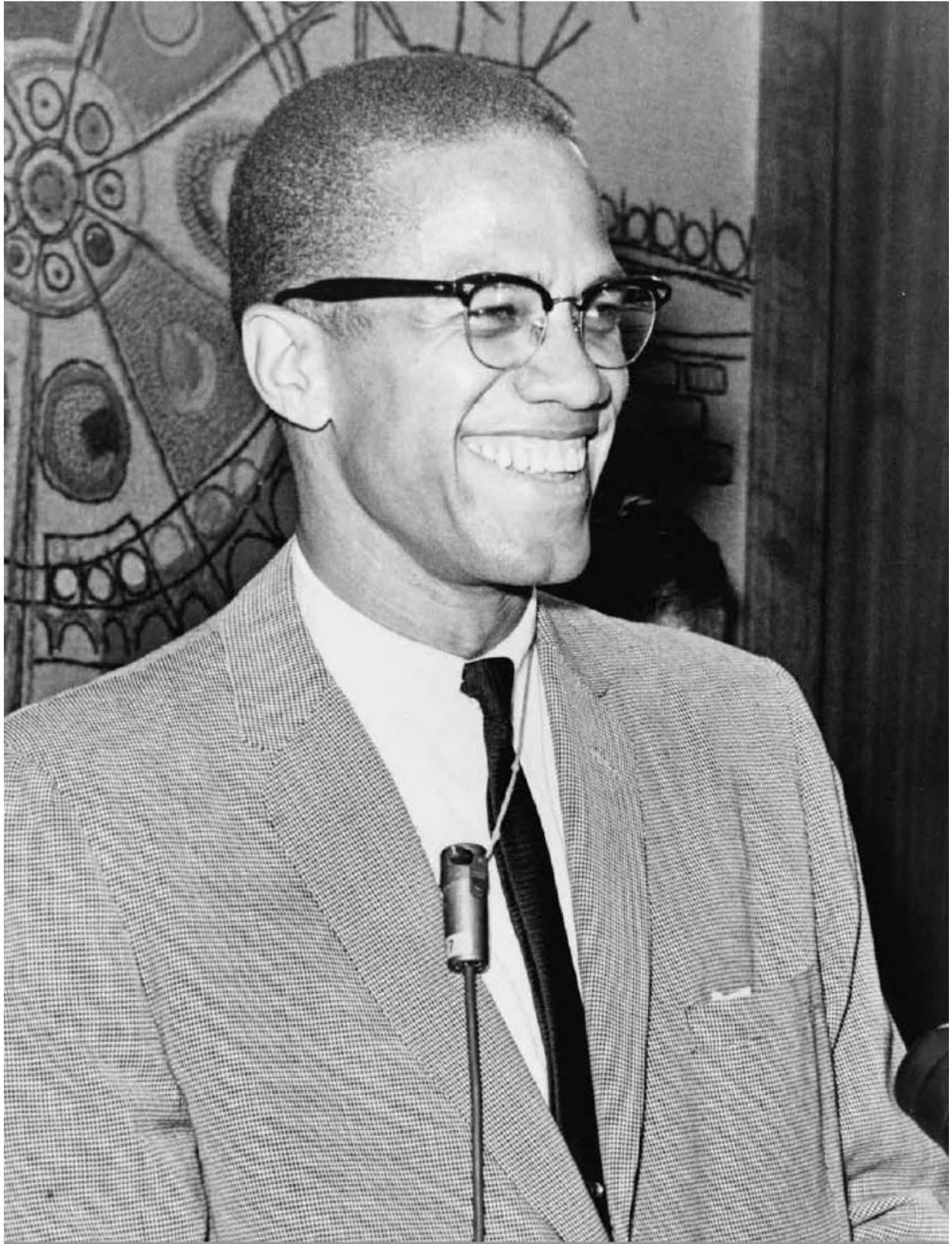


The DEAD ARE
ARISING

The Life of MALCOLM X

LES PAYNE
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

TAMARA
PAYNE



Malcolm X smiling, ca. 1964. (Photograph by Ed Ford for *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

THE DEAD ARE ARISING

THE LIFE OF
MALCOLM X

Les Payne
and Tamara Payne



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*To Violet, whose love and support are the foundation
upon which this work was completed.*

To Tamara, whose tireless effort was integral in the completion of this work.

*To the family—both nuclear and extended—whom I wanted to make proud
with all of my work and effort in the world over the years.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Les Payne". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

And in loving memory of the life and legacy of Les Payne.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Introduction by Tamara Payne

PART I: 1925–1939

CHAPTER 1: Born Against the Current

CHAPTER 2: Storms of Racism

CHAPTER 3: The Anchor Is Lost

CHAPTER 4: Pulling the Family Apart

PART II: 1939–1946

CHAPTER 5: East Lansing Red

CHAPTER 6: Lighting Out for His Territory

CHAPTER 7: Chased Out of Seventh Heaven

CHAPTER 8: Luck Runs Out

CHAPTER 9: Learning to Fight with Words

PART III: 1946–1963

CHAPTER 10: Birth of the Nation of Islam

CHAPTER 11: Building Temples in the East

CHAPTER 12: Hartford: “The Dead There Are Rising”

CHAPTER 13: “Meet with Them Devils”

CHAPTER 14: Malcolm, the Media, and Martin Luther King

PART IV: 1963–1965

CHAPTER 15: The Split

CHAPTER 16: The International Stage

CHAPTER 17: The Week Before: A Dry Run

CHAPTER 18: The Hit

CHAPTER 19: Back at the Mosque

EPILOGUE

Illustrations Insert

Appendix: Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X): Some Questions Answered

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Index

INTRODUCTION

by Tamara Payne

WHEN MY FATHER, LES PAYNE, BEGAN HIS RESEARCH IN 1990 for *The Dead Are Arising*, Malcolm X was very much alive in the consciousness of the black community. Walking down Harlem's 125th Street, you would hear Malcolm's emphatic voice resounding from the speakers of sidewalk vendors selling his speeches and you would see his countenance emblazoned on T-shirts.

This generation of hip-hop embraced Malcolm X because he spoke directly to them. His messages provided clear, direct analyses of what was happening around them in their communities. Point by point, he outlined how state-sanctioned racism is not new, but a continuation of the coordinated destruction of black people in America. Malcolm changed the way they viewed themselves and gave voice to their struggles; numerous rappers and activists quoted Malcolm in their lyrics and interviews on radio and television.

Malcolm also changed the way Les Payne viewed himself. As a college student in 1963, he had heard Malcolm speak in Hartford, Connecticut. On that June night, my father came face-to-face with his own self-loathing. Malcolm X addressed the race issue head-on:

"Now I know you don't want to be called 'black,'" he said. . . . "You want to be called 'Negro.' But what does 'Negro' mean except 'black' in Spanish? So what you are saying is: 'It's OK to call me 'black' in Spanish, but don't call me black in English.'"¹

Later, in “The Night I Stopped Being a Negro,” an essay that was first published in a collection titled *When Race Becomes Real*, Payne wrote that he had entered “Bushnell Hall as a Negro with a capital ‘N’ and wandered out into the parking lot—as a black man.”²

Born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Payne had moved to Hartford with his mother and two brothers at age twelve:

I’d never met a white person, South or North, who did not feel comfortably superior to every Negro, no matter the rank or station. Conversely, no Negro I’d met or heard of had ever felt truly equal to whites. For all their polemical posturing, not even Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., or the great Richard Wright, with all his crossed-up feelings, had liberated themselves from the poisoned weed of black self-loathing with its deeply entangled roots in the psyche.³

The lightning strike of Malcolm’s sword released the “conditioned sense of Negro inferiority” that was housed in the college junior’s psyche. Hearing Malcolm’s piercing analysis forced him to think about the Jim Crow South he was born into: remembering how he was told that Negroes were “just as good” as whites, but seeing Negroes rise only to janitors, cooks, cotton pickers—not to landlords or owners of lumberyards. By the end of the lecture, Payne was irrevocably changed. “Whites were no longer superior. Blacks . . . were no longer inferior,”⁴ he wrote.

Always inspired by Malcolm X, Payne would reread his dog-eared copy of the *Autobiography* every five years. So he was naturally curious when his high school buddy Walter O. Evans, who had become a successful surgeon in Detroit, introduced him to Philbert Little, one of Malcolm X’s brothers. Payne discussed this meeting with Gil Noble, a friend and fellow journalist who at the time hosted the weekly Sunday show *Like It Is* on WABC-TV in New York. In addition to his work as a renowned broadcaster, Noble was an admirer of Malcolm X. Every year, he dedicated episodes of *Like It Is* to the life and assassination of Malcolm X. Noble suggested that Payne also meet Wilfred Little, Malcolm’s oldest brother and best friend.

At the time, Payne was an editor at *Newsday*, a daily newspaper on Long Island. He had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 as part of a reporting team investigating the international flow of heroin from the poppy fields of Turkey, through the French connection, and into the veins of New York drug addicts. He was renowned for his investigative persistence and his skill in

obtaining the truth from reluctant sources. As he often told his three children—Jamal, Haile, and myself—he could not abide the phrase “We may never know.”

After sitting down in Detroit with the two siblings, he was shocked to realize how much he did not know about the man whom he had admired and studied. For such a persistent seeker of the true story, the fact that so much remained unknown about Malcolm proved irresistible. It set my father on a journey that would last twenty-eight years, until his untimely death in 2018.

Tracing Malcolm X’s steps—from the Nebraska cauldron he was born into and the family life that shaped him to the gunshots that would silence him forever—Payne traveled around the world, conducting hundreds of interviews with Malcolm’s family members, childhood friends, classmates, buddies on the streets and in prison, as well as cops, bodyguards, FBI agents, drivers, informers, photographers, journalists, U.N. representatives, African revolutionaries and presidents, sworn enemies, fake followers, and the two men falsely imprisoned for shooting him dead.

As he tracked down how Malcolm became the person he was, he learned an extraordinary amount of biographical detail that was new. Even though much has been written about Malcolm in the years since Payne’s investigation began, much that he found has never been told before or has been sketched only roughly, without the deeply reported detail and color that bring a life to life again.

Plying his Pulitzer-level skills as an investigative reporter, Payne was mindful that even though Malcolm X told his story well, his and other published accounts are neither fully rendered nor entirely accurate. Accordingly, the reader will discover that key trails explored in *The Dead Are Arising* are less well-trodden, and some—details of Malcolm’s sit-down with the Ku Klux Klan, for example—were long considered unattainable. Through extensive interviewing and reporting, the reader is now brought in on this 1961 meeting around the kitchen table of Minister Jeremiah X* in Atlanta.

The Dead Are Arising sheds light on Earl Little’s tragic death in 1931, and Malcolm’s haunting, lifelong doubts about the official version are, after extensive investigation, squared with the facts. New details about the breakup of the family reveal the roles played by state institutions, an insurance company, and young Malcolm himself as his mother tried to care for her

eight children during the harshest years of the Depression, in the end, crumbling in on herself. “Instead of being the happy person when our father was alive,” said one son, “she was quiet. My mother stopped singing.”

The Dead Are Arising also provides a new portrait of the young man known as East Lansing Red (long before he was dubbed Detroit Red), as Malcolm, starting at age twelve, hustled reefers from a neighbor’s garden plot and then became a sneak thief by pilfering scarce cash even from his mother: “Malcolm never would deny that he stole,” recalled one of his brothers, who had caught him red-handed. “He was not a liar.” He was, however, reckless. And long before the Muslim days, Malcolm’s craving for attention was chilling, as when he challenged a notorious Lansing cop holding a gun to his adolescent head: “Go ahead! Pull the trigger, Whitey.”

This biography will show readers in often astonishing detail how Malcolm, as the Nation of Islam’s great proselytizer, “fished” for converts and built a disciplined chapter, inciting a group of New England prospects to service in a cramped, housing-project apartment, while implicitly shaming the shorts-clad daughter of the house with his call to modesty. Away from media noise, the presence of ever wary cops, the muscling of rivals—and even the coaxing of the Nation of Islam’s leader, Elijah Muhammad—we catch an early glimpse of how Malcolm would run things when left alone.

Finally, the book provides readers with a moment-by-moment account of the February 1965 assassination, which is reconstructed with unparalleled vividness. Les Payne’s sources here include the undercover New York City policeman whose testimony might have cleared two men who were unjustly sentenced for the murder, and a member of the Nation’s Newark “goon squad” who provides an insider’s account of the planning and immediate aftermath of the murder.

This work, moreover, contextualizes Malcolm’s life against the racial conflicts, violence, and aspirations of twentieth-century America—all of this history richly rendered. Along the way, *The Dead Are Arising* provides portraits of the Marcus Garvey movement that shaped young Malcolm’s early life, the Nation of Islam organization that gave him direction when he came out of prison, and the Ku Klux Klan that he saw at one time as the most honest face of white America.

Although Les Payne’s investigative research revealed much that was new about Malcolm’s life, his assessment of Malcolm’s core message did not

change. In a 1989 column, he wrote:

More than any other leader of the 1960's, Malcolm moved blacks to consider who they were and whence they came, and to plan for what they could become. He saw his people as a brutalized class, who after centuries of slavery and oppression had been made to think of themselves—and to act—as inferiors, as “niggers.”

To correct this condition, the black man could either work on the outer manifestations of discrimination—as did Martin Luther King—or change himself from within, through transformation. Malcolm took the latter course, both in teaching and in his personal life on this planet. He underwent a dramatic conversion, from street criminal to devoted moralist and revolutionary.

Along the way, Malcolm sought to upset the white man's grossly inflated sense of himself, his complacent arrogance and smugness. In rejecting the dominant society that had rejected him, he instructed his followers to reject the white man's ideas, values and above all, the way he looked down upon blacks as inferiors.

King offered racists the other cheek, Malcolm the back of his hand. Freedom was so important to him that Malcolm counseled risking all, except one's sense of self-respect, in the fight. Nonviolence, he taught, unduly narrowed an oppressed people's options. “We have to change our minds about each other,” Malcolm said often to his followers.⁵

Even as he tracked Malcolm X, Payne was busy at *Newsday*. He wrote a weekly syndicated column, and as an assistant managing editor, he was in charge of the daily newspaper's state, national, international, and science coverage. During the years he worked on this book, he supervised reporting that won four Pulitzer Prizes: for coverage of genocide in Bosnia, U.S. friendly fire deaths in Iraq, Ebola in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), and the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda. Outside of *Newsday*, he participated in a weekly discussion panel on *Sunday Edition*, a popular CBS Sunday morning news show.

In 1975, he helped to found the National Association of Black Journalists, which was organized to “improve the number of black journalists over all in America. [To] improve the treatment of black journalists already in the profession. [To] improve the coverage of the black community and the third world community,” explained Payne. “We had to organize and challenge the industry of journalism. Confront and demand these things because black people read newspapers. Black people watch television. Plus, a lot of the information the media puts out about black people is distorted.” And then in 1992 he helped to found the Trotter Group of black columnists, named after William Monroe Trotter, a black journalist and editor of the *Boston*

Guardian. Trotter was thrown out of the White House in 1914 for arguing with President Wilson against the policy of segregating federal offices. In addition to organizing black columnists, the Trotter Group met with both President Clinton and President Obama during their terms in office.

Some fifty years after William Trotter's White House incident, Payne started his career in journalism as a federal employee of a sort. After graduating from the University of Connecticut, he spent six years in the U.S. Army as a Ranger, serving as an information officer in Vietnam for General William Westmoreland, where Payne ran the army newspaper. In 1969, attired in his captain's uniform, he applied for a job at *Newsday*, where he stayed until his retirement in 2006, but at every stage of his life he confronted racism. "When I was a rookie reporter," he later recalled, "my young daughter asked why there were no blacks among *Newsday's* 102 summer interns, in 1973, I shot off a note to management demanding an explanation. The reason I gave Tami, I wrote in my note to *Newsday*, was that her daddy worked for a 'racist newspaper.'"

As the young daughter cited here, I have worked on this book as a researcher since its earliest days. In a meeting with Faith Childs, his literary agent, Payne shared his experience of meeting the two Little brothers. He was intrigued by what he had learned from them. It was at this meeting he decided to write *The Dead Are Arising*. The title refers to Malcolm's description of conversion into the Nation of Islam. Before they joined the Nation of Islam, members were "dead" because they did not know their true selves. Elijah Muhammad's teachings—particularly those aimed at strengthening black communities through improving their diet and removing distractions of prostitution, gambling, drugs, and alcohol—enabled members to free themselves from the false sense of inferiority imposed by the larger society. Malcolm continued his work of eradicating this inferiority complex after he left the Nation of Islam, until his death. This work remains unfinished.

Embarking on this journey, Payne continued working at *Newsday*. *The Dead Are Arising* became one more project he had to manage. He hired Paul Lee, a professional researcher who has dedicated much of his career to archiving accurate records about Malcolm's life and work. Payne also brought on Elizabeth Bass, a longtime colleague and trusted friend, as an editor. Bass had worked for him as the science and health editor at *Newsday*. She also had served as *Newsday's* deputy national editor and deputy foreign