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# **BLACK NATIVITY: A SEASON FOR CHANGE**

**By T. Mychael Rambo  
and Lou Bellamy**

**Directed by Dominic Taylor  
Presented by Target**

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## **Voices from the Antebellum South**

There is an old adage that says, “history is told from the viewpoint of the victors.” What that means is that for four hundred years—from the late 1400s to 1863—white, property owning, Christian males got to tell the story of America. Women (of any ethnicity), poor whites, non-Christians, Native Americans and African Americans were largely written out of the early history of this country. In other words, those who birthed and raised future generations, those whose land this great country was built upon, and those who labored to build what is today one of the most powerful nations in the world would be virtually silent if limited to the official record.

In order to get a more complete sense of the founding of this country, it is necessary to explore the experiences of all those who participated in its formation. Historians working today must braid official records with instances of colloquial and collective memory. While the experiences of these groups were not inked into the history books, alternate forms of documentation were maintained. Through personal letters, stories, illustrations, textiles, music, alternative newspaper articles and fiction, members of these groups found ways to voice and preserve their experiences even when the dominant class found their experiences inconsequential. Until relatively recently, this kind of record keeping was not considered as viable as those records sanctioned by the dominant class.

Today, we realize that traditional historiography cannot adequately portray a broadly imagined early American experience. In order to get a wider, more accurate picture, an historian might investigate birth and deaths rosters from slave plantations, advertisements for slave auctions and books of sale, port records of slave ships arriving from the Caribbean, abolitionist papers, and postings offering rewards for the return of runaway slaves. Into the gaps of this fragmentary and one-sided history, black Americans add family stories passed down over generations, music, poetry, sermons from preachers and revolutionaries, jokes, visual art and textiles. This information begins to counter attempts to suppress or silence the full history of slavery and its critical impact on the contemporary American economy. Passed down generation after generation through song and sermon, *Black Nativity* is one of those stories.

Historian Gladys-Marie Fry began researching antebellum slave quilts for reasons similar to why many African Americans explore the American archive—to find information about her roots, her kin and our collective contribution to the making of this impressive country.

Several decades ago, I embarked on an emotional and intellectual journey to research and write an historical account of the life of Amanda, my great-great-grandmother. She was an enslaved African on an Arkansas plantation. . . . So sparse is the historical account that I was unable to corroborate any details in

the family traditions with existing historical records. I know so little about Amanda, and I wanted to learn so much—her birthplace, information about her family, the circumstances surrounding her death and the place where she is buried.

Unable to reclaim Amanda from the history that denied her the skills that would have enabled her to leave a written record, such as a diary or even a more complete oral account that I could corroborate with available historical records, I decided to tell Amanda's story through a composite portrait of the lives of enslaved African women in the antebellum South. These women lived a common history as skilled artisans who worked as quilters, weavers and seamstresses.<sup>1</sup>

Gladys-Marie Fry is hailed by her contemporaries for her careful and patient historiography. Betty McKeever Kay, Director of the Oral History Program of the Maryland Historical Society, points to Fry's work as "commendable [based on two features worth noting] First, [Fry's] . . . prologue critically examines what is available as historical source material for earlier periods (such as the slave narratives of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s). Second, the author's own interviews, obtained from people who were children in . . . about 1900, are compared with contemporary city records for the same period as a means of corroboration."<sup>2</sup> Today Fry is considered one of the preeminent historians on the textile arts of African Americans from the antebellum period.

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<sup>1</sup> Fry, Gladys Marie. *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002),vii.

<sup>2</sup> Key, Betty McKeever. "Publishing Oral History: Observations and Objections." *Oral History Review* 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press,1982) pp.145-152; 150.