

Let Justice Roll Down

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Keep your friends close but your enemies closer. The best way to neutralize a threat to the status quo is to welcome that threat with open arms into the halls of power. And so it was with Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who was hunted by the FBI, a man who led a movement that frightened the US government so deeply that they stalked him and harassed him and then he was - mysteriously - assassinated. The movement he helped to lead condemned war, racism, and economic injustice that afflicted this country and that afflict it still. It could be argued that once he was dead, discredited and abandoned, once the movement he led was appeased, once certain rights were won at the same time that a true just nation was not realized - he was very useful as a dead man.

Once dead, King became the parrot for neutral-sounding, let's all get along political messaging. The principles of nonviolence continue to be upheld in defense of property, as if destruction of property and destruction of life are anywhere close to the same.

Dr. King and the movement understood racism to be about systems. He preached and spoke about the three evils of our society: racism, materialism, and militarism. And yet in the years since his assassination, we have cited his legacy and held diversity trainings and confessed our feelings and permitted racial disparities in health and wealth to endure, powerfully. White people, especially those in the halls of power, we have used King's legacy to transform this nation's reckoning with racism into a dialogue about personal feelings. We have made it about friendships, about relationships, about guilt, about forgiveness, about anything other than reparations. About money, about fundamentally changing the distribution of power and wealth in this nation. We have transformed the movement's commitment to nonviolence into the right to comment on rioting, or looting, or destruction of property, or anything else that people who go oppressed and unheard might engage in. I will mention briefly that coverage of mostly white sports fans after a win or a loss is called "fun," even when it results in similar destruction of property. We have all but ceased the national anti-war movements, we have grossly swelled the war and military budget even as we abandon our veterans, and we comment on inner city violence, or black on black crime, or personal choices, or dangerous neighborhoods, and if we don't do that, people who consider themselves nice white liberals wring our hands about why young people don't vote.

In short, we have made a holiday for this great dead martyr and we have abandoned his cause. My black colleagues are requesting of white UU ministers that we do not preach King's I Have a

Dream Speech this Sunday. So you'll hear nothing of that. Instead, they are asking, preach what King would have preached. Tell about racism, materialism, and militarism. Tell about a leader most of us haven't heard of.

And so today I'm going to first tell you the story of Callie House, who led what could be called the first Poor People's Campaign, decades before the Montgomery bus boycotts, or voting rights for black folks, or integration, or the March on Washington, or the Black Panther Party. She and the folks with whom she organized laid the foundations for so many movements that came after. This is her story.

(picture) I've been reading this book called *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*.

Callie House was born into slavery in 1861 near Nashville, Tennessee, though the exact circumstances of her birth are not recorded. She grew up in the South, had five children, was widowed, and worked after Emancipation as a washerwoman. She lived and organized during the time that scholar Rayford Logan calls the nadir, "the lowest point along the long, rough road African Americans had traveled since Emancipation. Women were legally barred from voting, and black men suffered disenfranchisement through subterfuge and violence" (Berry, 7). After Emancipation, the Union had promised to give Confederate land to ex-slaves. But when President Lincoln was assassinated, President Andrew Johnson broke that promise, pardoning the Confederates, returning their land, and focusing on healing the divide among white people rather than making good on the promise to ex-slaves. So though they were free, they were very, very poor.

Mrs. House obtained an education and learned that black people who had fought for the Union in the Civil War were owed pensions, though they had a hard time collecting those pensions which white veterans collected freely. Harriet Tubman, famed for freeing slaves, had spied for the Union army, and served as a cook, nurse, and scout, and she received no pension despite years of petitioning the government. Upon the death of her husband, she received a widow's pension, but it was less than what she was owed. Mrs. House saw that neither land nor grants for education had been achieved by black political leaders for freedpeople, and thought that pensions as compensation for work without pay were a worthy cause. She was encouraged by a black teacher and minister named Isaiah Dickerson, who himself had begun to believe that "the best way to help the old ex-slaves is to get some money in their pockets" (Berry, 44).

So she and Dickerson organized, beginning in the 1890s, the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association. From the book: "At the grassroots level, the ex-slaves, who were at the lowest economic level, embraced what was essentially a poor people's campaign. Old

and disabled by so many years of manual work, bad diet, and no medical care, these people understood and supported the association's demand for pensions to compensate for years of unpaid labor" (Berry, 51). Just like in the later civil rights movement, local preachers supported these organizing efforts. The organization collected dues from ex-slaves and others, built local chapters, and had a democratic process whereby members had a say in the decisions. This organization also, however, offered medical and burial assistance when needed.

That's really important. For an organization to push for policy change and to offer practical assistance is unusual. How many of us today, even, find ourselves talking about practical assistance or policy change as if they oppose one another, as if an organization must choose a priority. But Mrs. House's organization did not, and the membership grew to tens of thousands.

Because of the incredible success of her organizing and the movement's growth, the Federal Pension Bureau came to investigate. Where before she was ridiculed and dismissed by elite black people and many, many white people, the government began to take an interest around 1899. At that time, scams run via the postal system had resulted in increases to the postmasters' powers, and these men were political appointees. So the Post Office, and the Postmaster of Nashville - a man named A. W. Wills - began to target Mrs. House's and the organization's mail. He was, because of the assistance the postal system provided to the federal government to investigate fraud, given free rein to label all of Mrs. House's mail fraudulent and to deny payment on money orders.

The reason given, when Mrs. House questioned this move, was that white people thought she was defrauding ex-slaves by promising them something that would never happen. Now that is some truly incredible mental gymnastics: that Callie House, born into slavery and organizing on behalf of her community, was being accused by the government of the United States, a nation which up until only recently had created and permitted the conditions of slavery and prospered vigorously from them, she was accused by the US government - which had backed out of its promise to black veterans or to grant land to ex-slaves, SHE was accused of defrauding ex-slaves. Though the Pension Bureau had no evidence of fraud, they did have letters from white people saying she was exciting old ex-slaves. So, Acting Assistant Attorney General (there's some bureaucracy for you) Harrison Barrett hit her with a fraud order anyway. And she wrote him a letter back, saying that the association advocated for:

"Four and a half million slaves who were turned loose, ignorant, bare-footed and naked without a dollar in their pocket without a shelter to go under out of the falling rain but was forced to look the man in the face who once had the power to whip them to death - but now have the power to starve them to death. We the ex-slaves feel that if the government had the right to free us she had the right to make some provision for us, and as she did not make it soon after our Emancipation she ought to make it now" (Berry, 88-89). Mrs House's own words.

So Callie House, born into slavery, at 33 years old with no formal education, now holds the leadership of a movement with such moral clarity and such a loyal grassroots base that it terrified the Federal Government. Barrett and others, in turn, launched a 20 year campaign to end the pension movement.

So they fought and they organized and they worked, somehow, around the fraud charge until 1917 when Mrs. House herself was arrested and tried for fraud. She went to prison for one year. The government expected that they would destroy the idea of pensions for ex-slaves by throwing Mrs. House in jail. But too many people had heard her, too many people had been inspired by her, too many people believed in the righteousness of the cause. Her imprisonment scared her collaborators and they ended their legislative activities, but their mutual aid and local organizing work carried on. Mrs. House died on June 6, 1928, at age sixty-seven.

In the 1960s, clear demands for reparations showed that Mrs. House's work lived on. King himself said in 1964, "The moral justification for special measures for Negroes is rooted in slavery.' The government should do something special for African-Americans since 'our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years'" (Berry, 239). James Forman, the former executive director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, targeted synagogues and white churches, claiming that they were "part and parcel of the system of capitalism" (Berry, 239). Some white Protestant churches complied.

In recent years, the reparations struggle has taken a legal and investigative turn. There is research into the companies that profited from slavery, and in LA, Detroit, and Chicago, measures were passed that required companies that do business with the cities disclose their profits made from slavery.

Largely, though, the struggle for reparations in the United States has not been won. But there are movements afoot, like the Poor People's Campaign on a national level and the efforts to seek police accountability here in Greensboro, that carry on the struggle to make things right. To connect racism, militarism, and materialism to the struggle for peace and dignity for all. I make no promises about the successes of these movements - I can't predict the future and I think too much optimism is bad for our spiritual health.

But I draw one great and important lesson from Callie House, Dr. King, and Bayard Rustin, and all those who worked with them and were inspired by them.

The fight is worth it. Even if it doesn't seem winnable, even if it puts you in danger, even if they will erase your legacy or whitewash it completely, even if history will remember you wrongly or

hardly at all, the fight for what was wrong to be made right is worth it. When I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, as the hymn says. Bind up the broken, as the hymn says. Because living inside of your own worth, even in a world that violently opposes it, is a way to claim your own dignity - like Bayard Rustin said. That is some powerful Universalist theology - your dignity is determined not by the way that others treat you but by God, by the universe, by the spirit - and you can choose to live in it. And because living inside of your own moral clarity, even in a world that will attempt to comfort and seduce you away from that clarity, is a way to live a faithful life. May it be so for you and so for us all, amen.

Citations from the book *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*, by Mary Frances Berry.