

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
presents
the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series
AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

Crafting Change:

African American Folk Artists and the Civil Rights Movement

Presented by
Patricia A. Turner, PhD,
UC Davis



FREE AND OPEN
TO THE PUBLIC

TUESDAY, JUNE 26, 2012
4:00 PM - 5:00 PM
PICKFORD THEATER
THIRD FLOOR, JAMES MADISON BUILDING
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
101 INDEPENDENCE AVENUE, SE
WASHINGTON, DC

Metro: Capitol South
First & C Streets, SE
(one block south of
Madison Building)

Request ADA accommodations five days in advance at (202) 707-6362 or ADA@loc.gov
For more information contact Thea Austen 202-707-1743

Crafting Change: African American Folk Artists and the Civil Rights Movement

In his 2011 Botkin lecture, "Making a Way out of No Way: Martin Luther King's Use of Proverbs for Civil Rights" the internationally renowned proverb scholar Wolfgang Mieder made a compelling case that the celebrated civil rights leader infused proverbs into his speeches and essays. As dispatched by King, these proverbs held a profound rhetorical power; they were key elements in his discourse, and if we agree that King's verbiage paved the path to positive change, then these proverbs are more than mere linguistic flourishes, they are nuggets of power. Mieder selected as his title the proverbial expression "Making A Way out of No Way," an idiom that King used frequently to signal his belief that he and those who subscribed to his convictions could and would create a powerful force for good out of "nothing." Reverend King wanted his listeners to believe they could make a way out of no way.

"Crafting Change" extends the reach of Mieder's thesis. It looks at the lives and work of several of King's African-American contemporaries, some of whom were long-term activists, others who were more selective in their political activities. To varying degrees, they surrendered the safety of submission to Jim Crow segregation and took stands, some minor and some major, that jeopardized their own well-being and that of their families. They knew firsthand what it meant to make a way out of no way. They made their barns out of what we now call repurposed wood and insulated their cabins with discarded newspapers. They made their quilts out of flour sacks. Musical instruments and sheet music were often uncommon luxuries, so songs were improvised and words and rhythms freely adapted to whatever instrument was at hand. Although their lives were often marked by deprivation, their ability to shape and sometimes thrive in these circumstances became a part of the preparation for the hard work of the civil rights movement.

When Rosa Parks told Roland Freeman that every good woman her age from Alabama knew how to quilt, she was commenting on an attribute that stood her well both in keeping her family warm and in enduring the thirteen-month boycott that was necessary for the courts to order the integration of the buses of Montgomery. Rosa Parks, Jessie B. Telfair, Nettie Young and numerous other women tapped the same cultural resource for making their quilts and for confronting the political obstacles they faced.

As the movement progressed, the beauty of some of the aesthetic renderings of black Southern Americans was noted by folklorists, art historians, ethnomusicologists and others attuned to cultural productivity. Even white southern politicians came to be taken with folk art. It took a few decades but on March 11, 1997 Alabama state legislators headquartered in Montgomery designated the Pine Burr quilt as the state's official quilt. Their resolution reads in part, "WHEREAS, quilts and artifacts of the Civil Rights era, which will be presented and stored in the Freedom Quilting Bee, will provide accurate documentation of the events taking place in American history..."

Thus, "Crafting Change" also discusses events after the height of the civil rights movement. What has happened to the men and women of King's era? Are the artistic, economic and social conditions of that generation and their descendants demonstrably improved over the 1950s and 60s? Was Reverend King's vision sustained? Did they make a way, a lasting way, out of no way?

Patricia A. Turner is the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education and Professor of African and African-American Studies at the University of California, Davis, where she has been on the faculty since 1990. A nationally known folklorist, her scholarly interests include rumor, quilting, and media portrayals of African Americans. Dr. Turner's books include *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African-American Quilters* (2009); *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America with Gary Alan Fine*; (2001); *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (1994) and *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (1993).

Patricia A. Turner

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

