Callie House v. The United States: The Organizing of an Unsung Political Prisoner and the Media's Suppression of the Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association

'FREE CALLIE HOUSE' is not fervently stenciled on political signs or chanted at rallies, nor is Mrs. House thoroughly referenced in mainstream historical documentation of the late 19th to early 20th Century. It was only until 2005 that Mary Frances Berry's work “My Face is Black is True: Callie House and the struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations” truly recognized and developed Callie House's leadership role in the post-civil war reparations movement. A woman of color, Mrs. House led a cross-gender crusade directed at the US government in an era where Jim Crow racism and entrenched sexism confined most women of color organizers to domesticated areas of work. Rather than appreciating Callie House's ardent dedication to the reparations movement, her contemporary newspapers slandered her, and our current print space and air time obscures her and the reparations movement at large. These concealing processes are indicative of the resistance of mainstream media to situate the reparations movement in its true historical context. If the truth shall set one free, then mainstream media are bolts and shackles.

This paper is but one small effort in the broader movement of illuminating largely silenced historical narratives. After providing a synopsis of Callie House's organizing trajectory, the essay analyzes the government's formulation of race-related issues after the de jure abolishment of slavery, specifically the treatment of the Ex-Slave Pension Association. It then moves into a discussion about contemporary African-American newspapers' treatment of Mrs. House and the Pension Movement. Through contextualizing and interpreting its framing, this paper sheds light on how and why Callie House and her movement received such veiled treatment in the press. The findings suggest that media has rhetorical and obfuscating power – still utilized in various techniques today – that function as
Callie House did not own the means of mass communication. In order to spread the word of her campaign, she began visiting primitive baptist churches, referencing the constitution as the legal bedrock of her campaign. Berry notes that after the Civil War, “…separate black churches proliferated as African Americans sought to exercise autonomy over their religious lives.” The heart of Callie House's campaign centered on citizenship rights and exercising autonomy, and churches provided the physical space where people of color could meet freely with a minimum of white control. Mrs. House soon moved to Nashville, Tennessee to enact her guiding principle: mutual aid for the sick and poor. Nashville had become the black church hub of the South, and it also included the publishing operations of the two largest black religious denominations.

In addition, Nashville had a growing black middle class, which contributed to the lack of press coverage concerning Callie House and the Ex-Slave Pension Movement.

Mrs. House and the other leaders at the Association's first convention in 1898 asserted that they could better advocate their own cause, in the interest of enforcing their underlying goal of the association: unity. Unfortunately, the government and the public press circulations that dealt with the Association did not share their underlying goal of unity. This did not cause Callie House to stumble; rather, she kept traveling from church to church, spreading her faith in the constitution to new faces. The idea of petitioning the government for ex-slave reparations quickly unfurled. White officials, frightened to see so many people of color mobilizing, started spying on the church meetings. Unable to see any illegalities in the meeting spaces, the government lent increasing power to the US Post Office to regulate the mode of communication between members of the blossoming movement.

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1 Berry, Mary Frances. *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations.* (Random House: USA, 2005) 14
2 Berry, 50
3 Berry, 51
4 Berry, 60
The thought process of the government was simple: if it could charge Callie House and her Association with fraud, then the Post Office could restrict any and all communication between its members, which would suppress their movement entirely. The government claimed that Mrs. House and the Association committed fraud because it was attempting to petition the government to pass a law – to give ex-slaves reparations – that the government was not going to pass. That is, the government cried out 'FRAUD' because it decided that Mrs. House's claim would never be validated, even though the power to validate the claim lied in that same government's hands.

The excuse that the government provided in order to convict Callie House is blood-boiling, but there was more than one duplicity in the government's actions and excuses. Berry lays out another hypocrisy in government policy at the time:

The federal government targeted the ex-slave pension cause as threatening enough for deployment of law enforcement resources, while at this same time the same federal government remained generally unreceptive to blacks' complaints of disenfranchisement, racially motivated assault, and even lynching, carried out with the cooperation of local and state authorities.5

Central to Berry's point is the concept of punished and permitted threatening behavior. In the government's watchful eyes, Callie House constituted a threat, not the oppressive black codes, not the heinous lynchings, and not the omnipresent police brutality directed at people of color. So, what is Callie House and the Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association threatening? In 1899, the Pension Bureau Inspector W.L. Reid told his superiors that if the ex-slave pension movement were to continue, then “...the government will have some very serious questions to settle in connection with the control of the race.”6 This sentiment from a government employee gets at the heart of the issue from the federal government's viewpoint – the necessity of control. The selective enforcement of U.S. governmental power served a purpose, one that the federal government did not overtly voice in defense of its actions.

As the hostility of the U.S. government toward Mrs. House grew, it became clear that the

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5 Berry, Mary Frances. *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*. (Random House: USA, 2005) 84
6 Berry, 83
government did not need a moral or legal reason to justify its suppression of the Association. The paramount explanation for this is that the U.S. government was established with the interest of privileging whites as a group at the expense of nonwhites as a group. So in this 'post-slavery' moment, the ex-slave pension Association represented an emerging threat to existing power dynamics; a tension between the inherent white male privilege of the state and the formally extended right of women and men of color to petition and organize. The government utilized colorblind reasons such as fraud to suppress Mrs. House and her movement, even though it was the unnamed white male supremacy that facilitated the government's crackdown on the Association's leader (read: woman of color) without serious objection at the state or federal level.

After the US government legally abolished slavery, a predominant hierarchical tension existed between the white supremacy that facilitated government's decisions and the widely espoused 'democracy' and 'freedom' of the United States. In July of 1866, the Speaker of the House of Representatives wrote that: “... no penalty or punishment for any violation of law shall be imposed or permitted because of race or color, or previous condition of slavery...” However, apart from numerous visible manifestations of state-sponsored white supremacy as referenced in The Racial Contract, Charles Mills proclaims that

...a crucial manifestation is simply the failure to ask certain questions, taking for granted as a status quo and baseline the color-coded configurations of wealth, poverty, property, and opportunities, the pretense that formal juridical equality is sufficient to remedy inequalities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege, and that challenging that foundation is a transgression of the terms of the social contract.

After slavery was abolished, the U.S. government began the process of altering the words in the constitution to effectively invisibilize written racial privilege. But as Mills asserts, a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege cannot be deracinated through legal wordplay.

The social contract that Mills mentions is referencing the rules in place that permit citizens a limited amount of dissent to the power structure in the United States, as regulated by those in power, of

course. In 1866, freed women and men rejected the false 'freedom' that the United States spewed. After President Andrew Johnson gutted the 'Forty Acres and a Mule' policy, the ex-slaves, speaking on their own behalf, predicted that the government would “make freedom a curse to us, for we have no home, no land, no oath, no vote, and consequently no country.” (Berry, 12) Their foresight cannot be understated. Throughout the organizing trajectory of the Ex-Slave Pension Association, white newspapers twisted the movement's goals and actions, all the while taking for granted the pretense that formal juridical equality could right the wrongs of the trans-atlantic slave trade and its pervasive impact on race relations (socially, politically, and economically) in the United States.

Any white press that mentioned Callie House did so to humiliate her or to belittle her cause through lies and racist stereotypes. This is enraging, yet hardly surprising. However, business and professional African-American newspapers largely ignored the Ex-Slave Reparations struggle. A major reason that African-American leadership disregarded the reparations movement in Nashville was the elite's desires to “spend their energy and political capital on other concerns where they believed they could make a difference.”9 Berry goes on to suggest that they were preoccupied with their own image as an educated group, they garnered access to money and power through racial accommodationist ideology, and they gladly displayed the “progress” that African-Americans had made since emancipation.10 Booker T. Washington applies to all of these traits. Through the lens of Mill's The Racial Contract, the white supremacist structure granted Washington and other black elites access to money and power because they adhered (mostly) to the rules of the contract at the time. These professionals accepted segregation and would even help tout notions of 'progress' and 'democracy.'

When national African-American newspapers and leading politicians and activists did not ignore the Ex-Slave Pension Movement, they publicly “criticized it as a distraction from the struggle

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9 Berry, Mary Frances. My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations. (Random House: USA, 2005) 66
10 Berry, 66-67
for political rights and a hopeless cause."\textsuperscript{11} Mrs. House's understanding of the situation sheds light on how differing levels of class within African-American communities limited the amount of support given to the Pension Association, especially in terms of finances, political representation, and publicity in the press. She exclaimed that “the most learned negroes have less interest in their race than any other negro as many of them are fighting against the welfare of their race.”\textsuperscript{12} This speaks to the sacrifices in achieving comprehensive justice that black elites made in order to reach positions that involved more money, power, and publicity. This contrasted sharply with the demands and grassroots organizing style of the largely lower-class members of the Pension Association. Regardless, the fees that the Association collected allowed it to print literature, although mainly to advertise for its conventions and meetings.

During the time that the federal government harassed Mrs. House and the Ex-Slave Association, African American newspapers focused on social engagements, self-help activities toward progress for the race that made no demands on whites and did not upset the established order, and articles on Jim Crow and the absence of civil rights. These papers continued to ignore the embattled pension-movement, the loyalty of its members, or its potential for the working class, barely educated nobodies and the poor.\textsuperscript{13}

In the same city that Mrs. House and the Ex-Slave Association were based in, African-American business and professional leaders completely ignored the pension cause. When the Association hired a 'respectable' black lawyer, Cornelius Jones, “...African-American newspapers and civil rights leaders still did not speak out to aid or defend Mrs. House or the pension movement.”\textsuperscript{14} African-American leaders praised Cornelius Jones (who was well-known and of high legal status), but that tribute did not extend to the people he was fighting for, the ex-slaves. Booker T. Washington, with his influence, opposed the movement as undermining the accommodationist up-by-the-bootstraps philosophy he advocated. Berry puts forward another potential reason why African-Americans didn't trust the

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\item \textsuperscript{11} Berry, 79
\item \textsuperscript{12} Berry, Mary Frances. \textit{My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations.} (Random House: USA, 2005) 79
\item \textsuperscript{13} Berry, 144
\item \textsuperscript{14} Berry, 189
\end{itemize}
movement: “Perhaps, independently, African-American leaders and newspapers simply believed the federal government's claims that the entire pension movement was misguided and probably crooked besides.”

It seems that stereotypes of racist origin can be wielded by people of color (usually with an element of privilege, such as class) as well as whites. The apex of African-American newspapers' obscuring process was when Callie House received a one year jail sentence, and African-American newspapers completely ignored the pension cause and Mrs. House's case.

The U.S. federal government targeted Callie House and the Ex-Slave Pension Movement because officials viewed ex-slaves fighting for citizenship, dignity and autonomy over their lives as a threat to the established order. The government acted to protect the country's long-standing investment in white male privilege, and drew upon the stereotype of “ignorant, illiterate, aged and credulous freedmen” in order to victimize the ex-slaves and convict the Association of fraud. Indeed, Berry documents that federal officials “regarded the large number of association members as evidence of the ignorance and susceptibility of African Americans, rather than as an affirmation of the support for the cause.”

White newspapers recirculated these stereotypes, mentioning the Association in racist jest or to further vilify its actions and malign its goals. Most widespread contemporary African-American newspapers, however, completely secreted the Pension Movement, paying more attention to middle-class interests such as educational progress and accommodationist ideology. They operated in the interest of keeping middle-class issues widely circulated, and limited the Association's print space. The Ex-Slave Pension Association did not have ample class privilege, which made their quest for resources and political power even more arduous.

15 Berry, 190
17 Berry, 136