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RESEARCH PAPER

Rose's Gift: Slavery, Kinship, and the Fabric of Memory

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One of the most evocative objects in the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture is an embroidered cloth bag that has come to be known as "Ashley's Sack". Stitch-work on the bag, signed "Ruth Middleton", recounts the bag's painful history, as a gift presented by an enslaved woman, Rose, to her daughter Ashley, when Ashley was sold at age nine in South Carolina. This paper explores 'Ashley's sack' as an object of history, memory, ritual action, and aesthetic creativity.

This essay explores the meaning and history of an enigmatic object, known as 'Ashley's Sack,' passed down through multiple generations of enslaved and free women. The embroidered cloth bag came to light at a flea market in Springfield, Tennessee in February 2007. From 2008 to 2013 it was displayed at Middleton Place, the well-known slavery era plantation historic house and formal gardens, just up the Ashley River from Charleston, South Carolina.[1] It is now exhibited prominently in the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC, which opened in September 2016.

The bag is made out of an unbleached cotton fabric—known as 'Negro Cloth'—also used to produce the clothing of enslaved people (**Fig. 1**). It measures about 33 by 16 inches, and has been patched repeatedly over time. The bag itself has been provisionally dated to the mid-19th century, and seems most likely to have been used as a seed sack. It is stitched in three different colors of cotton embroidery floss with the following text, evidently stitched in 1921:

> My great grandmother Rose
> mother of Ashley gave her this sack when
> she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina
> it held a tattered dress 3 handfulls [sic] of
> pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her
> It be filled with my Love always
> she never saw her again
> Ashley is my grandmother
> Ruth Middleton
> 1921

This essay attempts to understand 'Ashley's sack' as an object of history, memory, aesthetic creativity, ritual action, and perhaps gendered political resistance. I begin by reviewing my work in identifying the historical personages—Rose, her daughter Ashley, and Ashley's grand-daughter Ruth Middleton—referenced in the needlework. I next unpack the possible meaning of Rose's gift during the time of slavery, and then examine the literary and visual aesthetics of Ruth's 1921 needlework composition. I consider, in turn, the treatment of the sack after its rediscovery in 2007 in the Tennessee flea market. I conclude by reflecting on what the object is coming to mean to visitors who encounter it within the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington DC.

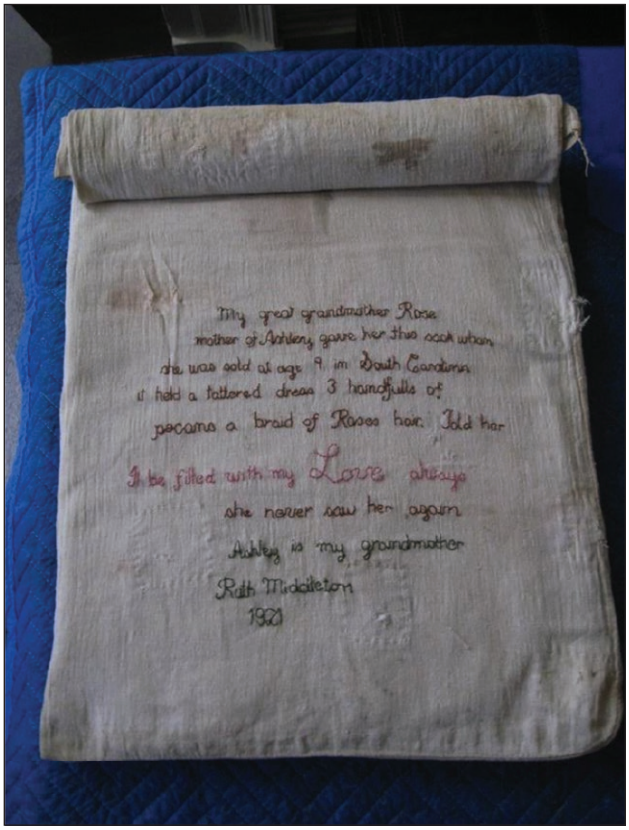

Figure 1: Image of the sack (front). Courtesy of Middleton Place Foundation.

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Identifying Rose, Ashley and Ruth

Elsewhere, I have discussed in detail my work tracing the likely identities of the three women, Rose, Ashley and Ruth, described in the sack's embroidery (Auslander 2016). Rose and Ashley almost certainly were owned by the wealthy Charleston merchant and planter Robert Martin. Sr. (c. 1790–1852), who owned both a palatial Charleston residence at 16 Charlotte Street and a plantation, known as Milbery (or Milberry) Place, along the Savannah River, in what was then Barnwell County, about six miles southeast of present day Allendale, South Carolina. Over one hundred enslaved persons labored at Milberry in the 1850s. At the time of Robert Martin's death in December 1852, Rose was held in Martin's Charleston's residence, as an enslaved 'house servant'. Ashley, in turn, was held in Milberry Place plantation, over one hundred miles away.[2] In his will, Robert Martin enjoins his widow and executrix, Serena Milberry Martin, to keep the house slaves, but to raise sufficient funds from his property to pay each of his legal heirs $20,000 in cash.[3] It seems likely that Ashley was among those sold to raise these funds.[4]

The 'Ruth Middleton' who signed the embroidered text on the sack 1921 was, it would appear, born as Ruth Jones around 1903 in Columbia, SC. Her parents were Austin Jones and Rosa (Clifton) Jones, both employed around 1910 as servants at the University of South Carolina in downtown Columbia. Ruth's likely linkage to Rose and Ashley is through her mother, who carried the maiden name Rosa Clifton, and who appears to have grown up in Goodlands township in western Orangeburg county, about fifty miles from Milberry Place Plantation, where the enslaved girl Ashley was held prior to the sale. There is no trace of an African American woman named 'Ashley' in post-slavery South Carolina records and it is possible that Ashley changed her first name, at least in terms of public records, after emancipation.

By 1918, both of Ruth Jones's parents were dead.[5] Ruth moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where in June 1918 she applied for a marriage license to wed Arthur Middleton (c. 1897–1964), thus acquiring the last name Middleton. Arthur was born and grew up in Camden, South Carolina, about thirty miles from Columbia. The young couple did not, according to Philadelphia city records, return a copy of the license signed by an officiant, which may mean that a formal wedding ceremony never took place. This may have been because Ruth, likely around fifteen-years-old at the time, was a minor. Hher 1818 marriage license application incorrectly lists her as born in 1897, implying her age was twenty-one, not fifteen.[6]

Two weeks after applying for the marriage license, Arthur entered into the US Army as a draftee and served in Europe.[7] There is no evidence that he resided with Ruth after he returned from Europe; he spent the rest of his life residing in Brooklyn, New York, where his sister and mother also relocated. Six months after applying for the marriage license Ruth gave birth in January 1919 to a baby girl, Dorothy Helen Middleton. It seems likely that Ruth was pregnant at the time of her marriage license application. It is not clear if Arthur was in fact Dorothy Helen's biological father or if he simply consented, in effect, to provide legitimacy for the child.

At the time of her marriage in 1918 Ruth Jones Middleton worked as a domestic servant in the home of the white chemical engineer and manufacturer Edward Linch and his wife Mabel, a socially prominent musician, in their mansion near the University of Pennsylvania campus. In 1930, Ruth is recorded as a 'waitress' residing in the home of Samuel Castner, a wealthy white society photographer in Lower Merion, along Philadelphia's suburban Main Line.[8] Ruth appears from time to time from 1928 through 1940 in the society pages of the *Philadelphia Tribune,* the city's African American newspaper; she is described wearing couture and hosting fashionable parties.[9] It is possible that during this period she was supported by a patron, who made possible her socially prominent lifestyle. In 1940, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reports that 'attractive South Philadelphia matron, Mrs. Ruth Middleton' was being confirmed at St Simon the Cyrenian Episcopal Church, a congregation attended by many of the leading lights of Philadelphia's black community (*Philadelphia Tribune*, 18 January 1940, p. 8). By that time, Ruth was residing with her adult daughter Dorothy Helen, near St Simon's.

The following year Ruth entered Douglass Memorial Hospital with tuberculosis. She died in 1942, and is buried in an unmarked grave in Mount Eden cemetery, just outside of Philadelphia.[10] Ruth's daughter Dorothy Helen Middleton continued to live in the Philadelphia metropolitan area up until her death in 1988 in the north suburb of Wyncote. Current African American Wyncote residents recall that Dorothy Helen, who took on the surname Page at some point, passed away in a local nursing home.

It would thus appear that in 1921, when she embroidered the family's oral narrative onto the sack, Ruth Jones Middleton was a young single mother raising a toddler daughter. It seems likely that she created the embroidery as a gift for Dorothy Helen and that Dorothy kept this family heirloom through her life. At the time of Dorothy Helen's passing in the nursing home, her possessions, including the sack, would most likely have been donated to Goodwill or another charitable venue. From there, we may surmise, the sack was sold and resold, until turning up two decades later in the Springfield, Tennessee flea market.

Rose's Initial Gift (c. 1853): Unpacking Levels of Meaning

In many respects, the sack presents itself to modern observers as an "obstinate thing" (Weismantal 2011: 303) shrouded in a history of violence and dispossession that resists easy decoding. There are no existing documentary records about the sack prior to its discovery in 2007, and to date, no oral history narratives have emerged about the sack within Clifton or Middleton family lines. Nonetheless, we may cautiously venture some interpretations about Rose's initial gift in the early 1850s, as well as how and why Rose's great granddaughter transformed the object in 1921.

We may begin with the fact that great care was clearly taken within the family line to conserve the object over time. Old patches on the back of the sack were applied with considerable skill from within the bag using two sets of stitching. The first was in a pattern around the outer perimeter and the second closer in, hemmed just around the hole itself. Three colors of cotton floss were used in the 1921 needlepoint, which was carefully applied in the lower third of one panel of the sack. The lettering of the needlework is neat and precise, and the embroider clearly made conscious choices about the use of color in the text. Folds in the fabric suggest that the sack was folded for a long time in such a way that only the lower, rectangular area of the needlework was visible, in a manner consistent with many textile samplers. We do not know if the object was ever framed.

What can we unpack about Rose's initial gift to her daughter Ashley in 1853, following the death of slave owner Robert Martin as his extensive estate was partially liquidated? Since Mauss (1923), anthropologists have noted that physical gifts are complex bundles of meaning in which the personhoods of giver and recipient intermingle in subtle ways. For Mauss, vital gifts are 'total social facts,' (Mauss [1923] 2000: 50) which embody more than the social relationship between two persons or two social units; these gifts and their trajectories map out the overall architecture of the social formation in which these actors are embedded.

Such appears to be the case with Rose's gift, which embodies both the persona of the grieving mother—through her dress, hair, and remembered words—and the larger political economy that violently structured the lives of mother and daughter. Alienated labor value, the foundation of the entire slavery system, appears to have been creatively worked upon, within and through the sack. 'Negro Cloth' seed sacks, owned by white estates, were familiar objects of daily labor, from which enslaved people had to broadcast seeds (such as cotton, tobacco and rice) to plant crops that were ultimately appropriated to create white wealth. In her act of gifting, the sack was reappropriated by Rose to be filled, instead, with tokens of her enduring love. The 'tattered dress' is presumably one that Rose herself wore day in and day out, and strictly speaking would have been considered the property of her master. In turning the dress into a gift, Rose reappropriates this article of clothing and remakes it into an enduring bond between parent and child that subverts (or at least momentarily escapes) white claims of capital and property. It is likely that, as in many sites in the Carolinas, the great majority of the estate's pecan crop was sold for the profit of the white master; here again, Rose redirects these elements from the category of white ownership to intimate kinship and solidarity. Mother and daughter may have had special shared remembrances of the tree or grove from which the pecans were picked, and the three handfuls of nuts presumably carried traces of the mother's loving hand that had so long nurtured Ashley.

More speculatively, might we conceive of this process as part of the great ritual drama of 'conjure' in the New World, the capacity to transform capitalist relations of bondage into spiritual connections and the enduring mystery of human kinship? Over the past year, I have worked closely with seven Low Country African American consultants, who have generously shared their reflections on the meanings of Rose's gift and Ruth's embroidery. Five of them suggest that the sack shares 'family resemblances' with regional medicinal bundles, which themselves appear to have been transformations of Kongo-derived '*minkisi*' (singular *nkisi*) power assemblages. "Alicia" remarks, 'Well, hair is power, as my grandmother always said; if Miss Rose put a braid of her hair in the bag, that wasn't just a keepsake, it was so she could keep and watch little Ashley'.[11] Rachel observes, 'I just have the feeling in my heart that sack wasn't just for carrying things, she was doing something with, a blessing, something sacred, the way a rootworker would, I'd say'. Both women observe that bundles with a collection of objects within them have long served as *materia medica* in the Lowcounty, activated with the power to heal or curse. Alicia also lays emphasis on Rose's statement, 'It be filled with my Love always'. She notes:

> Again, that's what grandmother would do, to turn on or wake up the bundle. She'd say something, maybe just whisper it, to make it jump like, make it light up. That sack wasn't a dead thing, you see, it almost was a like a living thing, traveling with little Ashley, protecting her.

Within BaKongo African polities, minkisi medicinal bundles are most famously embedded in figurative sculpture forms, often characterized by mirrors and pounded in nails. In the Georgia and South Carolina Lowcountry, minkisi often took the forms of medicinal or herbal assemblages contained within cloth bags, often referred to as 'conjure bags' or 'mojo bags'. Such concentrated ritual compilations could protect, heal or help divine the future (and in some cases could wreak harm on those who threatened the nkiksi's possessor).[12] Ras Michael Brown argues that in coastal South Carolina nkisi and the veneration of a great range of *simbi* (Kongo-inspired spirits of place) were closely integrated with Christian symbolism, and that the operations of medicinal bundles and angelic beings drawn from the Biblical pantheon often merged into one another.

Such appears to be the case with Rose's initial gift, a container that functioned in ways consistent both with Kongo-associated minkisi and with Old and New Testament paradigms. So far as we can tell, the sack did not contain any grave soil or bodily relics, which often were critical activating agents for Kongo minkisi; but minkisi often contained pieces of clothing, nuts, and human hair—precisely the items that Rose placed within the seed sack. It is suggestive that Rose placed within the bag 'three handfulls (sic) of pecans'. Many conjure or mojo bags are activated by the action of the human hand; indeed, a common term for these Lowcountry ritual containers is the word, 'hand'.[13]

Although the sack itself was not shaped into a human form, it contained a dress that traced the outline of the absent mother as well a braided lock of her hair, imbued with her distinctive personality. Three of my elderly Lowcountry consultants recall that their grandparents taught them always to burn their cut hair, since 'hair is power', and could be used to harm or heal. In a manner consistent with obeah or minkisi, the sack evidently functioned as a portable extension of Rosa's persona, created to travel with Ashley and produce around her a protective aura as she encountered travails throughout her life. The fact that Ashley kept the sack for decades and passed it on to her posterity would seem to attest to its perceived spiritual potency, whether or not Ashley was specifically familiar with the KiKongo term 'nkisi'. The bag is an especially poignant ritual object inasmuch as it makes present the absent maternal body. The sack encloses its contents, just as a mother embraces and protects her child.[14]

Like many minkisi, conjure bags, and comparable ritual objects of power recorded in the Lowcountry, the sack also seems replete with Biblical associations. There are three kinds of materials placed within the cloth container—the dress, the pecans and the braid of hair. This trinity is reduplicated in the three handfuls of pecans placed by Rose in the bag. Four African American Lowcountry consultants assert that the tripartite imagery recalls the three gifts of the three kings to the infant Jesus in the New Testament, as well as the Christian trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. They believe the gifts were thus meant to reassure the nine-year-old girl that God's love, as well as her mother's love, would forever be with her.

Ruth's Embroidery: 1921

It would appear that the bag was preserved and cherished by Ashley through whatever challenges she endured during slavery and freedom, and then passed down to her child, evidently the woman Rosa Clifton (later, Rosa Jones), who in turn gave it to her daughter, Ruth Jones (later Ruth Middleton). We can speculate that the story of Rose's gift to Ashley was repeated orally many times within the family. Then, in 1921, Ruth Middleton, Rose's great-granddaughter, felt called upon to render the long repeated oral history into text, embroidered into the very surface of the heirloom itself. How should we interpret the embroidered text?

This 1921 needlework emerges out of a long history of textile art in North America. Embroidering texts, including homilies, scriptural quotations, and short family histories, is a well-established practice in American decorative arts, undertaken by women since colonial times. Ruth's act of embroidering her family story onto this precious heirloom is also akin to the long-established practice of quilting in African American women's networks, stitching valued textile pieces associated with cherished relatives and ancestors into new amalgams that will pass on to their posterity. Indeed, many abolitionist women, white and black, sewed samplers depicting abolitionist images and quotations. Ruth may have encountered needlework growing up in Columbia, South Carolina; it is also possible that in the late 1910s, as a domestic worker in the socially prominent Linch home in central Philadelphia, she was further exposed to embroidery and developed her needlepoint skills.

In contrast to most samplers, Ruth's work contains no figurative or geometric design beyond the colored lettering. The sewn words are centered and organized more or less symmetrically, in keeping with the conventions of embroidery. What can we discern from the text itself? In its economy of words and its epic scale, binding together generations that had been torn asunder, Ruth's ten lines recall the language of the Old Testament, with echoes of the Psalms, Genesis, Exodus, and the Book of Lamentations.[15] The first two lines introduce the two protagonists, Rose and Ashley, specifying their relationship to one another and their relationship to the embroiderer/writer, and explain that the bag upon which the needlework is being sewn is the actual object that was given so long ago. The third line introduces the unbearably painful story of the slave sale, giving both Ashley's age and the location of the sale. The fourth and fifth lines recount the contents of the bag.

Up until this point, the text has been framed in standard English. Now, at the end of line five, the writer shifts into an African American vernacular register consistent with the way that Rose herself must have spoken and in which the story was presumably passed on within the family. Instead of 'She told her', Ruth writes, 'Told her'. The next line continues in the dialect of the remembered speaker, 'It be filled with my Love always'. This line can be thought of as a 'performative utterance', a speech act that transforms the very thing it describes in an enduring reality. (a classic example of a performative utterance is the statement by the officiant at the conclusion of a wedding: 'I now pronounce you husband and wife'.) In African American Vernacular English, 'be' signifies a continuous, habitual state, as in 'I be working every afternoon'.[16] In that strict sense, the word 'always' might be seen as redundant or added for emphasis. Significantly, the embroider has left a space, a beat, between the phrase 'It be filled with my Love' and the reiterative 'always'. We might thus read the line as, in effect, "It be filled with my Love (beat) always. We might read the word "always", as "all-ways", in the sense of "in all ways". This line in a sense enlivens the sack, making it a kind of living entity, filled with the spiritual or emotive presence of the soon-to-be absent mother for all time.

The visual qualities of the embroidery complement the narrative, and seem to reproduce some qualities of oral performance. No commas, apostrophes or quotation marks appear. Only one punctuation mark is used, a period near the end of line five, immediately before Rose's words are recounted. The ends of the other four sentences coincide with the line break on the cloth, as if to indicate where a breath might be taken. As noted above, the space between 'Love' and 'Always' also seems to indicate a pause. This is a story that was repeatedly told aloud and one that is meant to be read aloud. Just as the bag itself was passed on across the generations so is the embroidered text meant to be passed on, as a tangible, portable act of telling.

In keeping with the overall genre of embroidery, the artist aims for general visual symmetry in her ten lines of text, in which she uses three colors of thread. Although she has not sewn any images or devices, she has maintained the genre's convention of geometric symmetry. The first five lines in brown thread, roughly speaking, expand outward, leading after a space to the climactic line in red, consisting of Rose's parting statement to her daughter, 'It be filled with my Love. . . always'. The word 'Love', at the approximate center of the piece, is the largest word in the entire work, and is offset by spaces from the words before and after it. This word, 'love', more than anything else, enlivens the sack and makes it into a kind of body that contains within it the spirit of Rose and of Ashley.

The final four lines narrow inwards. Line seven recounts the poignant fact, 'She never saw her again', returning to the brown thread of the upper text. Then comes the final three lines, in a blue-green thread, clarifying the artist's relationship to Ashley and signing her name and the year.

As noted above, Rose's powerful speech act, 'It be filled with my Love always', was a kind of performative utterance, a blessing that transformed the inanimate sack into an enduring, protective vessel of tenderness and grace. Through her needlework, at least seven decades after Rose and Ashley were torn apart, Ruth herself engaged in a comparable act of linguistic performativity, paradoxically acting to stitch together an unrepairable breach. By embroidering the story on the very object that passed from the hands of mother to daughter at the moment they were severed, Ruth brings together the names of her great-grandmother and grandmother, along, at the end, with her own name. She has recreated, out of this valued family textile, the fabric of their female lineage. The finished sack, while a lamentation of long ago injustice, is also a tangible family reunion, sewing together those were torn asunder, and recreating the lines of descent that the slavery system had sought to annihilate.[17]

How are we to interpret Ruth's decision to write the climactic line, 'It be filled with my Love always?' in red thread? All of my older African American Lowcountry consultants see in Ruth's decision to sew in red the line 'It be filled with my Love always' echoes of the color used in many Bibles to denote the words of Jesus. In addition, red has likely associations with love, but also, presumably, with blood, redolent of the biological blood tie between Rose and Ashley, and the living connection that would endure between them, in spite of the horror of physical separation. I interpret the red thread as an example of what structural anthropologists refer to as a 'structural operator' that transforms the biogenetic filial tie into kinship, a fully human socially salient bond. The reworked gift of the sack, enhanced with embroidered writing, then, is the embodied gift of kinship itself; that is what 'love' is, asserting the fundamental primacy of what anthropologists term the 'elementary family', the mother and child unit.

The bag becomes over time an instrument that transforms or extends kinship into descent, a trans-generational line that transcended the lifespans of its individual members, passing on into time from woman, to daughter, to the daughter's posterity. It is perhaps for this reason that Ruth chooses to embroider the final lines, 'Ashley was my grandmother', as well as her name and the year, '1921', in green thread. Green, after all, is the color of enduring and regenerative connectedness, which marks the period of spring after the death of winter. The final lines can be read as a triumph of kinship and of social descent, more than simple biogenetic inheritance. Ruth writes herself into the story as both biogenetic and cultural descendant of Rose and Ashley.

The Sack Since 2007

A white woman residing in Nashville discovered and purchased the sack, as part of a bundle of cloth, for US$20 in February 2007, from a white man, at an open air flea market in Springfield, Tennessee.[18] Intending at first to sell it through eBay, she contacted a New York auction house about the bag's likely valuation. However, after being visited by dreams of the little girl Ashley, and developing a close connection over the telephone with a Middleton Place senior staff member, she decided to transfer it the Middleton Place Foundation near Charleston, South Carolina.[19] Suggestively, for four of my African American informants, the fact that the sack induced dreams of this sort in a white woman is evidence that the object really is imbued with the power of obeah, conjure, or nkisi.

The donor subsequently explained that she had been deeply moved by Middleton Place's demonstrated commitment to engage with mass enslavement and its legacy in their own history. A permanent exhibition on slavery at Middleton, listing the names of about 2,600 enslaved people associated with the plantation, was installed around 2005 in one of the plantation outbuildings, known as Eliza's House. Since Eliza's House lacked environmental control and security, it proved impossible to install the sack there. Instead, the sack was displayed within the historic house museum about a quarter of a mile away. It was initially exhibited in the upstairs library, near facsimiles of the Declaration of Independence, signed by Arthur Middleton, and South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession, signed, among others, by Arthur Middleton's descendant William. The Middleton Place leadership hoped that the Sack's placement in the library would productively complicate the interpretation of these documents, highlighting the paradoxes embedded in American conceptions of liberty and equality. Later, the object was moved downstairs to the front hall, to a specially constructed case with other objects more definitively linked to slavery at Middleton Place, including a slave badge and buttons worn by enslaved workers.

Middleton Place staff recall that the sack posed interpretive challenges for many of the veteran volunteer guides. Some felt uncomfortable with direct discussion of slavery; others were overwhelmed by the powerful emotional responses catalyzed by the object, which brought tears to so many visitors' eyes. Some volunteer guides complained that the sack, and the powerful emotional reactions it engendered, distracted from the core mission of the tour, to highlight the cosmopolitanism of the white Middleton

family and the decorative arts evidenced in the historic house.

The sack is, however, deeply treasured by professional staff at Middleton place. A large reproduction of it is included in the Foundation's commemorative book (Duell 2013: 57). In 2011, the object was displayed in the Grandeur Observed exhibition, organized by the Historic Charleston Foundation, at the New York Historical Society. It attracted extensive attention and profound emotional responses by hundreds of visitors.

Middleton Place Foundation vice president Tracey Todd brought the sack to the 'Antiques Road Show' event in Charleston hosted by the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as the Museum searched for significant, previously unknown works of material culture. Smithsonian curator Mary Elliot was deeply moved by the object; after negotiations, Middleton Place Foundation agreed to lend the sack to the Smithsonian, on a year to year basis. Mr. Todd personally delivered the object to Smithsonian staff in spring 2016.

Ashley's Sack at the Smithsonian

At the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which opened in September 2016, the sack is exhibited in the museum's lowest level, on the Slavery and Freedom concourse, within an atrium space centered on the words of the Declaration of Independence, highlighting the 'paradoxes of liberty' in the American experience. The sack is placed next to a case holding an auction block from Hagerstown, Maryland, near a large installation evoking bales of piled cotton, entitled 'King Cotton'. Curators Nancy Bercaw and Mary Elliot explain (personal communications) that they hoped to emphasize the enormous fortunes generated in the North and South through chattel slavery. In contrast, 'Ashley's Sack', to their minds, evokes the more intimate, 'human costs' of slavery, highlighting the highly personal nature of the Ashley story. A soundscape loop presents first person commentaries, from a range of first person narratives about slave slaves, some taken from the the Depression-era Works Progress Administration oral histories.

At Middleton Place, the sack was partially rolled up, so that viewers only saw the embroidered section. In contrast, at the Smithsonian the sack is hung entirely vertically, with the full front surface of the cloth visible, so that the text itself begins about three feet off the floor. Museum patrons must thus bend or crouch down low in order to read the text, which in a vertical orientation is rather difficult to decipher. A small label above the sack states:

> **Ashley's Sack**
>
> This sack is from Middleton Place Plantation in South Carolina. Rose, an enslaved woman, gave it her daughter Ashley before the girl was sold away. Rose placed pecans and a lock of hair inside and told her it was filled with love. In 1921, Ashley's granddaughter, Ruth Middleton, embroidered the story onto the sack. On loan from the Middleton Place Foundation, Charleston SC.

At the preview opening in September 2016, a young African American woman overhead me expressing disappointment that the installation did not feature large format lettering conveying the words of the embroidered text, to make it easier to read. 'No', she said quietly, 'it is much better this way. Miss Ruth, you can tell, put so much work into this needlepoint, to get the story just right. It's only fitting that we kneel down and put a little effort in, to hear her words again, after all the years. I wouldn't change a thing'. Her older companion, a woman in her fifties, agreed, 'It is like she is whispering us the story. . . told by all those women through the generations. So it seems right to bend down and lean in close, for words like these'.

Other visitors emphasized continuities between the events described in the embroidery and the present day. A middle-aged African American man chimed in:

> Makes you think about how the present and the past, they aren't so different. Back then, when Ashley was sold, that was just business, nothing personal they would have said, just the cost of doing business. How many things that we are doing now do we say are "just business", no matter how unjust? Private prisons. Sweatshops. Slavery by another name. Will we never learn?

Many who read the needlework walked over to a friend or companion and quietly summoned them to decipher the words for themselves, and then stood in silence before the case.

Some older African American consultants emphasize that just as a sack has an 'inside' and an 'outside', so does the embroidered narrative most likely have 'inside' and 'outside' meanings. The 'outside', visible or manifest meaning, they explain, would have been more or less acceptable to white employers or patrons, who might have seen Ruth Middleton embroidering the story and found it a redemptive tale of struggle and perseverance. The 'inside' meaning would have been accessible only to African American readers more intimately familiar with the long history of sexual exploitation of African Americans by white men, in slavery and post-slavery. Jane Hopkins, a woman in her eighties, explains,

> Any of our people, back then, would have understood that Ashley was probably sold away as a little girl by the white mistress. That white woman saw in her face a reminder of her husband and what he had gotten up to with Rose.

Robert Lennox, a man in his seventies, elaborates, 'Yes, I think there's an underside here, a code that only we'd be able to understand. Rose was messed with by a white man, probably the master, and so her daughter was gotten rid of, sold away'.

There is no direct evidence for this interpretation, although it is not inconsistent with what we have reconstructed about the likely circumstances of Ashley's sale around 1853, by Robert Martin's widow, Serena Milberry Martin. Perhaps Ashley had been fathered by her late husband, and Serena felt it would be expedient to remove her from the estate.

Mr. Lenox further opines:

> And you know, probably Miss Ruth too, was letting us know, between the lines, that she too had been messed with by a white man. That sort of thing happened all that time. That's probably why she had to get away from South Carolina. She's telling us here, for those who are paying attention, a whole story of what our women endured for generations. White folks just won't ever see that.

We might speculate, following Mr. Lennox's reading of the embroidered text, that Ruth was escaping sexual predation by a white man, and that Arthur Middleton was marrying her to legitimate her child, which may or may not have been fathered by him. Ruth may have been entangled in a romantic liaison, perhaps with a wealthy white man, at the time she embroidered the sack, and the story of her foremothers may thus have had a particularly poignant resonance for her.

My point here is not necessarily to defend this line of interpretation. Rather, it is striking that in these readings by visitors, the object is understood as testimony not only to the initial trauma of the child's sale during slavery time, but also as an enduring witness, a long conversation about a continuing history of sexual oppression directed at women of color, in slavery and freedom. The sack still speaks urgently of crisis, of an enduring now entangled with a distant then.

Thus, Rose's remarkable gift, first presented at a moment of heartbreaking desperation in the early 1850s to a beloved child she would never seen again, continues in its new venue to function as a gift, albeit in a very different register, to a vastly expanded audience. Through this complex object, Rose and her posterity continue to speak of tragedy and resilience, reminding us, in the words of the sorrow song, of a motherless child, a long way from home. At the same time, the sack speaks of specific familial continuity across five generations, and by extension, the continuity of thousands of African American families across slavery and freedom.

This is the gift bestowed to the many thousands who encounter Rose, Ashley, and Ruth's linked stories in the new museum. In the shadow of the Washington Monument, conceived of to mark a national lineage oriented around whiteness and masculinity, Rose's enduring gift presents us with an alternate, no less epic lineage, passed on in word and object through generations of women of color.[20] Through the sack we are bequeathed a collective history of endurance, embodied not in monumental granite celebrating the national father, but rather one encased in fragile cloth, redolent of an absent mother's parting touch.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Notes

[1] The sack is described in the epilogue of (Williams: 2012: 196–7) and has been discussed from time to time in media reports since its 2007 acquisition by the Middleton Place Foundation. The sack has received a round of new media coverage since the opening of the new Smithsonian museum in September 2016.

[2] Robert Martin inventory for Charleston property, listing Rose, 358; Barnwell County property, listing Ashley, 366–367, Inventories, Appraisements and Sales, 1850–1853, South Carolina, Department of Archives and History. Columbia, South Carolina.

[3] Copy of Robert Martin's will, Means Family Papers, Pinckney-Means Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina. See also Robert Martin will transcript, South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia, South Carolina.

[4] The settlement of the estate is detailed in Milbery S. Martin (Executrix of Robert Martin) v. James B. Campbell, Bill for Account and Relief, filed 9 January 1858, and papers, filed 18 April 1858; Miberry S. Martin v. Edward Petit, 2 July 1859–1861, March 1860, Court of Equity Records, South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Columbia, South Carolina.

[5] Ruth's father, Austin Jones, died in May 1912. Ruth's mother Rosa Jones was admitted on 26 June 1916 to the South Carolina State Mental Hospital and died there three days later. Letters of Administration, Richland County, South Carolina, Probate Court. Record of Admissions, Vol. 6, 114–15; Record of Deaths, 44–5, South Carolina State Mental Hospital. Certificate of Death no. 35328, Rosa Jones; South Carolina Department of History and Archives, Columbia, South Carolina.

[6] Marriage license application (25 June 1918), Arthur Middleton and Ruth Jones.County of Philadelphia, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

[7] Army separation application #272507 (22 November 1919), Arthur Middleton.

[8] Newspaper reports indicate Dorothy Helen lived with a mother in early childhood. In 1930, when she was eleven, Dorothy was evidently fostered out, in the home of George and Maggie Lynch in Mount Hope, Fayette County, West Virginia, listed as their 'niece'. Many African American live-in domestic servants during the period were compelled to place their children in foster homes or boarding schools.

[9] References to Mrs. Ruth Jones Middleton are found in the 'Woman's Page', 'Society at a Glance', 'Smart Set', 'Younger Set', and other columns of the *Philadelphia Tribune* (Philadelphia, PA), Dec. 8, 1928, 6; July 24, 1929, 4; Aug.13, 1931, 4; Feb. 18, 1932, 5; Sept. 8, 1932, 5; Dec. 21, 1933, 6; Feb. 3, 1938, 6; Feb. 17, 1938, 6; March 3, 1938, 5; April 7, 1938, 6; Dec. 13, 1939, 9; Jan. 4, 1940, 8; Jan. 18, 1940, 8; Feb. 18, 1940, 9; March 17, 1940, 18. I have not found any newspaper obituaries after her death in 1942.

[10] In 1942, Dorothy Helen Middleton purchased two burial plots—one for her mother and one for herself—at Mount Lawn in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. Mount Lawn cemetery records indicate that she never used the second plot; it is not known where she was buried after her death in 1988.

[11] These Lowcountry consultants. who have asked to remain anonymous, are identified by pseudonyms.

[12] Afro-Atlantic conjure and mojo bags are discussed in numerous sources, including Zora Neale Hurston's *Of Mules and Men (1935);* Theophilus Smith's *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, (1994); Jason Young's *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (2007) and Ras Michael Brown's *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (2012). These works excavate a deep history of Voudon and BaKongo ritual sensibilities, building on the spiritual heritages of West-Central Africa, among enslaved and free black communities in the coastal zones of the Carolinas.

[13] On the mojo hand and hand symbolism in conjure, see Zora Neale Hurston, Paraphernalia of Conjure, in *Of Mules and Men*; Aaron E. Russell, Material Culture and African-American Spirituality at the Hermitage, Historical Archaeology, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1997), pp. 63–80.

[14] It is suggestive, in this respect, that a small cloth (possibly a bag fragment), along with a cowrie shell, beads and needles were found together under the floorboards of a colonial house in Newport, Rhode Island. The new Smithsonian museum, as it happens, identifies these elements as comprising a nkisi. They are displayed in the gallery immediately preceding the one that contains Ashley's sack, although text panels do not suggest any linkages between the 18th century colonial ritual objects and the 19th century sack.

[15] Ruth Jones, who was baptized as a Methodist in 1903 in Columbia, South Carolina, presumably grew up familiar with scripture.

[16] I am grateful to my colleague Bobby Cummings for this linguistic insight.

[17] I develop this line of interpretation in Auslander 2017.

[18] This flea market at the time attracted vendors and buyers from outside of the state. It is no longer held, and it has not proved possible to trace the white male vendor in question.

[19] "Slave child torn from mom filled sack with love" Spartanburg Herald-Journal (Spartanburg, SC) April 16, 2007, C1, C3.

[20] The vital importance of Africanity and womanist perspectives in the collective reimagination of North American histories, is emphasized in Battle-Baptise and Franklin's *Black Feminist Archaeology* (2011).

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