



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

The application format has been changed since this application was submitted. You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above link).

Project Title: The Story of "Ashley's Sack": A Family Heirloom in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture

Institution: University of Michigan

Project Director: Tiya Miles

Grant Program: Public Scholars

NEH Public Scholars Program Proposal

The Things She Carried: A Meditation on “Ashley’s Sack”

Significance

When the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened in 2016, it contained among its treasure trove of artifacts an object called Ashley’s Sack. This singular item of African American material culture is prominently displayed in the Slavery and Freedom gallery of the museum where, according to curators, it draws crowds and inspires emotional connection and contemplation. The provenance of Ashley’s Sack, a plain, antique cotton bag, is as much mysterious as it is fascinating. The object tells a compelling familial, cultural, and national story stitch by stitch. Ruth Middleton, a seamstress about whom little is known, inherited the bag from her mother and embroidered it with explanatory text. Using needlework as her method of memorialization, Middleton recorded on the bag the chronicle of its origins. The inscription reads, in part: “My great grandma Rose/mother of Ashley gave her this sack when/she was sold at age nine in South Carolina.” The inscription then lists the contents of the cherished nineteenth-century bag: pecans, a braid of hair, a tattered dress, and love.

According to its inheritor, this bag was a gift fashioned by an enslaved mother, Rose, and handed to an enslaved daughter, Ashley, on the mournful occasion of that daughter’s sale. Ashley was the grandmother of the seamstress, Ruth Middleton. Passed down through the generations and then lost, Ashley’s Sack was discovered in 2007 by a flea market shopper in a bin of rags and old fabrics. The purchaser donated the bag to Middleton Place, the plantation where Ashley was presumed to have been enslaved. Middleton Place recently sent the artifact to NMAAHC, where it is being cared for on a long-term loan. A symbol of black women’s creativity, practicality, and perseverance, Ashley’s Sack is at once a material object and poetic text. The enigmatic and evocative nature of its creation and transferal across decades compels viewers to reflect on universal themes of slavery, freedom, love, loss, and how we retain our most precious memories over time. This exploration will capture the particularities of black women’s linked historical and contemporary experience along with the universalities of human feeling and memory.

This proposed book project, *The Things She Carried: A Meditation on “Ashley’s Sack,”* aims to present to the public an unexpected story of this material artifact that expresses its embedded reflections on African American women’s experience and introduces two recent turns in historical studies -- toward emotions as subject matter and toward things as sources. The book will explore the submerged meanings of Ashley’s Sack in the time of its origin in slavery, in the time of its scripting through stitchery, and in the time of its modern-day discovery. Each time the bag has surfaced marks a key moment in African American women’s collective lives and in the life of the broader nation. In the antebellum era when Ashley was sold, black women and their daughters were objects of property. In the 1920s when Ruth Middleton embroidered the bag with her family’s story, African American women and their kin faced extreme racial violence and discrimination even as black women organized a club movement to uplift the race. In the early twenty-first century when the bag was rediscovered, Americans were on the cusp of seeing a black First Lady in the White House, an event that Ashley and her mother could never have fathomed.

My purpose is to use this beautiful and wrenching artifact that has already arrested the attention of many to tell interlocking stories about black women’s history, American history, and public history that draw out the themes of love, loss, and rescue. This is a story of American slavery that highlights the complex emotional resonances between enslaved mothers and daughters as well as the exploitative nature of the system that forced them into inhumane bondage. It is also a story about the often tattered nature of African American material artifacts and historical archives as well as the creativity, serendipity,

perception, and dedication that descendants of the enslaved, people who care about history, and museum curators perform in order to find, save, and share these items. It is a story that reveals the ways in which beauty, creativity and pain are so often intertwined in single moments and objects. Finally, it is a story about the larger resonances of a rare item like Ashley's Sack, a touchable thing that conjures up the deepest needs of human beings that persist even in the darkest of circumstances – the love we have for others, the desire to maintain close bonds, the quest for creative expression, and the drive to make our family stories last. My goal is to render these through-line narratives by way of episodes that shift between the past and the present, thereby linking disparate time periods in ways that readers may find surprising, stimulating, and illuminating.

Work Plan

I have the ambitious hope that this book will be out by the end of 2019. My timeline has been accelerated as a result of a meeting hosted by the Mellon Foundation where the year 2019, the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved people to the American colonies, was noted as a critical date for the discussion of slavery in the public square. Last spring I initiated conversations with NMAAHC curators Nancy Bercaw and Mary Elliott about the sack; they encouraged my pursuit of the project and have facilitated access for me to see it in February 2017. I am in communication with Jeff Neale, Director of Interpretation and Mary Sullivan, Curator, at Middleton Place, and I will visit them and the Middleton site in April 2017. I have reviewed the small amount of existing literature on the sack: the epilogue of historian Heather Williams's book, *Help Me to Find My People* and two articles by anthropologist Mark Auslander. I am applying for an NEH Public Scholars Award to support the research and writing of the book in the winter of 2017 through the winter of 2018. While I do not have a pending contract for this project, I do have positive and ongoing relationships with the publishers of my previous books and expressed interest from two non-academic presses (Random House, W.W. Norton).

Schedule

Jan-April 2018 (half-time): Conduct primary & secondary reading, especially in textile literature; Return visit to NMAAHC; Conduct interviews with curators, sack purchaser, and any descendants if found.

May 2018 (full-time): Visit to Middleton Place, Charleston Archives, Tennessee market where sack was found & Boone Hall Plantation (for its pecan production history); Begin drafting manuscript.

June-December 2018 (full-time): Writing; Submit manuscript to press.

Writing Approach & Chapter Outline

I intend to contextualize Ashley's Sack in the nineteenth century, early twentieth century, and our contemporary moment by using sources common to both historical and literary studies: primary documents, slave narratives, runaway slave ads, novels of slavery, and material objects, especially the sack itself. My interpretive focus will be on the material world (objects, environments) and emotional realms (feelings) that merge in the story of the sack. I will explore what kinds of objects "carry," that is, travel meaningfully across time and space to connect people with one another, to places, and to cultural memory. I will emphasize textiles and texts (arguing that Ashley's Sack is both) as particularly potent carryalls. The metaphorical language of the book will emphasize textiles, the chosen material of communication and preservation in Ashley's female family line. The chapter structure will be organized around the materiality of the sack and the items packed within it, all of which lend themselves to textured interpretations. Chapter titles are derived from lines sewn into the sack. Each chapter consists of shifting episodes that move between the present and past and together narrate interlocking over-arching stories.

Threads: An Introduction. Part 1, Rag Bin: The introduction tells the story of the 2007 discovery of Ashley’s Sack as a cast-off item, describes the bag and its material, and contextualizes the history of the cotton empire that slavery made. Part 2, Stitches: describes Ruth Middleton’s artistry in embroidering a narrative into the sack of her foremothers, proposes that Ruth’s embellishment of the textile was an act of resistance at a moment of heightened anti-black violence as well as an act of memorialization through storytelling and craft, and places Middleton’s work in the context of black women’s southern textile arts tradition. The introduction poses the questions: How can we salvage elements of the past and toward what purposes? What are the threads that connect us across the distances of time and culture? What kinds of objects are especially potent for holding and transferring collective memories?

Chapter One: “3 Handfuls of Pecans.” Part 1, Middleton Place, Now: This chapter opens with a description of Middleton Place today, a historic plantation site and popular tourist attraction outside of Charleston & traces Ashley’s Sack to Middleton Place, examining assertions about the textile’s origination at the site. Part 2, Middleton Place, Then: This section shifts to Middleton in the 19th century, exploring the environmental and social world of Ashley and Rose by focusing on Rose’s inclusion of pecans in the sack. As food items and cash crops, pecans elicit notions of land, physical nourishment and identity tied to place. The chapter asks how we might understand the painful irony that food crops that sustained life also stole life from slaves who were compelled to produce them for the master’s profit.

Chapter Two: “A braid of Roses Hair.” Part 1, Possession: interprets Rose’s inclusion of a braid by exploring black women’s hair care during slavery & the broader cultural practice of hair clipping as memento creation. It analyzes the meaning of possession and lack thereof for enslaved people, as Rose’s act of passing down hair can be read as resistance to a master’s claim on her body. A literary analysis of the missing apostrophe in the line of text stitched by Ruth Middleton calls that essential possession of self into question, highlighting Rose’s encased position and the impossible realities of being enslaved. Part 2, Entanglement: explores ways in which Rose’s gift of hair might resound for black women today. As myriad novels, anthropological and sociological studies show, black women have a complicated and often vexed relationship to their hair texture in a society that emphasizes white standards of beauty. The chapter asks how the preciousness of Rose’s present might resound for black women in the context of a critical reexamination of the significance of black women’s hair to personal and cultural memory.

Chapter Three: “A tattered dress.” Part 1 Scraps: contextualizes Rose’s gesture of packing a dress for Ashley by describing “negro cloth” and examining enslaved women’s clothing and the importance of fabric and dresses to their senses of pride and self. It addresses the extreme care and risk that enslaved women took with their adornment, daring to manufacture scraps into things of beauty in circumstances that deprived them of time, resources, and the freedom to create. It also addresses the lack of respect for black women’s bodily dignity and the forced nakedness and exposures that were commonplace in the slavery era. Part 2, Style: touches on the role of apparel in black women’s cultural lives against the backdrop of the forced indignities of slavery and asks how African American women have made personal dress style into a mode of cultural messaging and empowerment.

Love: A Conclusion. Part 1, Loss: The last words sewn into the sack: “To be filled with my Love. Always,” point to the emotional depths of love and loss between enslaved mothers and daughters. The conclusion returns to Ashley’s sale and explores the legacy of loss for unfree individuals and families. Loss, here, also refers to what we cannot know about Ashley’s past due to the barrier that slavery has imposed on historical investigations. The two losses – of kin and of memory -- are intertwined in African American experience. Part 2, Nets: The final section concludes the introductory story, picking up with the bag’s transferal from Middleton Place to a Smithsonian museum. It returns to the material nature of Ashley’s Sack to consider textiles and texts as carriers of memory and nets of meaning, as markers of beauty as well as brutality in the African American past. Ashley carried the profound burden of being

claimed as someone else's thing, a concrete circumstance of legalized banishment from the category "human." And yet, the things that Ashley carried -- material and immaterial nourishment from a person who loved her dearly -- are what we all aspire to pass on as members of the human family.

Competencies, Skills and Access

I am the author of three histories that explicate unexpected aspects of social relations and cultural change in the plantation South. I have also published historical fiction as well as articles and essays in this topic area. My current books are taught in classrooms and have also reached publics beyond the academy, particularly family historians, genealogists, and women's book clubs. My second book, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story*, focused on a plantation that is now a state historic site and won the annual best book award from the National Council on Public History. My most recent book, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (from which the sample chapter is drawn), is written in a style that borrows from the travel narrative genre. My novel, *The Cherokee Rose*, enjoys an engaged readership and has garnered high praise in reviews. I have been able to build positive and generative relationships with site interpreters and curators. These ties and collaborations strengthened my books and also grew my audiences. Thus far, my efforts to connect with curators who have cared for Ashley's Sack in South Carolina and DC have been promising.

A fair amount of the secondary sources that I will need to access are familiar to me as a slavery studies, African American women's history, and American studies scholar. I have already begun research on black women's hair politics and on environmental histories of southern plantations. I expect to access archives and sources that I have investigated before to a great extent, such as WPA slave narratives, women's full-length slave narratives, John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* collection, runaway slave ad databases, UNC Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection, the Charleston Archive of the Charleston Public Library, literary fiction on slavery, as well as the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia, where I have not yet worked. I also plan to spend significant time at the historic sites where the story is rooted, as has been my method for my last two books.

Final Product and Dissemination

This book will be short (at approximately 150 pages) in part to increase its readability for public audiences. Given the paucity of direct sources about Ashley's family, a short, evocative, lyrical book also seems best suited to this material. I believe there is an existing and racially diverse audience for this book in visitors to Middleton Place, a National Historic Landmark and to the NMAAHC, as well as in followers of the Ashley's Sack handle on Twitter and Mark Auslander's genealogical blog, "Tracing Ashley's Sack." I hope to expand that readership by tapping into public interest in women's crafting and textiles. The central figure in the book will be this remarkable bit of cloth and its ability to convey multiple stories, emotions, and meanings.

I often accompany my research with webpages where I post primary sources and photos, and most recently, with professionally designed full-scale websites. (My next book, *The Dawn of Detroit*, due out in 2017, was preceded by a website called mappingdetroitlavery.com). For this project, I would like to create a website in tandem with the book's release where readers can post images and discovery moments of their own salvaged, repurposed, and transformed textiles that speak the silent stories of African American women's experience.

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