ALL THAT SHE CARRIED
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 handfuls of
pecans a braid of Rose's hair. Told her
it be filled with love always
she never saw her again
Ashley is my grandmother

Ruth Middleton
1921
To my Grandmother Alice, Grandmother Lillian,
Grandmother Cornelia, Grandma Bertha,
Great-grandmother Ida Belle, Great-grandmother Rachael,
Great-grandmother Missouri,
Great-grandmother Anna Christian, Great-aunt Margaret,
and to all of the greats and grandmothers
whose handiwork made our survival possible
Love and empathy, together, lead to justice.

—JONATHAN L. WALTON,
A Lens of Love, 2018

Fear, too, is crucial to love.

—DIANE ACKERMAN,
A Natural History of Love, 1994
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EMERGENCY PACKS

I think we should make emergency packs—grab and run packs—in case we need to get out of here in a hurry.

—OCTAVIA E. BUTLER, *Parable of the Sower*, 1993

ROSE WAS IN EXISTENTIAL DISTRESS THAT FATEFUL winter when her would-be earthly master, Robert Martin, passed away. The place: coastal South Carolina; the year: 1852. We do not know Rose’s family name, or the place of her birth, or the year of her death. Such is the case with the vast majority of African and Indigenous American women who were bought, sold, and exploited by the hundreds of thousands. But we can be sure that Rose faced the deep kind of trouble that no one in our present time knows and only an enslaved woman has seen. Rose knew that she or her little girl, Ashley, could be next on the auction block, the cold device enslavers turned to when their finances faltered.

Ripping families apart was a common practice in a society structured by—and, indeed, dependent on—the legalized captivity of people deemed inferior. And sale could not have been the end of Rose’s worries or the worst of her fears. She must have dreaded what could occur during this relocation and after: the
physical cruelty, sexual assault, malnourishment, mental splintering, and even death that was the lot of so many young women deemed slaves. Rose and Ashley’s life together, already encased by swales of suffering, could be torn asunder in a matter of moments with the stroke of a pen. Their lives apart portended even worse without the bonds of family. Rose adored this daughter and desperately sought to keep her safe. But what could safety possibly mean in a place, at a time, when a girl not yet ten years old could be lawfully caged and bartered? What would Rose do to protect her child? What could she do as an unfree woman with no social standing, political power, economic means, or cultural currency positioned in the trenches of unpredictable and insurmountable difficulty?

The kind of fix Rose was in—life-threatening and soul-stealing—was one that Black women like her had continually encountered over more than two centuries of life in America. It was a fix articulated by the few enslaved women who managed to escape and tell their stories in the nineteenth century and, later, by Black women thinkers and artists who drew sustenance from the writings of these cultural ancestors in the generations that followed, including our own. How does a person treated like chattel express and enact a human ethic? What does an individual who is deeply devalued insist upon as her set of values? How does a woman demeaned and cowed face the abyss and still give love? Rose’s actions, outlined in a single and unusual text and barely preserved for history, give us a sense. When the auction block loomed on her little family’s horizon, Rose gathered all of her resources—material, emotional, and spiritual—and packed an emergency kit for the future. She gave that bag to her daughter, Ashley, who carried it and passed it down across the generations.

Rose possessed inner strength and creativity even as calamity
struck. Saving another’s life meant acting despite despair, and she dreamed up means of survival as well as spiritual sustenance. Surely Rose felt that what she did was far too little, much too late. Surely she feared that a battered bag would not matter enough in the end. But Rose pressed on, matching the mettle of an entrenched slave society with a glimmering will of her own. And although we cannot know exactly how events unfolded, we can conclude that Rose’s gift did affect her descendants’ lives, no matter how inconsequential her act of packing may have felt in the moment. For, three generations later, a great-granddaughter of hers, Ruth Middleton, created a remarkable “written” record attesting to Rose’s deed. Ruth’s chronicle is evidence of a long-term effect that Rose herself would never see: her female line would continue against all odds, and her will to love would be carried forward.

Rose couldn’t know how things would turn out, but she held fast to a vision. She saw her daughter alive and provided for her into the future, a radical imagining for a Black mother in the 1850s. Rose’s daughter, Ashley, realized that vision by surviving, and her great-granddaughter, Ruth, preserved their history by stitching sentences onto the surface of the sack. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, we face our own societal demons, equal in some respects to the system of slavery that would finally be slayed. The world feels dark to us, just as it must have for Rose, and like Rose, we can’t know what will happen. We think it a fantasy that we might rescue our children’s futures, or revive our democratic principles, or redeem our damaged earth. In our moment of bleak extremity, Black women of the past can be our teachers. Who better to show us how to act when hope for the future is under threat than a mother like Rose—or an entire caste of enslaved, brave women who were nothing and had nothing by the dominant standards of their time yet managed to save whom
Prologue: Emergency Packs

and what they loved? Rose and her long line of descendants realized that salvation depended on bearing up to the weight and promise of their baggage. We should, too.

Just as Rose and Ashley found on their forced journeys through slavery’s landscape, there is no safe place of escape left for us. The walls of the world are closing in. We need to get out of here in a hurry. We need to get out of these frames of mind and states of emotion that elevate mastery over compassion, division over connection, and greed over care, separating us one from another and locking us in. Our only options in this pre-
dicament, this state of political and planetary emergency, are to act as first responders or die not trying. We are the ancestors of our descendants. They are the generations we’ve made. With a “radical hope” for their survival, what will we pack into their sacks?
ALL
THAT
SHE
CARRIED
LOVE’S PRACTITIONERS

In African American life black women have been love’s practitioners.

We forget that love is revolutionary. The word, cute and overused in American culture, can feel devoid of spirit, a dead letter suitable only for easy exchange on social media platforms. But love does carry profound meanings. It indicates the radical realignment of social life. To love is to turn away from the prioritization of the ego or even one’s particular party or tribe, to give of oneself for another, to transfigure the narrow “I” into the expansive “you” or “we.” This four-letter word asks of us, then, one of the most difficult tasks in life: decentering the self for the good of another. This is a task for which we need exemplars, especially in our divisive times. Here in these pages, we take up a quiet story of transformative love lived and told by ordinary African American women—Rose, Ashley, and Ruth—whose lives spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, slavery and freedom, the South and the North. Their love story is one of sacrifice, suffering, lament, and the rescue of a tested but resilient family lineage.

By loving, Rose refused to accept the tenets of her time: that
people could be treated as property, that wealth was a greater value than honor, that some lives had no worth beyond capital and gain. Hers is just one telling example of refusal from the collective experience of enslaved Black women, who practiced love and preserved life when all hope seemed lost. Even when she relinquished her daughter to the slave trade against her will, Rose insisted on love. Despite and during their separation, Rose’s value of love prevailed. The emotional bond between mother and daughter held longevity and elasticity, traversing the final decade of chattel slavery, the chaos of the Civil War, and the red dawn of emancipation before finding new expression in the early twentieth century just as a baby girl, the fifth generation of Rose’s lineage, Ashley’s great-granddaughter, was born.

Just as remarkable as this story of women who dared to insist on love is how we have come to know about it. Rose’s testament, as told by Ruth, is preserved on an antique sack that once held grain or seeds. Traces of the abused and adored, the devalued and the salvaged, the lost and the found accrue in this one-of-a-kind object. A mother bears the sacrifice of her daughter; a daughter carries on amid unspeakable loss; a descendant heaves the harrowing tale into the twentieth century; and we have the chance to be the better for its arrival here on our doorstep. Through the medium of the sack, we glimpse the visionary fortitude of enslaved Black mothers, the miraculous love Black women bore for kin, the insistence on radical humanization that Black women carried for the nation, and the immeasurable value of material culture to the histories of the marginalized. Although Black women have been treated like “the mules of the world,” in the words of writer Zora Neale Hurston, this sack bears them up as at times exemplifying, to borrow Abraham Lincoln’s phrase on the precipice of the Civil War, the “better angels of our nature.”


Ruth Middleton, a lineal descendant of Rose, embroidered the lines that follow on what Ruth identified as the original cotton sack Rose packed.

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 handfuls of
pecans a braid of Rose's hair. Told her
It be filled with my Love always
she never saw her again
Ashley is my grandmother
Ruth Middleton
1921
With these words a granddaughter, mother, sewer, and storyteller imbued a piece of fabric with all the drama and pathos of ancient tapestries depicting the deeds of queens and goddesses. She preserved the memory of her foremothers and also venerated these women, shaping their image for the next generations. Without Ruth, there would be no record. Without her record, there would be no history. Ruth’s act of creation mirrored that of her great-grandmother Rose. Through her embroidery, Ruth ensured that the valiance of discounted women would be recalled and embraced as a treasured inheritance.

The stained antique fabric once grasped in Ruth Middleton’s hands now hangs in an underground case at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), in Washington, D.C. The artifact, which is on loan from its current institutional owner, the Middleton Place Foundation in Charleston, South Carolina, immediately takes hold of those who view it. Ruth’s intellectual work of interpreting Rose and Ashley’s story and her handiwork in stitching it onto the sack in color produce a composite object of arresting visual and emotional impact. A testament to the national past fashioned of many thinning threads, it has an effect subtler yet more moving than the stone monuments built for pro-slavery statesmen and Confederate generals that have been widely contested in recent years. Those memorials, erected to bury a nation’s sin, were made to be larger than life to command a presence in national memory. At the same time, though, Confederate monuments undermined the aspirational principles of America’s founding: freedom, equality, and democracy. Ashley’s sack makes no such pretense to vainglory. It does not have to. A quiet assertion of the right to life, liberty, and beauty even for those at the bottom, the sack stands in eloquent defense of the country’s ideals by indicting its failures.
The sack crystallizes the drama of a region and a nation torn apart by the moral crisis of human sale and forced separation. But it also possesses a quality so tangibly intimate and personal that it filters a light of remembrance on the viewer’s own familial bonds, leading any of us to ask what things our own families possess that connect us to our past and to wonder what we might gain from the contemplation of that connection. Such is the capacious nature of Ashley’s sack that it can call hearts to attention while also speaking to local, regional, and national histories. Although the bag’s material contents have long been lost, its essential provision—love of a mother for her daughter—still remains. Every turn in the sack’s use—from its packing in the 1850s, to its tending across the dawn of a century, to its embroidering in the 1920s—reveals a family endowment that stands as an alternative to the callous capitalism bred in slavery. In the face of the base commercialization of their own bodies, these Black kinswomen cared for one another, preserving the next generations by provisioning their perseverance and remembering the past generations who defended their right to life. As the women in Rose’s lineage carried the sack through the decades, the sack itself bore memories of bondage and bravery, genius and generosity, longevity and love.

STORY CLOTHS

My own grandmother’s voice travels across warm breezes on a hilly side street in Cincinnati, Ohio. I am nine years old, or twelve and a half, or twenty-one.

“Lord only knows what we woulda done if she hadn’t saved that cow.”

Grandmother has told this story countless times to me, her
rapt audience of one, and to other women relatives in private moments over the years. Her dark eyes peer at me with the light of love behind her oversized men’s glasses, the sort that come cheapest with her Medicare plan. She does not need glamour or fanfare. The red brick porch of the Craftsman cottage is her stage. She sits on her lounger with the metal frame, its pillows changed out many times and now mismatched in shape and pattern. Her skin is the honey of bees’ combs, soft as crepe and just as creased. Her hair is a wreath of pressed cotton, once black, now white. A sleeveless, pale blue shift drapes to her calves, exposing ankles swollen from a lifetime of domestic labor in others’ homes and agricultural labor on others’ farms. She leans back and folds her hands across the broad moon of her belly, which birthed six babies in Mississippi and seven more in Ohio. In the summertime, she keeps a cool drink on the ledge of the porch wall—lemonade or sun tea sealed in a Mason jar. She reaches for the cooling liquid, wets her lips, and continues. She is my first storyteller, the one who tends me when I am sick, the one who bakes my favorite rice pudding. She is my beloved.

“If it wasn’t for my sister Margaret,” my grandmother preaches, “we woulda had nothin’ left.”

This was the defining story of my grandmother’s childhood in Mississippi. It told of a fragile family and a brave Black girl. My maternal grandmother, Alice Aliene, was born in Lee County to a mother much younger than her father. Her father, Price, was tall as an oak, with bark-dark skin. He had “eyes like an eagle’s,” to hear my grandmother tell it, which she claimed he got from a “half-Indian parent.” Price had been born into slavery’s last days. He told my grandmother, and she told me, that he had been sold away from his mother. Maybe this is why the 1870 federal census lists Price as an eight-year-old alone, with no guardian or family.
My grandmother’s mother, Ida Belle, was the yin to Price’s yang, youthful, light-skinned, with long raven hair “swinging down her back.” This mother, romanticized in the adoration of my grandmother’s words, had somehow come from means. Ida Belle had been born in St. Louis; she could read and write; she could figure with numbers. Ida Belle’s father was white and unnamed in my grandmother’s stories. Ida Belle’s mother had had no choice about this intimacy. “When those white men wanted to go with you,” my grandmother explained to me, “you went.” Ida Belle had a bit of money, a set of gold-edged plates (now in my mother’s display case), and even twenty-five acres of land in her possession. Price, Ida Belle, and their splitting-the-seams farm family of nine were getting by in rural Mississippi, the state that had harbored the worst forms of torturous, Cotton Belt slavery and would later see the gruesome murders of three civil rights workers in 1964’s Freedom Summer. They farmed 165 acres, produced between 25 and 30 bales of cotton per year, and made around $100 to $125 per bale. They had “plenty to eat” back in the 1920s, my grandmother said, and lived “comfortable” on their land. She remembered their white house with the big hallway, long porch with a double swing, “fifteen to twenty head of cows,” glossy green vegetable garden, and fruit cobblers cooling in the kitchen.

And then the family fell into debt, owing someone around fifty or sixty dollars. White men came from town, riding on horses. They appeared armed with papers that they insisted Price must sign. This was a trap. While Ida Belle could have read the contract, Price had never been educated. My grandmother inserts this detail into the story as if it might have made a difference, as if Ida Belle might have marched down to that road in a long skirt and flour-sack apron, ferreted out the secret intention, and prevented the family’s financial downfall. But I
know after twenty-five years of studying Black women’s history, and my grandmother must have known from experience as she told me the story back then, that a Black woman was better off hidden than smart when white men came calling in pre–civil rights Mississippi. “I remember seeing her standing on the porch crying,” my grandmother said of her mother. Price signed the documents with his X. Weeks later, the men returned, claiming that Price had relinquished the farm. Who knows what the black marks on those papers really conveyed? The truth became irrelevant the moment those men returned with guns.

My grandmother’s words pick up speed and seem to chase each other now as she tells the story, or maybe it is my memory that blurs the details. All is panic. Who runs to hide? Who stands by as witness? Price argues with the men. Ida Belle flies to locate her young ones. The children cower. The dogs warn. The family evacuates as alarm evolves into knowing fear.

They were being evicted by the Law of the South, which is to say by white supremacist whimsy. They had little time to think or plan, to collect and pack their necessities. They grabbed at dishes, blankets, clothing but lost all of their wealth, which was the land itself, the farmhouse, and the livestock. The men took the family’s cows, which had belonged to Ida Belle. “I never will forget them, in the wagon with the horses, going on down the road,” my grandmother told me. But my grandmother’s sister Margaret, she was shrewd and she was quick. While commotion raged at the front door, Margaret slipped out the back, fetched a cow from the pasture, and led it over to the farm of Old Man Rose. He helped them, later allowing the family to rent one of his houses. My grandmother never mentioned his race.²

That cow was the only thing of significant value rescued from my ancestors’ farm besides their lives. The expulsion drove
my grandmother’s family into poverty. This poverty, this pressure, this unrelenting fear of loss would later push my grandmother to marry young and migrate, out of the jaws of the Jim Crow South and into the teeth of the segregated North. But the act of strength and daring shown by Margaret that day enriched them in spirit despite their woes. This is how I remember my grandmother telling it. My great-aunt Margaret, only a teen, saved the day. And my grandmother wrapped the moment up in a silk sleeve of artful story.

I never had the chance to meet this dauntless aunt. I have never even glimpsed a picture of her. But I had seen and touched and admired the work of her hands, a connection just as powerful. My grandmother kept a quilt in her bedroom that Margaret had stitched sometime after the ouster. The quilt bears an appliqué fan design: rose and mint-colored circles and ovals alternating with a regularity broken only by shifts in shade. The backing has cobalt and powder-blue polka dots on a vanilla-cream background that brings to mind the sweet smells of an ice cream parlor. Margaret had folded a blue-dot border onto the edges of the appliqué side, mixing the mild pastel fans with an altogether different feel that smacked of modernist dots and splodges. She imposed what did not fit onto her visual canvas, the mark of a creative soul as well as a rebel. This girl, whom I would never know except through stories handed down, was both a maker and a savior. She is remembered in family lore in a way that reflects regional history tinged by archetypal myth.

I inherited my great-aunt’s quilt when my grandmother passed away, more than fifteen years ago. The quilt was for my grandmother, and is for me, a treasured textile. It seems to have absorbed into its fibers the intangible essence of a past time. When I gaze at the vibrant colors of this quilt (including stains of an ancestor’s blood), I see my grandmother as a girl and
imagine the faces of her kin. I feel each syllable of that many-eyed monster, Mississippi—a place where heat, terror, and love intertwined. The story of Margaret saving the cow fused with the quilt’s material. The most traumatic event of my grandmother’s childhood is embedded in it. The history of Africans in America is brutal, but we have made art out of pain, sustaining our spirits with sunbursts of beauty, teaching ourselves how to rise the next day.

I was born in the 1970s, a chaotic time to be sure, but more hopeful by bounds than the 1920s, when my grandmother and her sisters were young. I never knew enslavement firsthand, never experienced legal segregation, yet I savor the story of Mar-
garet, her cow, and her quilt now more than ever. This fabric and the tale I associate with it have blanketed and anchored me, a reminder of dignity preserved, and of the hope in our dire times that something necessary for the preservation and elevation of life might, in the end, be saved.

There are myriad lessons in the story of the cow. What strikes me upon this telling, as I also ponder Ashley’s sack, is the emphasis on girls and women, acts of rescue, and the salvaging of vital things that hold the deep meanings of our lives. This family story is about the resourcefulness of women and girls, even the most marginalized and maligned of them. It illustrates how the overburdened of the world can persist through unanticipated hardship. And this story suggests how instructive memories of perseverance from the past can be, especially when fastened to things that serve as aids of recall and connection.

I link the eviction to the quilt because of the heroine they have in common. In the case of Ashley’s sack, the attachment is even more material. That story from the past is sewn directly onto the fabric. As the oft-quoted scholar of U.S. women’s history Laurel Thatcher Ulrich recounts in her book *The Age of Homespun*, folks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sometimes affixed stories to objects, tucking fragments of paper about origins or events from the times into woven baskets, or pinning information about an object’s owner onto the heels of woolen stockings, or even painting wordy descriptions onto wooden chests of drawers. This impulse to preserve past knowledge by hitching narrative explanation to items exhibits what Ulrich calls the “mnemonic power of goods.” Things become bearers of memory and information, especially when enhanced by stories that expand their capacity to carry meaning. And if those things are textiles, stories about women’s lives seem to adhere with special tenacity, even as fabrics, because of their vul-
nerability to deterioration and frequent lack of attribution to a maker, have been among the last kinds of materials that historians look to in order to understand what has occurred, how, and why.

My attachment to an ancestral quilt tethers me to the breathtaking weight of the African American past. Certainly, my own history is partly what drew me toward the sack, inspiring a wish to know the women behind the object and explore more deeply traditions of African American craft and family bequeathal. This is a feeling I’m sure to share with other women (and men) of Black, southern, rural, or crafting heritages. Many of us have felt in our lives the allure of the cloth as a twining cord connecting us to history. Some save and repair hand-me-down table linens. Others hunt the flea market aisles for vintage fabrics. A few of us learn the skills of traditional sewing and quilting to reproduce the experience and art of our foremothers. The past seems to reach out to us through these fabrics and the practices of making them that have survived over time. Gathered up like crisp ends of a cotton sheet fresh from the washing, past and present seem to meet above the fold. We feel a sense of contact with the women who preceded us. We wonder if gaining knowledge about their lives can shine new perspective on our own. And as we discover the lives of these women from a time so different from ours, we enhance our ability to peer across other differences—of race and culture, class and status, ability and disability, youth and age. In this intermediate space where the fold of the fabric forms, we glimpse not only our foremothers’ lives but also our foremothers’ allies and adversaries. We begin to see the makeup of all their intersecting worlds and appreciate a larger swath of interwoven experience. We notice a shift from the self to the other, from personal and family history to local, national, and even global history. This dawning awareness leads us to trace all of the inter-
twined threads, to appreciate that there is one earth and one humankind, one social fabric of many folds in dire need of mending.

It may not be coincidence that we feel this expansion of self in the quaint attic rooms or antiques shops where we ponder the fibers that remain. An essential medium of social messaging, fabric announced information (often about social status), triggered memory (of events and people), and even bestowed protective magic (through embedded sacred material and shared belief). Before word processors, the printing press, and wood-pulp paper, cloth fashioned by women makers preserved the “mythohistories” of entire groups. Noblewomen spun thread on gold and silver spindles, fashioning tapestries with grand visual narration. In ancient Greece, Europe, and the Mediterranean, cloth did the work of retaining stories of distant kin, as women “recorded the deeds and/or myths of their clans in their weaving.” These tapestries, laden with messages of historical events and mythological symbolism, bore a critical record-keeping and cultural function as “story cloths.”

While few ancient women had the luxury of twining their thread on golden spindles, the tradition of the story cloth of yore continues in the pieced quilts and cotton windowpane coverlets, embroidery samplers and crocheted afghans that we hand down through families with stories attached.

Though early women’s history can be elusive, women need not “conjure a history for ourselves,” says the archaeologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber. We do not have to magically pull our collective past out of thin air. “Very little of the ancient literary record was devoted to women,” Barber continues. “Here among the textiles, on the other hand, we can find some of the hard evidence we need.” Similarly, in her essay “African-American Women’s Quilting,” the historian Elsa Barkley Brown insists
that if we “follow the cultural guides which African-American women have left us,” we will “understand their world.” Barber, a specialist in the ancient past, and Brown, a scholar of the recent past, agree on this: our foremothers wove spiritual beliefs, cultural values, and historical knowledge into their flax, woolen, silk, and cotton webs. The work of their hands can lead us back to their histories and serve as guide rails as we grope through the difficult past. Here I attempt, alongside you, an unpredictable expedition into the lives of Black women during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation, locating them in the contexts of their dynamic social worlds by tracing the threads of a story cloth. I seek to uncover the story of an enigmatic object and its makers; to explore the historical meanings of things in Black women’s lives, Black lives, and women’s lives; and to stitch into our cultural memory the chief values Rose upheld: love, hope, and salvation.

ASHLEY’S SACK AS ARCHIVE

As multiple things rolled into one, Ashley’s sack is an extraordinary artifact of the cultural and craft productions of African American women. Nothing else quite like it has yet been uncovered in the trunks, closets, or museum storage rooms of the North, South, or West. And the sack is more than an artifact. It is an archive of its own, a collection of disparate materials and messages. It is at once a container, carrier, textile, art piece, and record of past events. As with any archive, we cannot presume that this sack bears straightforward, unassailable facts. Using the object responsibly as a source for historical inquiry means asking questions of it and, as uncomfortable as it might feel, maintaining a willingness to poke holes into it. Placing this artifact in
Introduction: Love’s Practitioners

conversation with other sources and considering its various historical contexts can help us test its reliability in the service of historical understanding as well as the search for “symbolic truths” that transcend hard evidence and speak to the intangible meanings of our collective human lives. Taking care with a singular and mostly undocumented object calls for a cautious process of interpreting inadequate records, interrupting my own narrative at times to bare its reconstructive elements, and unraveling some commonly held story lines—about the sack, the South, and even this country—in order to loosely weave others. While these pages will offer grounded interpretations based on evidence, comparison, and context, they will also accommodate supposition and imagination, recognizing that there are a great many things about the past that we cannot know for certain, especially with regard to populations whose lives were mostly underrecorded or misunderstood. In this joint research, reading, and writing endeavor, Black feminist historical methods are usable hands-on tools. Among these approaches is a determined archival practice modeled by the historian Marisa Fuentes, who acknowledges the “violence” and “distortion” of traditional archives while refusing to abandon enslaved Black women to that discursive abyss. Employing methods of dogged documentary collection and analysis, Fuentes probes the records of slave owners, slave sellers, and slave jailers in Barbados looking for traces of Black women and following those clues across the historical and geographical terrain like bread crumbs. With fabric as her metaphor, Fuentes terms her archival strategy reading “along the bias grain.” It is an approach that I apply throughout this exploration, but most prominently in the second chapter, where I embark on a search for Rose.

I also adapt the writing practice beautifully captured by cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman as “narrating the time of slavery.
as our present.” Hartman advocates incorporating a sense of the present moment and its failures to secure full freedom for Black people into our historical interpretations of slavery, as a means of illuminating “the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead.” Writers “narrating counter-histories of slavery” and present-day inheritors of the legacy of slavery carry a responsibility not to forget our close ties to these lives, Hartman insists. Because archives do not faithfully reveal or honor the enslaved, tending this intimacy with the dead necessitates new methods, including a trans-temporal consciousness and use of restrained imagination.

I take up Hartman’s notion of past and present abutment, of imaginative license, and of recognizing the persistence of archival gaps. In select moments where I encounter archival deficit, I imagine onto the page the figures of Rose, Ashley, and Ruth. At other times, I take an opposite approach of marking their absence in the record, so that we remain aware of how the real conditions of their lives precipitated not only physical and psychological trauma but also archival diminishment. My way of linking past and present and, indeed, the future into this exploration is to make my best effort to bring these women vividly into our minds while linking their circumstances and hard-won wisdom to great urgencies of our present moment, such as the federal mistreatment of migrant children, the cultural neglect of African American heirlooms, the political betrayal of democratic principles, the economic cleavage of rich from poor, and the global shadow of an existential threat—for these women, chattel bondage; for us, climate change—that demands long-term, big-picture, cooperative response.

Finally, I practice a third approach in this work that is more expertly applied by art historians and archaeologists. In addition to stretching historical documents, bending time, and imagin-
ing alternative realities into and alongside archival fissures, I ask that we seek out the actual material—the things enslaved people touched, made, used, and carried—in order to understand the past. As Caribbean studies scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot has trenchantly expressed it, referring to the basic material foundation of all life and, hence, inquiry: “The materiality of this first moment is so obvious that some of us take it for granted. . . . History begins with bodies and artifacts.”

We, too, will begin with an artifact fashioned by hand and pressed against bodies long buried. Our journey with Black women’s things in this book runs in a threaded loop, from Ruth’s time, to Rose’s era, to Ashley’s moment, and back again. The past stays with us, wrapped inside our storied quilts, packed into our cotton bags, and written upon our memories. Past is present is passed on.

MAKING LOVE

Aptly called a “revelation” by a museum interpreter at the Middleton Place plantation, Ashley’s sack illuminates the contours of enslaved Black women’s experiences, the emotional imperatives of their existences, the things they required to survive, and what they valued enough to pass down. For without their possessions, Black women, like any other people, could not sustain or express their lives. Although it may seem counterintuitive at first, attention to material things, especially ones elaborated by words or pictures, opens a route to accessing intangible feelings and desires that can evade the documentary record. Humans are composite beings, made of matter and infused with spirit. We have always collected, created, and surrounded ourselves with material objects in order to express that inner ineffability. “The things we interact with are an inescapable part of who we
are,” as one historian of the environment has put it, and hence things become our “fellow travelers” in this life.\textsuperscript{17} The physical traces left behind therefore allow us to glimpse what our forebears found worthy of making and keeping, and what, by implication, they held dear.

What did Rose value enough to save, pack, and carry? How did she turn her vision of what mattered in life into action? The things Rose gathered for her daughter, according to the memory of her great-granddaughter, indicate her thoughts and guiding principles. She sought to immediately address a hierarchy of needs: food, clothing, shelter, identity through lineage, and, most centrally, an affirmation of worthiness. The wise values upheld by Rose reverberate across the testimony of African American women from the slavery era. Rose’s kit was, by all evidences, one of a kind, but she shared with other women in her condition a vision for survival that required both material and emotional resources. Rose supported Ashley’s life through the collection and storage of stuff: a dress, nuts, a lock of hair, and the cotton tote itself—things shaped by the intermingling of southern nature and southern cultures. Rose then sealed those items, rendering them sacred, with the force of an emotional promise: a mother’s enduring love.

The inscription on Ashley’s bag contains a list that is nothing less than a prescription for survival. It allows us to appreciate what women in bondage deemed essential, what they were capable of getting their hands on, and what they were determined to salvage. We save first that which we value most. Rose was determined to rescue her daughter. She understood, as did other Black women with their backs against a wall of entrenched dehumanization and impoverishment, that survival for future generations meant fusing whatever one had together, the material and the emotional: making love.\textsuperscript{18} The work of Rose’s hands, as
captured by her great-granddaughter’s words, illuminates the importance of materiality as well as emotionality to Black women’s survival strategies.

You can sense by now that this is not a traditional history. It leans toward evocation rather than argumentation and is rather more meditation than monograph. As science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin has previously said about the novel, a work of history could be conceptualized as a sack. “A book holds words,” Le Guin explains. “Words hold things. They bear meanings.”

This book bears meanings about the burdens of being human in an inhumane world; about the treasures, traumas, and capacities we inherit and carry; and about the means we have at our disposal for recalling and acknowledging the assembled wisdom of ancestral women. Chapter 1 introduces Ruth as the intellect behind the cloth record and sets the stage of colonial South Carolina, the place Ruth names as the scene of the crime. Chapter 2 confronts the devaluation of women like Rose in the records of American slavery and asks how we can recover the ignored and dispossessed. Chapter 3 ponders Rose’s act of packing and discovers how her deliberate movement and carefully selected items were a claim for motherly love and familial continuity. Chapter 4 examines the dress Rose packed, exploring the things enslaved women cherished and unveiling how they used personal objects like clothing to protect dignity and reinforce relational ties. Chapter 5 explores the emotional world of the slave mother against the backdrop of the auction block, which hoisted Charleston and the South Carolina interior to heights of untoward luxury. Chapter 6 uncovers a survival culture rooted in nature, including the pecans inherited by Ashley after sale set her adrift. Chapter 7 follows the sack bearers after the Civil War, exploring women’s stories of trauma and healing as exemplified by Ruth’s embroidery. The Conclusion weighs
the value of things, including textiles and sacks, to African American history and American imaginings of the future.

Beyond the trinity of Rose, Ruth, and Ashley, a circle of Black women writers and storytellers will emerge in these pages. Some, like Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley, may be familiar as authors of classic slave narratives assigned in college classrooms; others, like Louisa Picquet, Eliza Potter, Melnea Cass, and Mamie Garvin Fields, are lesser-known figures with equally revealing stories. Harriet Jacobs, a survivor of slavery in North Carolina who executed a painstaking plan to free herself and her children, is the author of one of the most analytically sophisticated slave narratives in the genre. Elizabeth Keckley, an enslaved woman from Virginia taken to North Carolina and St. Louis by her owners, was a dressmaker for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and an autobiographical writer of the Civil War years. Louisa Picquet lived a harrowing existence of serial sexual abuse in several states. Nevertheless, Picquet persisted in loving the family torn from her in slavery, as well as the children that she conceived with her enslavers. She told her story in print form to purchase her mother’s freedom. Eliza Potter, a self-professed fine artist of hairdressing and lay historian, plied her craft as a free Black woman in Cincinnati and points south while publishing a tell-all memoir about her wealthy slaveholding clients. Melnea Cass, a community organizer and women’s club leader in Boston, had moved north with her family during the first wave of the Great Migration and contributed to the shaping of a mutually supportive and politically conscious Black urban community. South Carolinian Mamie Garvin Fields taught school, co-founded a club for Black women in Charleston, and published a memoir with her granddaughters that exemplifies, in full-length book form, the relationships between telling, hearing, and preserving Black family stories.20
Each of these authors professed a deep and committed love for their own families, for captive Black people, and for the principle of ethical action rooted in relationship. Together, these women and many others whose voices emerge in slave narratives, interviews, and letters create a chorus of corroboration for Rose, Ashley, and Ruth’s tale, which illuminates separation, survival, and love as core features of Black women’s experience. Because formerly enslaved women regularly veiled the worst of their trials and the most private of their feelings, especially regarding the sexual atrocities that the tyranny of slavery encouraged, we will also turn for emotional context to contemporary Black women writers, whose literary representations in fiction and poetry approach an affective realm beyond the reach of historical accounts. The women leading our way in these pages are the lineal ancestors of families whose migration spans from South to North, cultural ancestors of a Black racial family rocked by the hardships of history, and national ancestors of a broader American family whose social, economic, and political roots are buried in the mire of slavery. And as much as we are one human family that knows the feel of growing dread and shattered hope, they are the emotional ancestors of us all.

While working on this manuscript, I often turned to colleagues who regularly sew and presented my tangled knot of questions. To one of them, a close friend who makes her own wardrobe, studies prison garb, and writes about family relations as fabric, I put a query that arose as I contemplated Ruth’s embroidery: “In sewing, is there a name for the space between the stitches?” My friend considered this for a beat before answering no and leaving me to settle for my own gangly phrasing. The story of Ashley’s sack that I endeavor to tell in these pages bares its thin spots
and holes while simultaneously showing how material objects can help us to assemble rich histories of the marginalized. This book follows an odyssey set in motion by one Black woman whose ideals and actions, as recalled by her great-granddaughter, shaped a family’s perseverance against the odds. It is a cautionary tale about the personal pain and collective price exacted when a society devalues what is precious. And it is an invitation for those who would honor histories of the lost to embrace the spaces between the stitches.
PRAISE FOR
ALL THAT SHE CARRIED

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD
WINNER OF THE PEN/JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH AWARD
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NAMED ONE OF TEN BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE WASHINGTON POST, VULTURE, SLATE, AND PUBLISHER’S WEEKLY

BY TIYA MILES

All That She Carried
The Dawn of Detroit
The Cherokee Rose
Tales from the Haunted South
The House on Diamond Hill
Ties That Bind
“What container can hold so big a thing as love? In what small, silent objects can loss be stored, and passed on, screams of pain, and yet, somehow, too, hushed whispers of solace? In All That She Carried, the peerless Tiya Miles confronts both the staggering anguish and atrocity of American slavery and the still more staggering courage and beauty of the lives she chronicles. A history told with brilliance and tenderness and fearlessness.”

—Jill Lepore, author of These Truths: A History of the United States

“All That She Carried is a brilliant exercise in historical excavation and recovery, a successful strike against the traditional archives’ erasure of the lives of enslaved African-American women. With creativity, determination, and great insight, Miles illuminates the lives of women who suffered much, but never forgot the importance of love and family.”

—Annette Gordon-Reed, author of The Hemingses of Monticello

“Tiya Miles is a gentle genius. The histories she writes are as deeply feeling as they are brilliantly researched and her writing is both elegant and tender. All That She Carried is a gorgeous book and a model for how to read as well as feel the precious artifacts of Black women’s lives.”

—Imani Perry, author of Breathe: A Letter to My Sons

“All That She Carried is a moving literary and visual experience about love between a mother and daughter and about many women descendants down through the years. Above all it is Miles’s lyrical story, written in her signature penetrating prose, about the power of objects and memory, as well as human endurance, in the history of slavery. Ashley’s sack carries us into another world as it reveals our own. The book is nothing short of a revelation.”

—David W. Blight, Yale University, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom
“Tiya Miles has written a beautiful book about the tragic materiality of black women’s lives across three generations, through slavery and freedom. She also allows readers to witness the historian’s craft; how she carefully reconstructs marginalized and forgotten lives from and beyond unyielding and indifferent archives. This book is for anyone interested in learning about black people’s centrality to American history.”

—Stephanie Jones-Rogers, author of They Were Her Property

“We live in a world that undervalues, ignores, and erases the work and the humanity of Black women. Ashley’s Sack, as it is known, with its short and simple message of intergenerational love, becomes a portal through which Tiya Miles views and reimagines the inner lives of Black women. She excavates the history of Black women who face insurmountable odds and invent a language that can travel across time. She unearths how Black women fashion for their daughters sacks and words that will carry them into uncertain futures. All That She Carried is a stunning work of history and humanism, and Tiya Miles is one of our most eloquent chroniclers of the African American experience.”

—Michael Eric Dyson, author of Long Time Coming: Reckoning with Race in America

“Tiya Miles uses the tools of her trade to tend to Black people, to Black mothers and daughters, to our wounds, to collective Black love and loss. This book demonstrates Miles’ signature genius in its rare balance of both rigor and care.”

—Brittney Cooper, author of Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower
“Only a brilliant storyteller like Tiya Miles could get Ashley’s sack to speak across the generations. This story, about an enslaved girl’s simple cotton bag and its few embroidered lines, encourages us to pick up our treasured family keepsakes and recognize the love that they contain. Blending urgency, imagination, and poetic prose, All That She Carried is a masterpiece work of African American women’s history that reveals what it takes to survive and even thrive. Read this book and then pass it on to someone you love—it is a fitting tribute to Ashley, her mother Rose, and all those foremothers who endured.”

—Martha S. Jones, author of Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote and Insisted on Equality for All

“This absorbing, heartfelt and beautifully written book traces the story of one family through a simple cotton sack to reveal the determination of one woman, sold into slavery, to protect the next generations from harm. In researching Rose’s life, Tiya Miles uncovers the—too often unheard—voices of Black female slaves; and tells of their appalling suffering and remarkable stoicism.”

—Clare Hunter, Sunday Times-bestselling author of Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle and Embroidering Her Truth

“It is such a small sack, made of such very rough material. Yet as Tiya Miles shows, this textile given by a mother to her child at a time of greatest peril not only holds within it the whole unforgivable history of Transatlantic slavery, it also contains the greatest thing that anything can contain: love.”

—Victoria Finlay, author of Fabric: The Hidden History of the Material World
“A deeply layered and insightful book . . . [This] lyrical account presents the obscene inhumanity of slavery while celebrating the humanity of its victims. . . . While it may not be traditional history, it is certainly great history. All That She Carried is a broad and bold reflection on American history, African American resilience, and the human capacity for love and perseverance in the face of soul-crushing madness.”

—The Washington Post

“A remarkable book, striking a delicate balance between two seemingly incommensurate approaches: Miles’s fidelity to her archival material, as she coaxes out facts grounded in the evidence; and her conjectures about this singular object, as she uses what is known about other enslaved women’s lives to suppose what could have been.”


“[A] powerful history of women and slavery.”

—The New Yorker

“All That She Carried is a master class in the use of context in historical writing. Stymied by a lack of records, Miles thinks around the sack from every available angle. . . . Through her interpretation, the humble things in the sack take on ever greater meaning, its very survival seems magical, and Rose’s gift starts to feel momentous in scale.”

—Rebecca Onion, Slate

“Miles compels us to consider how objects hold a certain metaphysical space where memories and emotions meet, making them valuable and transformative sites for scholarly focus. . . . All That She Carried is the epitome of an artifactual Black women’s history, one which begins with a cloth sack but ends with the bodies that held it.”

—Chicago Review of Books
“[A] deeply and lovingly researched account . . . But even as a historian’s creed dictates that corroborated facts are the most important ones, Miles honors the women with not only the scant facts she could gather, but also with belief that the story Ruth told was true. To bolster that belief and to fill in the gaps of the record, Miles relies on narratives from the formerly enslaved, primarily those of women, to illustrate what life was like for Black women and girls such as Rose and Ashley. . . . Miles’ book gets as close as any document can to explaining why the sack remains so powerful. It contains great misery, but it is also a testament to the power of story, witness and unyielding love.”

—Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“[An] extraordinary story . . . Unique and unforgettable, this volume is also a critique of the importance of archives and those who are routinely left out, to the detriment of us all.”

—Ms.

“[The] sparkling tale of an embroidered bag from 1921. On its surface, Ashley’s sack is an intimate family heirloom. In Miles’s artful hands, though, the object is transformed—an embodied memoir of Black women traveling from slavery to freedom, South to North, carrying relics and hopes as they seek new lives.”

—Oprahdaily.com

“[A] brilliant and compassionate account . . . With careful historical examination as well as empathetic imagination, Miles effectively demonstrates the dignity and mystery of lives that history often neglects and opens the door to the examination of many untold stories. A strikingly vivid account of the impact of connection on this family and others.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
“[Tiya Miles] paints an evocative portrait of slavery and Black family life in this exquisitely crafted history. . . . Miles brilliantly shows how material items possessed the ‘ability to house and communicate . . . emotions like love, values like family, states of being like freedom.’ This elegant narrative is a treasure trove of insight and emotion.”

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“All That She Carried is the poignant tale of a family heirloom passed down through generations of Black women. . . . This volume paints the fascinating history of Ashley’s sack in a readable, episodic account . . . a riveting account of how Ashley’s sack was rediscovered and traces Ruth’s journey through the Great Migration while exploring the family’s lineage. Filled with rare, archival photographs of objects from the era, this volume is a natural choice for book clubs and a must-buy for public and academic libraries alike.”

—Booklist (starred review)

“With skillful writing, the author carefully explores South Carolina’s history of economic dependence on slavery, and discusses the efforts of enslaved people to obtain sustenance and clothing and maintain family connections. Drawing on scant genealogical records and letters from people who were formerly enslaved, as well as research on ornamentation, Miles creates a moving account of three women whose stories might have otherwise been lost to history. Readers interested in often-looked lives and experiences, and anyone who cherishes a handcrafted heirloom, will enjoy this fascinating book.”

—Library Journal (starred review)