Malcolm X's pivotal letter on race at center of dispute between Syracuse, Alex Haley's family

by Glenn Coin
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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Sitting in his hotel room in Saudi Arabia in April 1964, civil rights activist Malcolm X penned a letter on hotel stationery to his friend and co-author, Alex Haley.

Malcolm X had just left the controversial Nation of Islam, a group whose leader denounced whites as "devils." In Saudi Arabia, he completed the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, where the experience of eating and drinking with "fellow Muslims whose skin was the whitest of white" had changed his mind on race, he told Haley.

"What I have seen and experienced on this pilgrimage has forced me to 'rearrange' much of my thought patterns and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions," he wrote.

Ten months later, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City.

The letter -- considered by many historians to capture a watershed moment in Malcolm X's life and philosophy, became part of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," which Haley co-wrote and Grove Press published in 1965. Four years later, Grove's owner agreed to give his company's files -- including the letter from Saudi Arabia -- to Syracuse University, where they sit today on the sixth floor of Bird Library.

Now, Haley's son wants that letter back.

A rare documents dealer working with William Haley says the letter is worth $250,000, and has demanded that Syracuse turn it over. A lawyer for William Haley says said it rightfully belongs to Haley and his two sisters.

"There was not a direct transfer of any ownership to (SU) of that letter, nor did Grove have ownership of the letter," said Gregory Reed, a Detroit attorney who also collects Malcolm X documents.

University officials disagree. They say the letter was given to the university in 1969 under a legal agreement with Grove Press owner Barney Rosset, and the university has no plans to give it up. The letter is used frequently by students and faculty, and will be a centerpiece in a 2013 exhibit on the Grove Press collection.

"Given the historical significance, it seems it's in the right place to be at a university that makes it available as a public good," said Sean Quimby, SU's senior director of special collections.

The letter links two of the leading African-American voices of the 1960s and 1970s, along with the era's most controversial publisher of books that were elsewhere thought to be too racy or avant garde for publication, such as "Lady Chatterley's Lover" and the works of poet Allen Ginsberg.

Malcolm X espoused Islam and black separatism, and was often seen as the counterpart to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Christian ethos of nonviolence and integration.

The elder Haley died in 1992 at age 70. Haley, whose ancestry saga "Roots" would win a special Pulitzer Prize and be made into the most-viewed television program of its time in 1977, remains among the best-selling African-American authors. Barney Rosset, who gave the letter and other papers of Grove Press to SU, was one of the leading free-speech figures of the era.

Rosset, who died in February, ran the publishing house that SU's website calls "the literary engine behind the sexual revolution in America." The collection that Grove gave to SU takes up 400 feet of shelf space and includes 2,500 books, many of them first editions.

William Haley said he is compiling a collection of his father's papers, and the letter helps cement the relationship between Alex Haley and Malcolm X. William Haley says that partnership led to the successful autobiography that then allowed Alex Haley to continue writing.

"Malcolm X enabled him to eventually do 'Roots' because of the income (Alex Haley) got initially from the autobiography," he said.

The younger Haley concedes that money is a factor, too, in his desire to get the letter back. "I have grandchildren," he said, "and I'd like to be able to leave them something more than we have now."

Joan Bryant, an African-American studies professor at Syracuse, said the letter represents a pivotal point in civil rights history.

"The hajj is clearly a moment when Malcolm rethinks that position of excluding a certain group from the arena of human association," said Bryant, who uses the letter in her African-American history classes.

Quimby said Haley himself believed deeply in libraries and having his papers available for public use. Haley himself explained why he had given his papers to the university:

"Now they're not just my private works and recollections, but a part of the fabric of our state to eventually be shared with other researchers, writers, explorers and dreamers."