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Readers should not take the title of Stephen Tuck’s new book too literally. *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union* is not a microhistory of the evening of December 3, 1964, when Malcolm X graced the British institution to debate the notion, “Extremism in defence of liberty is no vice, and moderation in the pursuit of vice is no virtue.” Nor is it a Rashomon-like tale that compares different recollections of the debate that X and the Scottish nationalist Hugh MacDiarmid lost to the liberal Conservative MP Humphry Berkeley and the Labour peer Lord Stoneham by 228 votes to 137. It is more similar in tone and content to articles in the (neo)liberal media that have marked the anniversary of X’s speech and assassination by asking pundits and historians to provide pithy accounts of race relations in Britain and the United States during the past fifty years. As a result, the book serves as an instructive tale for anyone who wishes to translate historical articles to a broader public; communicate radical campaigns for human rights in the 1960s to contemporary audiences consumed by social media activism and the clichés of journalists and public relations agencies; and speak to audiences in the US and UK that are not only divided by a common language but different understandings of race and racialization.

Although it draws on some of the Malcolm X Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, chapter one is primarily concerned with synthesising secondary material about Malcolm X’s life of travel and discovery between 1925 and 1964. It may not be “breathless and sensational”. (21) However, its descriptive asides about Marcus Garvey (a “charismatic Jamaican” (13)), and X’s sensitivity to the “marketing game” and “propaganda” (39, 42) bear as much resemblance to the series of prints and paintings of X developed by Glen Ligon in 2000 (which drew on Afrocentric coloring books of the 1970s and the erratic styles and unworried markings of school children), as Manning Marable’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Penguin, 2011).

After providing a CliffsNotes companion to X’s biography in chapter one, chapter two paints a picture of Oxford, Britain and race that moves between 1870 and 1964. This means a certain imbalance to the book, since it does not provide an equivalent emphasis on nineteenth century antecedents to X’s visit to Oxford, such as the UK tours of Frederick Douglass and Ida Wells-Barnett, which were critical components of crusades against slavery, lynching and anti-black racism. In addition, the chapter discusses anti-black riots in British ports in the early twentieth century with phrases such as “Tensions rose. Violence followed.” (57) It does not analyse the rhetoric about the protection of white jobs and women in relation to transdisciplinary work about the fears of miscegenation. Nor does it connect such phobias about mixture and mixing to X’s diatribes against so-called “mongrel-complexioned children” created by American slavery. Historians of labour who scratch the surface of this historical narrative will no doubt uncover other moments in which the language and style of Tuck’s tale marks a significant departure from...
historical accounts that do not eschew social and cultural theory. Two examples, however, deserve particular attention. In the first, Tuck describes white British students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds as “lower class” rather than connect them to a long history of working-class radicalism. (63) In the second, Tuck repeatedly notes that Malcolm “may well have” read a particular newspaper article that the historian has found illustrative. (73, 83) Such passages suggest that the historian may not have found archival material relating to X’s interpretation of written documents. They may also be used to note the book’s (over)reliance on journalistic articles, and concomitant lack of engagement with music, art and film that influenced the politics and poetics of the African American icon.

Chapter three marks a dramatic shift in focus as it provides detailed discussion of organizations and groups that campaigned against racial discrimination in Oxford between 1956 and 1964. It also shares similar rhetorical strategies to liberals in the 1950s and 60s who wished to distance themselves from so-called dangerous militants. For while Tuck was willing to describe British tabloids such as the Daily Mirror as “left-leaning” in chapter two, (75) chapter three considers newspapers such as the Daily Mail and Daily Express to be normative and national rather than right-leaning or ideological. (114, 121, 140)

Chapter four is devoted to the night X spoke at the Oxford Union, while chapter five considers X, Oxford and a racial Atlantic between 1956 and 1968. The chapters not only adapt material previously published in Tuck’s 2013 article on transatlantic history in the American Historical Review (“Malcolm X’s Visit to Oxford University: U.S. Civil Rights, Black Britain, and the Special Relationship on Race”), but offer further evidence for an elegiac description of British-American opposition to racial discrimination – a liberal hour that achieved a shifting of the racial architecture with reform measures in relation to health, education, housing, immigration, transportation and anti-poverty legislation between 1963 and 1966 in the United States, and between 1966 and 1968 in the United Kingdom.

This is not to say that Tuck ignores X’s impact on radical humanists who espoused Black Power. However, his epilogue only devotes two pages to British activists and artists who were inspired by X in order to assert the importance of radical collective identities in the 1970s, and quickly scrolls forward to Oxford students in a digital age who adapt the creeds, deeds and iconography of global African Americans who insist, “I, Too, Am Harvard”. Such emphases are understandable since Tuck is a Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, Director of the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, and Visiting Fellow at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Studies at Harvard University, who is able to draw on a network of powerful entrepreneurial intellectuals (such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University, who wrote the book’s foreword). Yet if the final pages of The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union reframe X as an entrepreneurial subject who was attracted by the power and prestige of an elite university, (150, 153) it also bears repetition that Tuck is mindful of X’s repeated dismissal of those “so-called intellectuals” and has constructed a
book that displays little interest in what he terms the “so-called Black Atlantic.” (7) In short, his narrative is not only revealing about what it says about the marketing of humanities research as new, accessible and transatlantic. It is also notable for what it does not say about earlier work in the field of Black Atlantic Studies that creatively adapted the insights of critical theory about travel, media and culture in order to analyse the transnational, transdisciplinary and transracial nature of anti-racist protest.

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