): 83-94.
4. See, for example, Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space/Politics/Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008).
5. For example, see Pamela H. Smith and Benjamin Schmidt, eds., *Making Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Practices, Objects and Texts, 1400-1800* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007); Nicholas Mirzeoff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998); Peter Jackson, "Rematerializing Social and Cultural Geography," *Social and Cultural Geography* 1:1 (2000): 9-14 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
6. David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003); Charles W. J. Withers, "Eighteenth-Century Geography: Texts, Practices, Sites," *Progress in Human Geography* 30:6 (2006): 711-29; Elizabeth Gagen, Hayden Lorimer and Alex Vesudevan, *Practising the Archive: Reflections on Method and Practice in Historical Geography* (Historical Geography Research Series 40) and Miles Ogborn, "Archives," in S. Pile and N. Thrift, eds., *Patterned Ground* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 240-42.
7. See, for example, the discussions of H. C. Darby and Carl Sauer in Alan R. H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
8. See, for example, Trevor J. Barnes and James S. Duncan, eds., *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text & Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (London: Routledge, 1992).
9. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*; Catherine Nash, "Performativity in Practice: Some Recent Work in Cultural Geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 24:4 (2000): 653-64; Lorimer, "Cultural Geography"; *idem*, "Cultural Geography: Worldly Shapes, Differently Arranged," *Progress in Human Geography* 31:1

- (2007): 89-100 and "Cultural Geography: Non-Representational Conditions and Concerns," *Progress in Human Geography* 32:4 (2008): 551-59.
10. Tim Cresswell, "'You Can't Shake That Shimmie Here': Producing Mobility on the Dance Floor," *Cultural Geographies* 13:1 (2006): 55-77, 73.
 11. The image that I used in the lecture is from that classic text on the pre-cognitive molding of bodies, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). See also, Jonathan Goldberg, *Writing Matter: From the Hands of the English Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
 12. Miles Ogborn, "Geographia's Pen: Writing, Geography and the Arts of Commerce, 1660-1760," *Journal of Historical Geography* 30:2 (2004): 294-315.
 13. For a full discussion see Miles Ogborn *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).
 14. Given the variety of textual practices considered, it might be better to use Bruno Latour's term "inscriptions." See Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How To Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).
 15. James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000); David N. Livingstone, "Science, Text and Space: Thoughts on the Geography of Reading," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30:4 (2005): 391-401; Innes M. Keighren, "Bringing Geography to the Book: Charting the Reception of Influences of Geographic Environment," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31:4 (2006): 525-40; Harold Love, "Oral and Scribal Texts in Early Modern England," in John Barnard and Donald F. McKenzie, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Book. Volume 4: 1557-1695* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 97-121 and Miles Ogborn and Charles W. J. Withers, eds., *Geographies of the Book* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).
 16. Miles Ogborn, "Writing Travels: Power, Knowledge and Ritual on the English East India Company's Early Voyages," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 27:2 (2002): 155-71.
 17. Also published as Miles Ogborn, "Streynsham Master's Office: Accounting for Collectivity, Order and Authority in Seventeenth-Century India," *Cultural Geographies* 13:1 (2006): 127-55.
 18. See Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, 82-83.
 19. *Ibid.*, 99.
 20. Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998) and Secord, *Victorian Sensation*.
 21. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii.
 22. *Ibid.* The third volume of the series of books on everyday life co-ordinated by de Certeau, following one on cooking, was to be on talk. It was never completed.
 23. Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and its Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). For an exchange between the geographers Eric Laurier and Marcus Doel on talk and text, see "Geographies of Talk: An Exchange," *Area* 31:1 (1999): 35-48.
 24. Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf, eds., *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain, 1500-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
 25. David N. Livingstone, "Text, Talk and Testimony: Geographical Reflections on

- Scientific Habits. An Afterword," *British Society for the History of Science* 38:1 (2005): 93-100.
26. For example, Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) and Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). I'd like to thank Tamar Rothenberg for pointing out the absence of this work in the lecture I gave.
 27. Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, "'A Parcel of Muddling Muckworms': Revisiting Habermas and the English Coffee House," *Social and Cultural Geography* 8:2 (2007): 259-81, 273-74 and Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History* (London: Phoenix, 2004).
 28. Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, "Ethnoarchaeology and Undefined Investigations," *Environment and Planning A* 36:3 (2004): 421-36.
 29. Michael J. Braddick, "Civility and Authority," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 93-113, 95 and 100.
 30. Philotheos Physilogus [Thomas Tryon], *Friendly Advice to the Gentleman-Planters of the East and West Indies* (London, 1684), 120.
 31. Edward Long quoted in Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" 216.
 32. Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" 222.
 33. *Ibid.*, 223.
 34. *Ibid.*, 223.
 35. *The Acts of Assembly and Laws of Jamaica, Abridg'd under Proper Heads*, in *An Abridgement of the Laws in Force and Use in Her Majesty's Plantations* (London, 1704), 147 and *Acts of Assembly, Passed in the Island of Jamaica, From the Year 1681, to the Year 1754 Inclusive* (Saint Jago de la Vega, Jamaica: 1769), 61.
 36. Thomas J. Davis, "Conspiracy and Credibility: Look Who's Talking, About What—Law Talk and Loose Talk," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:1 (2002): 167-74, 169. This is part of an extended discussion between a number of authors about such deadly talk, "Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy: Part I," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58:4 (2001): 913-76 and "Part 2," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59:1 (2002): 135-202.
 37. Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58:4 (2001): 915-76, 960-971.
 38. Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 1999), 54-55.
 39. While Thistlewood did nothing directly on the basis of what he had overheard, he did have two women, Abigail and Bella, given 100 lashes each for not assisting him when confronted by "Congo Sam." Sam, himself, was acquitted after a key slave witness, London, refused to give evidence.
 40. Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" 223.
 41. Quoted in Jill Lepore, *New York Burning; Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 115.
 42. Quoted in Lepore, *New York Burning*, 204.
 43. Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" 221.
 44. Edward Long quoted in Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" 218.
 45. Carretta, "Who Was Francis Williams?" 214.
 46. Lepore, *New York Burning*, 125.
 47. For two recent examples, see Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Steve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress: Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica, 1760-1890* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2004).