Malcolm X and Black History: Tamara Payne

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insights from the New York courts. I'm John Caher.

On February 10th, the Latino Judges Association and the Judicial Friends Association are jointly sponsoring a special Black History Month literary program focused on a new book, "The Dead Are Arising: The life of Malcolm X," by Les Payne and Tamara Payne. In that program, CBS News anchor, Maurice Dubois, will interview Tamara Payne.

Now, the backstory of this book is a great story in itself. The book was nearly 30 years in the making, the capstone of a distinguished career of Les Payne, a very well-known and very, very highly regarded Pulitzer Prize winning journalist.

For decades, Les research Malcolm X, and for many years, he relied on his daughter as his principal researcher. After Les passed away in 2018, Tamara completed the book, which won the 2020 National Book Award for non-fiction.

Technically, of course, this book is a biography, and it is a definitive one at that, but it's more than a, "Malcolm did this, and then Malcolm did that and then Malcolm did this and then Malcolm got assassinated" book. It really puts this still controversial and in many ways complicated and conflicted man in context — the context of his life, the context of his influence and the context of a times in which he lived. It is not "tribute" to Malcolm X, rather it's a sort of in-depth objective and thorough analysis we'd expect of a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist.

Tami, welcome to the program.

Tamara Payne: Thank you, John. How are you?

John Caher: I'm doing well, and I hope you are as well. I'm curious about the title of the book, and, in particular, the use of the word "arising" in the title. Was that your idea, your father's, both of yours? How and why was that word used?

Tamara Payne: That was Dad's idea. He titled the book. The word, "arising," as opposed to "rising," comes from Malcolm, when he writes a letter to Elijah Muhammad giving him updates as to how his recruitment efforts were going in one of the cities he was organizing in —Hartford, Connecticut — and in one of the letters, he writes that he was experiencing challenges.

He said that "the dead there are rising," but we liked the term, "arising" better because it really describes the whole idea of when you're coming into your consciousness. The action of arising from one state to another state of being, as opposed to just rising up from one point to another point of superiority and inferiority. But this is really just about arising from one state of consciousness to another state of consciousness, and in this case, the idea of embracing the true knowledge of self when you join the Nation of Islam.

John Caher: So it was kind of an active progression rather than a passive progression. Is that what you're saying?

Tamara Payne: Correct.

John Caher: Okay. Now, why did it take 28 years to write this book?

Tamara Payne: Well, as my father would say we never worked on this full time at any point. My father and I, we had jobs. I worked in commercial real estate. My father was senior manager at Newsday and he was managing reporters and news coverage. Whenever a news story would break, he would cover the news. He was a journalist to his core. He also appeared weekly on CBS, a Sunday edition. He also was teaching journalism classes. Also, during this time, he continued with the National Association of Black Journalists, which he was a co-founder of. He co-founded another group called the Trotter Group of Black Columnists. Both of these organizations had annual conferences. So we were quite busy. In between time, we were interviewing, researching and he was working on the manuscript in between all of that.

John Caher: It's real obvious there were a whole lot of interviews that were done for this book and a whole lot of research. A lot of it fell on your shoulders, I believe.

Tamara Payne: We did a lot of interviews, finding a lot of these sources, and during this time, my father was also passing on the craft of journalism to me. For me, that was why I actually joined and was committed to this project of working with my father and knowing who my father was and respecting his work. What better way to really learn about him then to work with him and work closely with him?

Then there's the whole idea of trust; he's my father and we both have our best interests at heart. We wanted this to do well. So there was a trust factor that you don't normally have with other people that you're working with.

You hear stories where people worked on projects and stories leak and stuff like that. Whereas with this, we really were working closely together. We had other people that were working with us, but the core of it and the long-term of this was me and my father really working together and putting this book together. He did the writing, obviously. It's his book. It was his idea really, to do this book. Originally, he didn't feel, before he had met Malcolm's brothers, he didn't feel that we needed a book on Malcolm X, a biography on Malcolm X, because he felt that we have the autobiography and the speeches. My father has been hugely influenced by Malcolm, and you can see that in the way he had organized such organizations like the National Association of Black Journalists, as well as the Trotter Group.

These are, mentally, how do you protect Black professionals in their fields from racism, but also how do you bring in younger people and teach them the craft that they may not get when they go to the newspapers or whatever media organization they may be working for? So you have these organizations where seasoned professionals are passing on the craft to younger people, and understanding the larger context of how racism works and may be blocking people from performing at their highest abilities.

John Caher: So obviously, your father was touched by Malcolm, but you say in the introduction that Malcolm changed the way your dad viewed himself and made them come “face to face with his own self-loathing.” What's that all about?

Tamara Payne: White supremacy. And it impacts all of us. Martin Luther King had this saying where he talks about racism and segregation, and I will even include white supremacy. It imbues the oppressor and the segregator with a false sense of *superiority*, and the segregated and the oppressed with a false sense of *inferiority*. It is important to understand that because when you look at the civil rights movement and if you look at the roles of Martin and Malcolm in particular, Martin Luther King and his civil rights organizations were dealing with overturning the superstructure of white supremacy, attacking the laws of white supremacy, desegregating schools, jobs, lunch counters, where you shop, buses, starting with the bus boycotts, in fact.

Malcolm, on the other hand, when he got into his work with the Nation of Islam, he actually was dealing more with the other side of this, which is dealing with the false sense of inferiority that the oppressed, and in this case, Black people, have inherited from the messaging and the practices of white supremacy. So he's attacking that and showing Black people they

need to understand their history and understand that we have made more contributions, even though people want to tell us that we're the lowest of the world.

John Caher: What was it about Malcolm's message as opposed to any others? There were lots of people with similar messages at the same time. What was it about him that so resonated with your father?

Tamara Payne: Mostly, his ability to analyze what was going on with racism. He analyzed it. He looked at our history. He showed how the media. He attacked how the media would take victims of racism and then call the victims the perpetrators. This is still happening today. It happened even with my father in his career. He was a syndicated columnist. He wrote a weekly column and he often talked about the racism that was going on in this country, and particularly in cases of police brutality. Whenever he was attacking police brutality and questioning the police and how we make the police perpetrators accountable for their actions, he was called the racist. He was called the troublemaker.

John Caher: Now, most accounts of Malcolm's life focused on his adult years, really, his activist years. You spent a lot of time looking at his childhood and his family history. Why is that so important? Why is it so relevant to understanding who and what Malcolm was?

Tamara Payne: Well, it shows who Malcolm was and the world of which he was born into. Malcolm was always been presented to us as fully formed and angry without a real analysis of the context, as if he shouldn't be this angry. This happens with a lot of people who speak out against injustice and speak truth to powers. When you're speaking truth to power, power is going to push back and call you the troublemaker. “We'll look at and take you out of context and isolate you” — and that's what history has done over the years. That's what happened with Malcolm. They took them out of context and just said, "Look at this man who calls white people the “blue eyed devil," for example.

But then I'm putting that in context. That was a concept that was in the Nation of Islam. It was Elijah Muhammad's preaching of that. Malcolm, who was a member of the Nation of Islam, was using that language. Believe it or not, Malcolm, when he first joined the Nation of Islam, when his brothers were talking him into joining the organization, he was in jail at the time. They were talking to them about how white people were evil and how white people used Black people over the years.

Malcolm had a hard time accepting that. So, they had to work on him to understand the larger picture of that. It was his family that did this. A lot of this also goes back to their upbringing. Malcolm's sense of who he was as a Black person in this world doesn't come from Elijah Muhammad, but it actually comes from the teachings from of parents who were followers of Marcus Garvey, and it organizes for his new UNIA organization. So they were teaching him about Black people and Black pride and the need to support Black businesses and build up our communities and support each other. That's where he gets that sense from. We don't really fully understand what that means until we really look at and listen to the stories that his brothers tell us about growing up in the household, such as this.

John Caher: I know Malcolm was always suspicious of whether his father's death was really a streetcar mishap, or a cover up racial murder.

Tamara Payne: Correct. If you read the book, you understand how we open the book. Malcolm isn't even on the scene yet. He's actually *in utero*. His mother's pregnant with him. The local Klans chapter visits the family and threatens them. The local white people are threatened by the organizing of Black people and being conscious and strong in their communities. So they feel that anybody that's doing this kind of work is a threat to the status quo of what white people are experiencing, and they see this as being troublemakers and they want the Littles, they target the Littles, and they want them out of town for that. So they come and they threatened her, breaking her windows on horseback and threatened her and her family, and she stands her ground. She stands up to them.

We get the story from Wilfred, who was six years old when that happened. So when you're thinking about that, this is the environment. This is the world Malcolm was born into. I bring that up because this never changes. This white supremacy is constantly there, and it still is. So we're still dealing with it. But in the context of Malcolm's father's passing, when the Littles are in Lansing, they purchased farmland that they live on, but this farmland has an exclusionary clause in the deed. It says that Black people can’t own that land, but yet they had purchased it, unknowingly of this restriction. The white neighbors pushed to have the Little family evicted. They don't want them to live on that land.

They push to have them evicted. They leave. They push to have them evicted and then after that, their house is burned down by the neighbors. So there's this environment. Then, soon after that, Malcolm's father's in a street car accident where he dies from his injuries. Then you still also have what's happening is there's the organization of the Black Legion

happening in Lansing. So people who are part of that, they want to keep Black people in check.

So they say, "Hey, we take responsibility for that action." Malcolm and Louise heard these rumors. So it never leaves them, but you also have to understand the context of the environment that they were living in. I'm not saying that the Black Legion didn't threaten and kill Black people, but they didn't kill Little. We found this out by talking with people who were alive at that point. We looked into the coroner report. We also looked at the newspaper articles that are written at the time. There was quite a few things that we had to look at and talk to people to get a sense of what really happened here, but if you're going to say the Black Legion and the Klan, do they kill Black people? Yes. But they did not kill Earl Little.

John Caher: So you're able to state that conclusively with Earl Little was not murdered by the Klan or murdered by...

Tamara Payne: No. We also are getting this because Wilfred Little was there. He was 12 at the time when the policemen came to the house to tell them that their father was injured and to get to the hospital, for Louise to get to the hospital before he dies. Earl remembers how the policemen spoke and he actually believed what the police was telling him, but we don't just only accept Wilfred's story. We talk with other people and we were able to even get to somebody who had witnessed it and said that it was an accident. It was not the Klan.

John Caher: Okay. Now, it seems pretty clear that Malcolm's anger led him to the Nation of Islam, but what led to his falling out with the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad?

Tamara Payne: Anger, again, we get into this thing of anger. Like I said, I think that we have to look the whole trajectory of what's going on with Malcolm.

Malcolm was in jail and his family had joined the Nation of Islam, actually, not out of anger, but because they wanted to do more for their community. They were attracted to the Nation of Islam because their tenets were similar to what they grew up in their household, with Garvey principles. That is why they also brought Malcolm in. But Malcolm, and understanding of what is going on, he's being brought in because of his family and their attraction and the resonance with the teachings, not so much that he himself is just angry, but there's a movement there too.

You also have to understand the organization itself is working to build a community, strengthen the community and provide services for Black people that are not being provided elsewhere and are giving the misconceived ideas of who they are as a people, even in education. So they're taking on the responsibility of educating themselves and providing that to their own people and supporting that. Malcolm is continuing with that and helping spread that to other people who aren't aware of this, who are outside of the nature, and that's why he works hard to recruit them. As for why he left, he outgrows the organization and he's finding himself having more disagreements with Elijah now. I would say he starts to become more angry, because, for example, if you look at the Klan meeting...

Malcolm was visiting the Georgia temple and he's preaching, but they receive a telegram from the local Klan chapter saying that they would like to meet with the Nation of Islam. Malcolm's preaching to the temple in Georgia and this telegram comes and they read it, but neither he nor the minister who is of the Georgia temple, are leaders of the Nation of Islam.

They have to go back to Elijah Muhammad and talk to him about, "How do you want to proceed with this?" Elijah Muhammad sees this as an opportunity to grow this organization, to purchase more land, to build up more businesses, and Malcolm really wants to have more of a confrontation with the Klan. Now, we can talk about Malcolm's anger here. He really wanted to have a face-off with them, rather than have any kind of alliance with them.

He felt that any working with them would show it's the wrong message, and it's the wrong action to take. You can't trust these people. For Elijah Muhammad to even say that, "We don't trust white people. We want to live in a separate state," but yet, in order to do this, you're going to trust these people to help you set up your separate state. This was the disagreement for Malcolm that's started the rift between him and Elijah Muhammad and it grew, but this is where it starts and they move on from there.

John Caher: Now, what was the relationship between Malcolm and Martin Luther King? How did each influence the other?

Tamara Payne: While Malcolm was in the Nation of Islam, they were on opposite sides of the civil rights argument. The civil rights movement, they're attacking superstructure segregation, Jim Crow South segregation laws, and wanting to protect the vote of Black American citizens. So they're attacking that. Whereas the Nation of Islam doesn't vote, they don't want

to participate in the American experiment and they don't want to integrate, so they want to have a separate state. So you would say at that point, yeah, Malcolm sees himself in competition with Martin Luther King and the civil rights organizations because it goes against what the Nation of Islam was doing.

But also, there's this thing of where you look at the media need to one leader of all 22 million—at that time, 22 million Black people. So they're gravitating to Martin Luther King. Malcolm X understands that that's what the media is doing, but he also wants to be on top of that. He also wants Elijah Muhammad to be that one person who represents the Black.

So there's a competition there. But once Malcolm leaves, especially towards the end of his tenure with the Nation of Islam, he realizes as Black Americans, we're Americans. We're part of this country and we need to have our rights. We need to fight for our rights. So now, he's coming out and this is his own thinking and philosophy towards the freedom and thriving of Black people in America.

So now, they're more in line and he sees himself as the more extreme side where he's dealing with the Black people who are holding on, who have internalized racism, and he's dealing with that, but also he's saying, "These people, once they come to consciousness, they're going to be pretty angry. You better deal with Martin Luther King, the negotiator" — meaning the Kennedy administration: Deal with Martin Luther King, the negotiator, or else you're going to have to deal with me and these angry masses." So he saw himself as kind of an alternative to push people to work and pass these laws of protecting Black American civil rights. But then he even goes even beyond that, and this is more where Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are much more in alignment, which is when he looks at it internationally towards the end of his life in 1964, '65, you hear him talking about bringing the United States up on charges of violating Black Americans' human rights.

In doing that, he expands on this when he travels to Africa and the Middle East and Europe, and he's having these conversations, but also to drum up support for presenting this to the United Nations. That's where he's going with that. Then he's also expanding through his experiences, firsthand experience of traveling, expanding his outlook of what's going on in the world because he's looking now, not just at what's happening in America, but what's happening in the world. So he's looking at African countries overthrowing their colonized powers and then having to deal with neocolonialism and how they deal with that and supporting them and coming into their own away from all of that and moving away from

that, but he was never able to fully explore that because he was assassinated in February of 1965.

John Caher: Sure. Now, Malcolm has been dead for close to 60 years. Why is his story relevant right now? And why is this book relevant right now?

Tamara Payne: White supremacy still exists. Oppression still exists. In order to really deal with and confront this, we have to understand how we got here and how it's lasted all these years. We do that by learning from history. We learn from the works of the civil rights movement, Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois , and others, but also in learning from Malcolm X and these voices. We also learn from their mistakes. Malcolm gives voice to people who feel that they are not heard from, that they are not seen because in oppression, the people who are oppressed are pushed to the point where they're not to be taken seriously and Malcolm gives these people a voice and a way to deal with that and to deal with the energies that are oppressing them. So people still are gravitating to that, and it still rings true today.

John Caher: That's a little disconcerting that 60 years later, we're still having that discussion.

Tamara Payne: We have an opportunity to change it. We're going to make mistakes, but let's make new mistakes. Let's not repeat the same old mistakes. At this point, it doesn't have to be Republicans, but right now, it is Republicans. "Oh, forgive us for these trespasses," don't make us accountable. We'll learn from this and then let's watch them do it again.

John Caher: That's a great way to end. I'd like to thank you. If our Amici listeners are interested in a much more in-depth conversation with you or discussion with you, they can sign on February 10th and they need to RSVP to S-M-A-N-Z-A-N-E. That's S-M-A-N-Z-A-N-E at nycourts.gov by February 8th.

Tami, thank you so much for your time and good luck with the book.

Tamara Payne: Thank you, John.