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THE DEATH AND LIFE OF MALCOLM X

By Peter Goldman

OF MALCOLM X

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By JOHN W. BLASSINGAME

AT THE END of one of the last speeches Malcolm X made, a disillusioned follower rose and asserted: "We heard you changed, Malcolm. Why don't you tell us where you're at with them white folks?" Malcolm replied, "I haven't changed, I just see things on a broader scale."

Peter Goldman has written a masterful account of how Malcolm did and did

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not change. A Newsweek editor who conducted hundreds of interviews with Malcolm, his friends and enemies, Goldman writes with an honesty, an appreciation of subtleties, a sensitivity to the black situation which is all too rare among American whites. While his work will not be the definitive biography, it will be an indispensable starting point for any one interested in contemporary black life.

For many blacks and whites Malcolm was most attractive when he was the Black Muslim, totally convinced that whites were inherently the enemies of blacks, integration was impossible and nonviolence ("this mealy-mouth, beg-in-plead-in kind of action") unmanned

blacks. It was a time when he was clearly black first, in sympathy, allegiance and objectives. He was a warrior engaged in combat; a dark presence, angry, cynical and implacable where whites were concerned. Rejecting all liberal pretensions, he argued that America had no conscience.

Those of us who heard this message at Muslim rallies and mosques or on TV felt uneasy with the last pages of Malcolm's autobiography and his actions after the break with Elijah Muhammad. Although entoziged by practically all blacks on his death, Malcolm was *per se non grata* in all of the civil rights organizations while he lived. He could

never shake off the simplistic stereotype of hatemonger and demagogue the media fastened on him. Yet after the break with the Muslims he began preaching black nationalism, exchanging aid with Africans trying to bring the United States before the UN for violating human rights and flirting with electoral politics.

His detractors made too much of the "change" in Malcolm's philosophy. Unlike so many others, Goldman refuses to sentimentalize him into a black-white liberal. After all, in the end Malcolm only conceded that whites who were willing to die for blacks could certify their good intentions. Despite all of his talk about
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poetry celebrates vision and wholeness, is an authentic (and under-rated) poet whose work, independent of current fashions, stands as great a chance of enduring as does Plath's.

It is absolutely accurate that women artists have had—and continue to have—excruciating problems in developing themselves and their work. I am willing to believe that we have lost many talented women to these pressures. Probably, they are greater, in general, than the pressures faced by male artists—again, in general. But to measure the specific pressures against a particular artist is impossible, especially when men as well as

which a changing women's consciousness has been voiced in women's poetry. She seems to fear that I am arguing for art as agit-prop or for some feminist version of "socialist realism." It should be clear from the review itself, as well as from my own poetry, that this is far from the case. The third paragraph from the end of my review attempts to raise the difficult question of the assumed split between subjective and political poetry, and to suggest that that split may be a symptom of deeper schisms in our culture, indeed in the whole western consciousness.

I did not say that "desperate, angry or suicidal poetry is somehow

should write in one vein. One of the major developments of the next quarter-century, I believe, will be the discovery by women of the multiplicity of voices, images and language available to us, in poetry and elsewhere.

Male poets have indeed encountered "ridicule, opposition, starvation" in trying to become artists in the patriarchy. Yet no male poet has been without male privilege, and male artists have used women ruthlessly in order to get on with their work and satisfy their physical and psychic needs. The mistress or wife or student or daughter or companion of the male artist has satisfied him in bed, done his laundry, cooked

to sheer away masculinized fantasies and to explore our own, to reconnect with images vital to us, to "purify the dialect" of our tribe. I admire Morgan as a serious and powerful poet, one of many engaged in this work. The possibilities are enormous—for poetry itself, for sensibility itself. I myself believe that these possibilities are connected with immense social and political changes; but at no time have I ever felt that there could be only one or two ways to write poetry—I agree wholeheartedly with Ms. Murray that the poet has a responsibility to bring to her culture, her movement, her society the most precise and powerful language of which she is capable.

The Death and Life of Malcolm X

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brotherhood in his last two years, he considered most whites incorrigible. "Historically, I think the weight of the evidence is against them if you're looking for angelic deeds."

Judiciously combing through the trial record and interviewing policemen and witnesses, Goldman cuts through all of the myths surrounding Malcolm's death and concludes that some unnamed high official in the Black Muslims ordered him killed. The events which led to this decision are less clear. According to Goldman, eventually both the philosophy and the ossified, worldly bureaucracy of the Muslims became too stifling for Malcolm. Granting this and the ego conflicts between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad, Goldman's account of the bitter feud between them leaves some crucial questions unanswered: Why did Malcolm take the cheap and uncharismatic step of accusing Elijah Muham-

mad of keeping a harem? Why were the Muslims so intent on evicting Malcolm from a house they allegedly owned? Who firebombed the house?

As Malcolm did in his *Autobiography*, Goldman makes too much of his trip to Mecca and confrontation with color blindness among Arabs. Travel has always had this impact on American blacks. Even so, foreign travel among more egalitarian whites did not change the philosophy of Frederick Douglass or other blacks as much as Goldman argues that it did Malcolm.

Goldman's biography contains some lessons for all of us. First, there is the unsurprising fact that the State Department, FBI and New York police shadowed Malcolm, tapped his telephone, bugged his office and infiltrated his organization (one of his body guards was a police agent). Yet, even when the police knew he was going to be assassinated, they did little to protect



him. Second, for blacks there is the desirability and difficulty of closer relations with Africans and the necessity of decolonizing their minds before they can be liberated. For whites, this biography conveys the depths of black rage and the conviction that a 45 may be the legitimate last resort of a people for whom there is no other redress.

Malcolm X is dead, but we must remember that "every good-bye ain't gone." While rarely tangible, Malcolm left all of us a lasting legacy. He helped to alter the style and thought of the black revolt of the 1960s. When our television screens were filled with God-fearing, hymn-singing Negroes confronting billy-mauling, nigger-baiting Bull Connors, Malcolm was projecting the image of unblinking, unflinching black men and women unafraid of white America's police, guns or death itself. His greatest legacy was the example of unchained, unbowed black manhood.