

My face is black is
true: callie house and
the struggle for ex-
slave reparations



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My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations “ My Whole soul and body are for this ex-slave movement and are willing to sacrifice for it” Callie House, 1899 Even after the slavery was abolished in 1865, the African-American struggle for basic human rights, civil rights, ‘ equality’ and ‘ acceptance’ per-say, continued.

Much torture and many lynchings followed. Legal and educational equality finally came to fruition in the 20th century but racism continued and still continues to this day. During the Civil Rights Era, minorities fought for complete equality and years after, they succeeded. The fight for civil rights though, started long, long ago.

It only took a couple of years for ex-slaves and their families to realize the abolishment of slavery did not mean equality. A few years after that, ex-slaves started to do something about it. In fact, one forgotten woman valiantly spearheaded the Ex-Slave Reparations movement starting in 1894 and died in 1928, continuing to fight for the movement. She was not a coward nor quiet with her opinions. She obeyed the law but fought it tooth and nail. She was never swayed and she never gave up, even after imprisonment.

This unflinching woman was Callie Guy House. The story of this never-before-recognized woman, is now a published book by Mary Frances Berry, a native of Nashville, Tennessee. Berry’s My Face Is Black Is True is ridiculously detailed. In fact, it took her eight years of research before she began writing about this amazing woman who preceded the likes of Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and Martin Luther King Jr. Mary Frances Berry’s does a

remarkable job accounting not only the life of Callie House but also the Ex-Slave Reparations movement.

Mary Frances Berry's purpose seems to be to provide the reader with an accurate, historical account, starting with a background on the civil war and the slaves' role during the time, how the historical timeline parallels with Callie House's life, as well as the Ex-Slave Reparations movement, even after the death of House. The historical and biographical account provides the reader with a piece of history that is not mentioned at all in history classes yet equally significant as everything that is learned. Her meticulously detailed narrative stands testament to her eight years spent researching the era and the woman that was so involved. BACKGROUND Callie Guy, from Nashville, TN, was born into slavery in 1861.

As a young girl, Callie Guy lived with her mother, her sister, and her sister's husband, Charlie House. In 1883, she married William House and they had five children together. To support her family, House took in laundry from other African Americans, as well as white patrons. In the mid-1890s, Callie House and her family moved to south Nashville, where she later began her fight for reparations. It was in south Nashville where House was first introduced to the Reparations movement. She came across a pamphlet that advertised several reparations movements.

Of course, being the ambitious woman she was, she decided to organize her own movement, with help from a local reverend, Isaiah Dickerson. They began the organization: National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association (NESMRBP). The grassroots goal was to provide for sick and

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disabled ex-slaves and their families. The funding came from local chapters who had monthly dues.

The goal was also to serve as a representative for ex-slaves in the national fight for reparations and pensions for black soldiers based on those offered to Union soldiers. In a brilliant and daring move, House targeted \$68 million in taxes on seized rebel cotton and demanded it as repayment for centuries of unpaid labor. House tried relentlessly to receive reparations and came close a few times with the help of brave congressmen. The National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association inspired thousands of African Americans but alarmed many Southern legislatures and white politicians. Chapters all over were organizing and gaining momentum.

Impoverished African Americans sent in letters to the organization but also to Congress in support. There were however, some influential African-American figures like congressmen John Mercer Langston, Thomas E. Miller and H. P. Cheatham. They and others used their legislative forums against House's campaign.

Through all this though, House's determination, along with her effectiveness as a fundraiser, temporarily made the NESMRBP a success. Though House and Dickerson's organization stayed intact through relentless attacks and fraudulent accusations, her bid for slave pensions was eventually defeated; largely due to governmental pressure and interference. The accusation of mail fraud and finally a conviction, despite specious and inconclusive evidence, from an all-white male jury in 1917, did her in. Although the presiding judge in House's fraud case was "no more persuaded of her

criminality than at the failed plea-bargaining proceeding” 2 Callie House spent a year imprisoned. Berry discusses how although House’s “ conviction.

.. killed the national legislative activities of the Ex-Slave Association” 3 the reparations movement did continue and other leaders like Marcus Garvey, came to the forefront. House is said to have been the “ secret” 4 to the organization so it is not surprising that although local chapters of the NESMRBP continued for awhile, the organization later died out. Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) led the reparations movement from 1916 on. After House got out of prison it seems she stopped working for the movement.

Years past and Callie House eventually died of complications due to uterine cancer in 1928 at home. SUMMARY The ex-slave pension movement “ is setting the negroes wild,...

making anarchists of them. ” Pension Bureau Inspector W. L. Reid, 1899 Mary Frances Berry provided a more detailed account of the aforementioned background information.

The story of Callie House is intertwined with the history and evolvment of the reparations movement, a movement that cannot be understand without reading this book. She did not shy away from including opposition leaders and delving into their backgrounds nor did she withhold information about the Postmaster General Wills and Harrison Barrett, who was a consistent force to reckon with throughout the book. Berry begins her first chapter on the beginning of the movement with a quote from House: “ We are

organizing ourselves together as a race of people who feels that they have <https://assignbuster.com/my-face-is-black-is-true-callie-house-and-the-struggle-for-ex-slave-reparations/>

been wronged” 6 and proceeds to introduce House as hard working washerwoman born as a slave. Berry discusses what led to the Civil War, society at the time, during, and then after, the generals and their dealings, historical feats of both armies, the end of the war, voting rights and emigration. She focuses though on the horrible experiences and thought processes of the black people during the period.

In the chapter, Walter Vaughn’s pension movement is introduced and reparations are House is intertwined into the account of the start of the reparations movement. Next, Berry goes in depth in discussing the way ex-slaves lived, the troubles they came across every day, and details about House and her family. After the background Berry begins her discussion on the start of National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association, initial troubles, and the wavering of some African Americans at the time. It isn’t until the next chapter does the reader truly understand the feat the organization undergoes. Harrison Barrett, initially the assistant attorney general of the Post Office in D. C.

, tried relentlessly to keep the NESMRBP from growing because any rising up of the ex-slaves could threatened the livelihood and opportunities for the once-masters of the race. Mail was crucial and the lifeblood of any organization, so House was slammed with accusations of mail fraud over and over. Berry supplies facts and figures pertaining to the NESMRBP and notes that the growing number of 34, 000 members irritated and only added suspicion to the organization’s operations. 7 The Pension Bureau Inspector W. L. Reid actually said if the support continued, the government “ will have

some very serious questions to settle in connection with the control of the race.

" 8 To make matters worse, Congress gave more power to the Post Office and thus, threatened the survival of the organization. The reader, if not already, begins to revere Callie House for her defiance even more when in response to Barrett's fraud order prohibiting correspondence amongst NESMRBP officers, she writes back: The association acted on behalf of " four ; half million slave[s] who was [were] turn[ed] loose ignorant bare footed and naked without a dollar in their pockets without a shelter to go under out of the falling rain but was force[d] to look the man in the face for something to eat who once had the power to whip them to death but now have the power to starve them to death. We the ex-slave [sic] feel that if the government had a right to free us she had a right to make some provision for us as she did not make it soon after our Emancipation she ought to make it now" This resulted in the defamation of the organization and an order to not contribute to the campaign. However, the NESMRBP continued its organizing, on tippy toes of course. In Chapter Four, Berry takes a step back by including various ex-slave accounts. House begins to travel around as a representative for the organization and with Dickerson, starts a newspaper: the National Industrial Advocate.

This way House and Dickerson could publish literature for their cause. She also spoke to many chapters and at public meetings. At the time, any one was welcome to join the NESMRBP. Berry notes that House's traveling and listening to other ex-slaves only made her feel stronger about the cause.

Berry writes in the next chapter that although House's faith in the cause was <https://assignbuster.com/my-face-is-black-is-true-callie-house-and-the-struggle-for-ex-slave-reparations/>

strong, she was nervous. What Callie House was unaware of was that there would be no negotiations and no reparations.

Both the Postmaster General and Congressmen were not going to let up until the cause was dead. Berry presents the aforementioned logic but also counters it, by including writings by both sides. Writings by both House and Dickerson, reveal their strength and determination. By the end of the chapter, another fraud notice had gone out and Dickerson was arrested and convicted. Berry writes of continual hardships, harassment and measures taken of and by House and the organization to prevent any destruction in the next chapter. While the NESMRBP continued to hold meetings and the government continued to supervise, House mysteriously stepped down as officer.

She resumed the role of traveling lecturer. This was intentional and successfully deterred the Postmaster temporarily. Unfortunately though, the reader learns the organization has to come up with another strategy to stay afloat financially and to successfully receive reparations. What happened next was a bold move. Callie House decided to sue the government for reparations from the cotton tax.

0 Berry describes the trial and House's emotions throughout. The suit was lost however and her attorney, Cornelius Jones, was accused and opponents attempted to prosecute. Opponents attempts to prosecute fortunately, failed. Unfortunately Callie House was not as lucky, and later prosecuted.

Berry states that federal government officials saw House as defiant and believed her cotton tax suit only “ further evidence of... [her] arrogance and refusal to submit.

” 11 This was the spark that lit the fire for House. She would now travel down the long road of trial and tribulation. Berry proceeds to record a general account of what happened during trial. Callie House maintained her innocence throughout, even by not accepting a plea bargain. She was indicted for “ fraudulently converted[ing] money to her own use.

” 12 The chapter also mentions her time in jail but provides no personal account from House because supposedly there is not one. Instead Berry discusses what it would have been like for House as well as other women during that time. As a side, Berry mentions that Emma Goldman was imprisoned at the same time and in the same prison as House. Goldman, an antiwar activist, did keep an account and Berry used some of her entries to describe the conditions. The rest of the book discusses the historical evolvment of the Reparations movement.

Berry mentions that upon her release from prison, Callie House worked as a washerwoman and died in her home. There is not mention of other accounts or any participation, by House, in the movement. At the time of release in 1918, lynching a racial riots occurred more than ever, but the Harlem Renaissance had begun. It was a time of great change.

The Reparations movement continued, spearheaded by Marcus Garvey, and even today discussions of such occur. It did though, sputter out. The Civil

Rights Era began later, and then Black Power in the 70's became a big
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movement. Berry discusses these occurrences but maintains that none of it would have had such an impact, especially the Reparations movement that led to later activism. REACTION The chaos and confusion, the elation over freedom, the struggle to survive, and the scars of their bondage shaped ex-slaves' thinking about the meaning of abolition. Mary Frances Berry The quote above has haunted me from the moment I read it.

Such confusion and emotional turmoil can only occur in an ex-slave's mind. The level of confusion and emotional turmoil that I cannot possibly fathom. Without the in-depth, meticulously detailed, and very emotional account of Callie House and the Reparations movement, I would not have a clue. I knew nothing of reparations or its development before this book.

I guarantee most people are not familiar with the movement. However, the history of reparations is integral to Black Studies. This was not only the first movement by African Americans, but it also what lead to their early forms of protest. There is no reason why people should not be informed of the subject. Some people argue the 'equality' and 'acceptance' aspect of our lives has yet to be seen and still hard to measure.

If this is true than not only should historians be blamed but also the education system in the United States. We are told to be open and fair, however, racial equality and an acceptance of all people are not regulated by law and thus, social inequality exists right beside legal equality. This book is in some ways a testament to these statements but can also serve as a stepping stone to improving the conditions of society today. Mary Frances

Berry spent years researching and it really is obvious. The book flows well. It is not just a person's story, its a people's story, and an era's story.

All three are successfully integrated into My Face Is Black Is True. The book is so significant in so many ways, but especially in the development and understanding of the black struggle. I believe Mary Frances Berry's goal in writing this account is to quite simply, think, to probe the mind. Quite obviously, her purpose is to introduce the movement and its biggest supporter and discuss, along with, its and her development and decline in the public sphere. The author does not provide an outline for the reader, but from the beginning, the book flows easily and the objectives become clearer with progression. I find myself questioning the moral character of whites as a whole, during that time.

There is absolutely no excuse for what happened nor for how long it has taken the country to enable every single human to live in a safe environment, and live in an equal opportunity environment. This book has helped me get closer to the truth. BIBLIOGRAPHY Berry, Mary Frances. My Face Is Black Is True. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

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