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Reviews

Bringing Malcolm to Life

- Reviews section -

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The Dead Are Arising provides a much fuller picture of the life and death of Malcolm X. It draws on interviews with his friends and family, including brothers who joined the Nation of Islam (NOI) before he did, to assess his contribution in the context of the times.

The book title refers to the NOI's belief that all Blacks are "dead" until their conversion to the Nation of Islam. "Negroes" did not know their true selves yet. They had to free themselves from the false sense of inferiority imposed by white society.

(Because the surname of most Blacks usually is that of white slave owners, it does not reflect African heritage. The letter "X" means unknown.)

Malcolm quit the NOI in March, 1964. He then presented a more radical vision of achieving Black self-determination and liberation from racism and national oppression.

In an April 3, 1964 speech in Cleveland, Ohio, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm told his followers to join organizations, such as the NAACP, to spread Black Nationalism, and to bring awareness to the problems affecting African Americans.

He encouraged African Americans to fight the oppression of the "white man" by means of the "Ballot or the Bullet:"

"It's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem — a problem that will make you catch hell whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist. Whether you're educated or illiterate, whether you live on the boulevard or in the alley, you're going to catch hell just like I am."

The book is based on decades of painstaking research by Les Payne, an acclaimed journalist who died before it was completed in 2018. His daughter Tamara, his primary researcher, transcriber and collaborator, completed the book.

Decades of Research

As she explains in the Introduction, her father first heard Malcolm X speak at the University of Connecticut in Hartford, Connecticut in 1963. Les Payne said he went into the speech as a "Negro" and came out for the first time as a "Black man."

Malcolm told the young people:

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

"Negroes" grew up in a racist society run by white supremacists where self-loathing and unconscious inferiority were taught by whites and accepted even by many educated Blacks. Belief in Black pride and equality was the fight that

Malcolm X and Black nationalists stood for.

Today Black self-respect is taken for granted. That was not the case for most of U.S. history until the end of Jim Crow segregation.

Les Payne was a young, proud and educated African American when Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. He became a Pulitzer Prize winner and an editor of the Long Island, New York, newspaper Newsday.

He read and re-read the Autobiography of Malcolm X, co-authored with Alex Haley, after Malcolm's death. As Payne began his research in 1990, he found a lot had been left out and needed clarification. He interviewed family members and many others.

The book's strength is in telling Malcolm's life story and the history of Black America from the legal segregation era until the late 1960s.

What we see now in race relations has connection to the past. Understanding Malcolm's life and ideas is important to today's generations. The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) can only be fully appreciated by knowing this history.

In his final year of life Malcolm was more than a Black nationalist. He had become a firm believer in international solidarity and revolutionary activism. His newly found conversion to orthodox Sunni Islam, the basis of his newly created Muslim Mosque Inc. (MMI) and the secular OAAU showed that. Neither survived for long after his death.

The ideology of white supremacy was at the foundation of "American Democracy." Even whites who aren't racist have looked the other way after Blacks were lynched or murdered by cops. White liberals' unconscious bias slowed progress and urged protesters to self-limit their demands for equality.

That's the point Martin Luther King Jr made in his famous "Letter from Birmingham jail" in August 1963:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was 'well timed' according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'wait.' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never.'"

Legacy of Lynching

Payne begins by describing the 1919 lynching of William Brown, a Black man, by a "race riot" in Omaha, Nebraska. The vicious excitement of the white mob that did it, and faced no consequences, is what the Little family moved to in 1921.

The opening chapters also explore the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the climate of white terrorism that prevailed after the defeat of Radical Reconstruction after the Civil War.

The issue of lynching and white celebrations has been a vital trademark of American history. Whites get off free while the Black population suffers permanent terror.

A new film, “United States vs. Billie Holiday,” shows how the greatest African-American jazz singer was targeted by the FBI and police for standing up and singing the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit.”

Harassed and persecuted, subsequently she was incarcerated for drug possession. She ultimately in 1959, age 44, in a New York hospital room under police guard.

Malcolm Little was born in 1925, six after Brown’s lynching, at the University Hospital in Omaha. Malcolm’s parents Louise and Earl Little joined the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus Garvey based in Harlem, one of the most important Black organizations of the 20th century.

Garvey was the Jamaican-born immigrant who preached Black self-reliance, Black nationalism, and pride in being African in the 1920s. He was targeted by the predecessor to the FBI and finally arrested and deported in 1927. The organization had branches in big urban communities and many countries.

As a child, Malcolm would listen to his father preaching the Garveyite tenets of Black pride, independence and repatriation to Africa. Payne make clear that his parents’ influence was at the core of Malcolm’s identity. As “Black Power” activist Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) once explained, Malcolm never really changed. He said his “basic philosophy was Garveyism” from childhood to the grave.

Earl Little was born in Jim Crow Georgia and knew the violence of that system well. He was also a Baptist minister.

Louise was born in the Caribbean Island of Grenada. She migrated to Canada and then to the United States. Like all immigrants, she was determined that she and her large family (eight children) succeeded. Louise was light-skin and could pass as “white.” It got her some work from which darker-skin Blacks would be excluded.

Father’s death in 1931

Malcolm’s determined proud father moved his family in white areas and bought six acres of land in a suburb of Lansing, Michigan. As in Omaha, the family faced threats from white supremacist groups. Neither Earl nor Louise ever bowed down.

One surprise of the book relates to the death of Earl Little. Malcolm always insisted his father was murdered by white racists (his children still say so). It turns out, according to Payne, that he was accidentally run over by a tram car, although Malcolm was never convinced because of the numerous threats made against his own family and his life.

His older brother Wilfried, whom Payne interviewed, was 11 years old at the time. Malcolm was only six. His mother accepted the accident explanation after an investigation

Payne also reveals more about Malcolm’s infamous meeting, and the Nation of Islam’s collaboration, with both the Ku Klux Klan and the U.S Nazi party.

Malcolm took the meeting with the KKK head as the NOI’s national spokesman as instructed by “The Messenger,” Elijah Muhammad. The white racists proposed collaboration with NOI to assassinate Dr. King, which Malcolm rejected.

Incarceration and Conversion

Malcolm was arrested, prosecuted and jailed in Massachusetts at age 20. Payne explains that incarceration was the pivot of Malcolm's life. He accepted the teachings of the NOI while behind bars for seven years, thanks to evangelizing correspondence from his brothers Philbert and Reginald.

Malcolm dedicated himself to his new religion's Black nationalist message and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. He quickly became the group's most effective and recognizable spokesman, with fierce criticism of white America and a gospel of Black self-respect.

Malcolm's split from the cult-like NOI, in Payne's view, was inevitable. In the end it was Malcolm's suspension from the NOI for calling the assassination of John F Kennedy "chickens coming home to roost," and the sex scandal surrounding the leader Elijah Muhammad — who fathered multiple children with his secretaries — that led to his exit.

But Payne make clear that Malcolm was always going to leave the NOI. The question was just when and how explosive his departure would be.

The split ultimately led to his death. The final two chapters are dedicated to an in-depth account of Malcolm's assassination at the hands of the Nation of Islam with the help of both the FBI and the NYPD, which had informants with advance intelligence of the assassination and did not intervene. (See my accompanying article on new revelations and the family's call for a new probe.)

Malcolm's political celebrity and unapologetic approach ultimately turned the leadership of the NOI against him, and according to Payne, Muhammad gave the assassination order that led to Malcolm's killing.

Payne discusses the role of the FBI's COINTELPRO program that aimed to "neutralize" and prevent the rise of a "Black Messiah." But he makes clear that Muhammad told his closest associates in the Fruit of Islam, the Nation's security arm, to take Malcolm out.

Farrakhan's Role

Payne notes the role of Louis Farrakhan, then Minister of the Boston Temple and the current longtime leader of the NOI. He had "been complicit" and acknowledged that he "created the atmosphere that ultimately led to Malcolm's assassination."

Farrakhan was at the Newark, New Jersey, Temple where the Fruit of Islam members returned from the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm was killed.

Payne gives a detailed account of Malcolm's assassination — who was present at the Ballroom, the lack of security and those who shot Malcolm. The details have never been totally clear, but Payne's narrative highlights key figures and examines the possible involvement of the FBI and New York City police.

Malcolm knew he was in danger and did little to protect himself. He had trained bodyguards (who were arrested days before the assassination), but knew the Nation by itself could not take him out without complicity from the government agencies and police.

By the end, Payne implies, it is as clear as it should always have been that you cannot be pro-Malcolm X and in favor of Farrakhan and the NOI. This fact of Farrakhan's role was admitted by Farrakhan himself, 22 years after Malcolm's assassination.

On breaking from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had dedicated himself to Sunni Islam and begun experimenting with new tools for a global, human-rights-based movement for Black liberation. Both Elijah and the government wanted him removed.

Legacy and the BLM

The book's Epilogue briefly discusses Malcolm's legacy, including its impact on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, asking for nothing less than justice and equality in the criminal system.

Like Malcolm, the BLM demands everything that Black people deserve, by any means necessary. It does not advocate violence but will not abide the sick amoral logic that condemns destruction of property as "too extreme" a response to the police shooting Black men and women.

And thanks to the leadership of Black women and Black LGBTQ people who initiated the BLM, the imagination of the current movement is even more expansive than its predecessors in the mid-20th century. This is the promise they keep, and the idea that pushed Payne to write until his own death took his pen: "We will exceed even Malcolm's wildest dreams."

One shortcoming of *The Dead Are Arising* is not discussing the speeches of Malcolm X, such as the "Ballot or the Bullet." It is relevant to discussions about tactics and strategies today.

The Paynes also do not discuss the significance of the formation of the OAAU and its radical democratic demands. This was more than a replication of older civil rights groups.

Malcolm had a vision to build an organization for all African Americans, religious and nonbelievers alike, similar to the Organization of African Unity (OAU). His death came too soon; his followers couldn't keep it alive.

Malcolm remains a shining example for revolutionary nationalists, socialists and antiracists of all racial and ethnic groups worldwide.

"With his appreciation of the power of words," Payne concludes, "Malcolm helped changed the names people called themselves, 'Black' from an insult among so-called American Negroes — fighting words in many cases — to a proud affirmation.

"Later, after his sojourn in Africa and his conversations with Black American expatriates there, he helped popularize the term 'Afro-American'...embracing Africa had been seen only as an embarrassment by the Nation of Islam as well as by many Christian Negroes.

"'You can't have the roots of a tree, and not the tree,' he would say as he directed African American eyes toward Africa. 'You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself.' These words speak directly to today's youth across the United States as they challenge the media's beauty standards to be more inclusive." (524)

Source: [Against the Current](#)

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