



My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations

Mary Frances Berry

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“My face is black is true but its not my fault but I love my name and my honest in dealing with my fellow man.”

~Callie House (1899)

In her groundbreaking new book, *My Face Is Black Is True*, historian Mary Frances Berry resurrects the forgotten life of Callie House (1861-1928), ex-slave, widowed Nashville washerwoman and mother of five who, seventy years before the civil rights movement, headed a demand for ex-slave reparations.

House was born into slavery in 1861 and sought African-American pensions based on those offered Union soldiers. In a brilliant and daring move, House targeted \$68 million in taxes on seized rebel cotton (over \$1.2 billion in 2005 dollars) and demanded it as repayment for centuries of unpaid labor.

Dr. Berry tells how the Justice Department, persuaded by the postmaster general, banned the activities of Callie House’s town organizers, violated her constitutional rights to assembly and to petition Congress, and falsely accused her of mail fraud; the federal officials had the post office open the mail of almost all African-Americans, denying delivery on the smallest pretext. Berry shows how African-American newspapers, most of which preached meekness toward whites, systematically ignored or derided Mrs. House’s movement, which was essentially a poor person’s movement. Despite being denied mail service and support from the African-American establishment of the day, Mrs. House’s Ex-Slave Association flourished until she was imprisoned by the Justice Department for violating the postal laws of the United States; suddenly deprived of her spirit, leadership and ferocity, the first national grassroots African-American movement fell apart.

Callie House, so long forgotten that her grave has been lost, emerges as a courageous pioneering activist, a forerunner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. *My Face Is Black Is True* is a fascinating book of original scholarship that reclaims a magnificent heroine.

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