



Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities

Lynden Sculpture Garden, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

“I’m Building Me a Home”

Prophetic Memories and the Lives of Eliza

I’m building me a home
I’m building me a home
This earthly house is gonna soon decay
And my soul gotta have, oh Lord, some place to stay

—African American Spiritual

In 2004, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center exhibited a historic slave pen that once served as a holding cell for enslaved men and women being transported from the Upper South to the expanding cotton plantations of the Deep South and the emerging West. The Freedom Center undertook the meticulous and costly project of restoring the slave pen, originally built in Kentucky in the first half of the nineteenth century, in an effort to return the once dilapidated structure to its original form. Now sturdy and imposing, the slave pen is the reigning attraction in the center of a cavernous exhibition hall, giving viewers an opportunity to touch, quite literally, slavery’s wooden walls.

In *Eliza’s Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities*, Chicago-based artist Fo Wilson creates a slave cabin that is less an exact replica of an erstwhile slave past, and more a testament to slavery’s enduring legacies in this, the season of our own despair. The walls of this cabin are not prison walls, strong and sturdy and thick. They are rather, like the walls of Jericho, fallen and open and inviting. These walls are waiting to be stormed; they are asking onlookers to enter.

At the center of this cabinet of curiosities is the enigmatic Eliza, a fictional slave woman whose presence is very much felt in the cabin, though she herself remains ephemeral. By stages and degrees, Wilson reveals the life of Eliza who occupies the cabin and fills it with the lost and found and made objects of a life lived in slavery. We know her by the whimsies she collects: Uncle Remus wallpaper, a pair of tattered boxing gloves whose horsehair padding oozes through cracked leather. We know her in the dainty table napkins she places carefully atop a small writing desk. We know her in the candles and delicate hand mirrors that decorate the cabin. She is revealed in the visual puns she tells and in her mischievous seditions, a trumpet blaring silently from the mouth of an otherwise respectably comporting free woman and wife.

Of course, in conjuring the name “Eliza” Wilson sounds an echo of other enslaved women. One thinks, of course, of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Eliza, the runaway slave in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, who “vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap—impossible to anything but madness and despair...” And we are reminded of Solomon Northup who, writing in *Twelve Years a Slave*, recounts the story of another Eliza: “I have seen mothers kissing for the last time the faces of their dead offspring; I have seen them looking down into the grave, as the earth fell with a dull sound upon their coffins... but never have I seen such an exhibition of intense, unmeasured, and unbounded grief, as when Eliza was parted from her child.” But if Wilson gestures toward this litany of Elizas—seeing a sorority of scars in the pain and trauma that so marked the lives of all enslaved women—she still creates a character in Eliza who is altogether new, speaking in her own voice, creating with her own hands.

This cabinet of curiosities reveals Eliza to be a scientist, claiming the world beyond the cabin’s walls as a laboratory made for close scrutiny and observation. Nestled in the corners and along the walls, on the shelves, and in the drawers, are the animal specimens, feathers, bones, bell jars, and books that characterized scientific study in the antebellum period. In her own field notes, Eliza reveals a mind curiously, feverishly at work: “on my walk today, I found the nest underneath the pecan tree next to the south gate on the left side of the creek. It had one egg in it all dried up.” Eliza is curating her life in this cabin and displaying the results of her findings as a living, breathing museum. But if the cabin invites us to come and see these varied specimens on display, I never did shake the uneasy sense that in looking at these collections of a life, I had become myself a subject of study, Eliza closely observing me as through a microscope.

If Eliza’s cabinet of curiosities is a laboratory to study the world of plantation slavery, it is also a portal for seeing worlds beyond. In this, the cabin is a *moving-place*, moving not only as a place that inspires emotion, but also as a place that is in motion. Reflections of rippling water caress the ceiling of the cabin while water rushes along the open bottom of a bucket in the corner. And I am becoming aware—but only gradually—that in this cabin, I am in the water, under its waves; that this is a ship—a *slave ship*?—and I am its human cargo traveling from a known place to a foreign shore. I am hearing Robert Hayden’s words in “Middle Passage”

as a ghostly, whispering wind in my ears: “Deep in the festering hold thy father lies, / of his bones New England pews are made, / those are altar lights that were his eyes.

This cabin of curiosities is a sacred place, a memorial to lives lost, then and now and forevermore. I see a ladder extending, reaching, growing stubbornly from the cabin up to and through the roof, like Tupac’s “rose that grew from concrete,” like Jacob’s ladder reaching upwards, like a lonely finger pointing to the heavens, like the hand of God returning the touch: “and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” This cabin of curiosities is a testifying, a telling of truths. Eliza is speaking to us, sending us a message through time and space. And though we might protest the improbability of such a testimony, and declare its witness a mere fiction, I am reminded of *A Mercy*, and Toni Morrison’s faith in untellable tales: “Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?”

Eliza’s testimony is a necessary impossibility. This cabinet of curiosities is, to be sure, a thing of the past, situated as it is in the much-contested battleground of American slavery. But it is also standing here and now, providing a framework to articulate the vexed nature of Black life in the moment of our current mourning. Our bodies and forever-lost souls are now so quickly absorbed, consumed really, before being returned to us as so many slogans. *Hands Up, Don’t Shoot! I Can’t Breathe. Say Her Name*. But our bodies are big and broad and wide. And our losses cannot be accounted in #hashtags. This hole in the heart of us, in all of us, is a vast emptiness, an echo chamber shouting to us our strivings, humming to us our hymns like a long-forgotten lullaby. In this, I am reminded of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and the cruel cost that the past levied on the body of Dana, a young Black woman pulled repeatedly, and against her will, from the comfort of her present life to the plantation of her ancestral past: “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm.” This is the true nature of our connection to the past. It is always, already incomplete and broken; sharp, dangerous shards where the stained-glass windows used to be. As Saidiya Hartman notes in *Scenes of Subjection*, “these traces of memory function in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there.” And so Eliza is our necessary impossibility, our improbable bridge from this known place to those foreign shores.

Memorials to America’s slave past pepper this country’s physical landscape and occupy its popular imagination. Civil War generals and soldiers etched in marble stand at the ready in parks and public squares like so many toy soldiers across a vast historical battlefield. Actors play the part of the slave in colonial Williamsburg while re-enactors get dressed up in Gettysburg. We read voraciously the biographies of conflicted presidents: Jefferson and Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, too. We sympathize with them much their gnashing of teeth and wringing of hands. We walk in droves to see the latest historical period pieces on film. We want to remember.

But at the same time, we obscure the true nature of slavery in the stories we tell of the past. A recent children’s book was shelved after a massive backlash erupted over its depiction of George Washington’s slaves as so many contented, happy workers. And a textbook in Texas received similar scrutiny for its sanitized depiction of the Middle Passage as mere immigration. Even now, some 150 years after the end of the Civil War, the ultimate aims of the Confederacy are still shrouded in the refuge of states’ rights: an empty euphemism, if ever there was one, for the preservation of a violent slaveocracy. We want to forget.

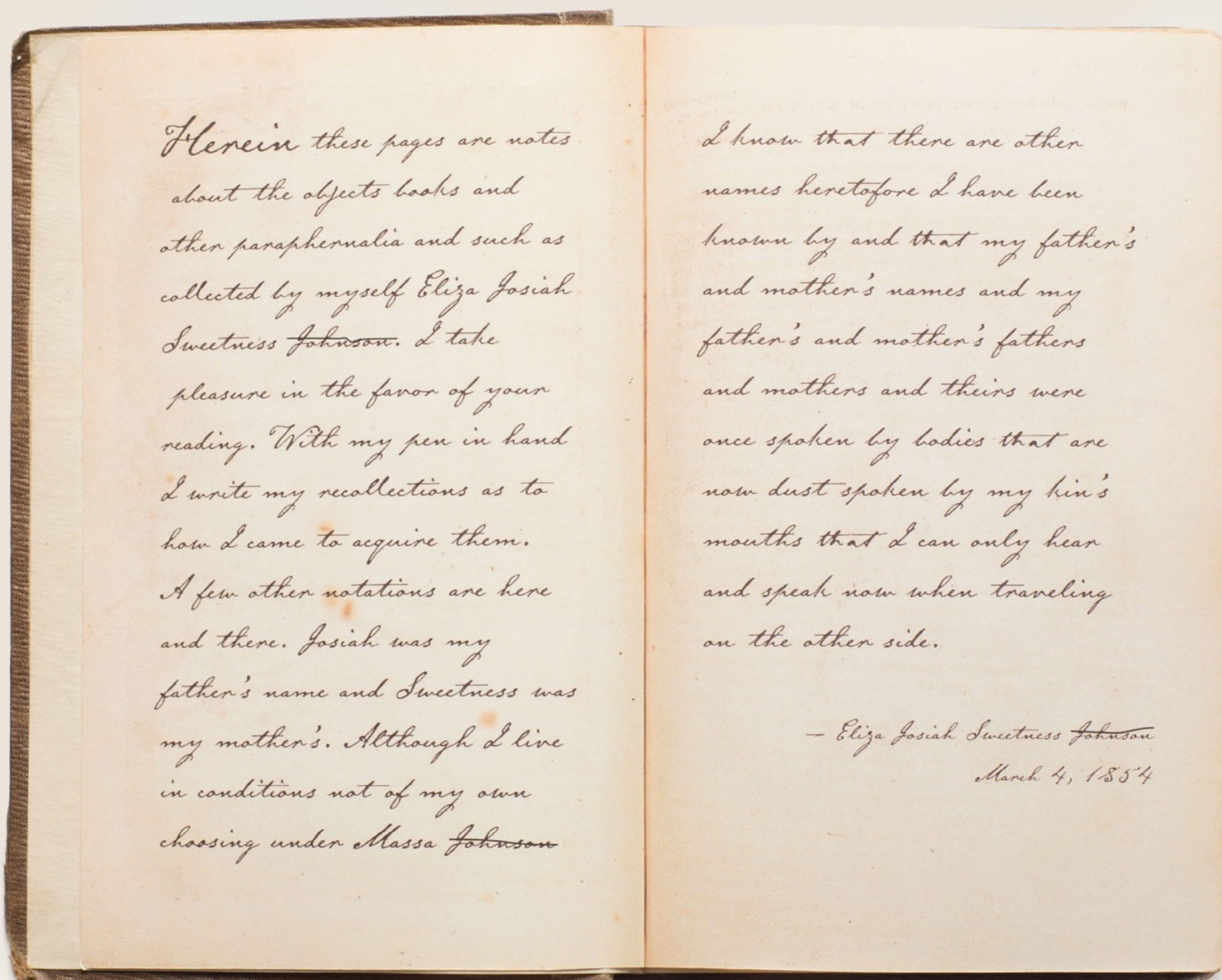
In all of this memory and amnesia, I imagine Eliza young, forthright, and wise beyond her years. I imagine Eliza old, veiled in a swarm of wispy white hair, her heart beating rivers of red, salty blood.

Jason R. Young

Jason R. Young is an associate professor of History at the University of Michigan. He is the author *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry Region of Georgia and South Carolina in the Era of Slavery* (LSU Press, 2007) and the co-editor, with Edward J. Blum, of *The Souls of W.E.B. Du Bois: New Essays and Reflections* (Mercer University Press, 2009). He is currently conducting research toward his next book project, “*To Make the Slave Anew: Art, History and the Politics of Authenticity*.”



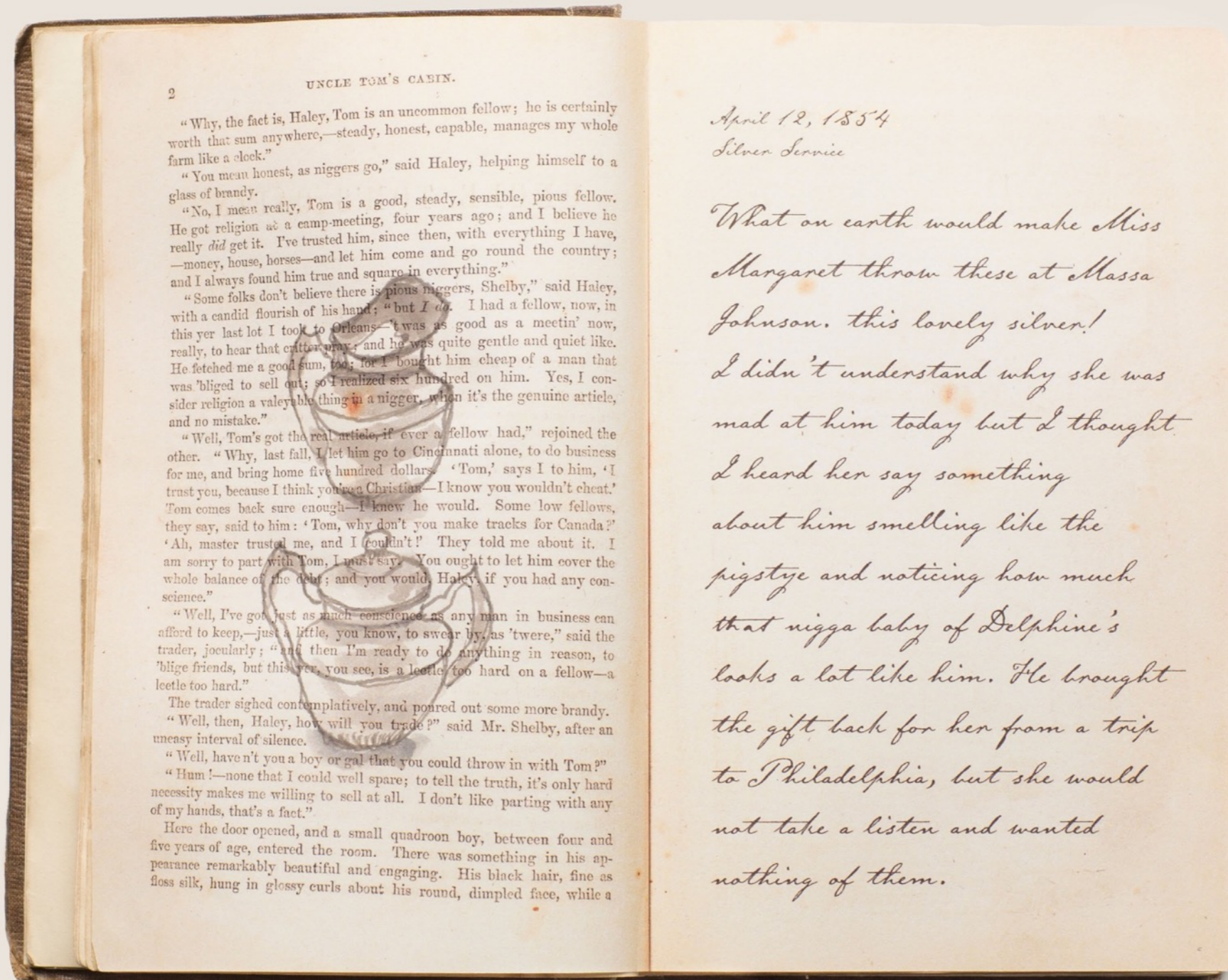
"they keep killin' us miss eva. all he want was to breathe."



Preface, March 4, 1854

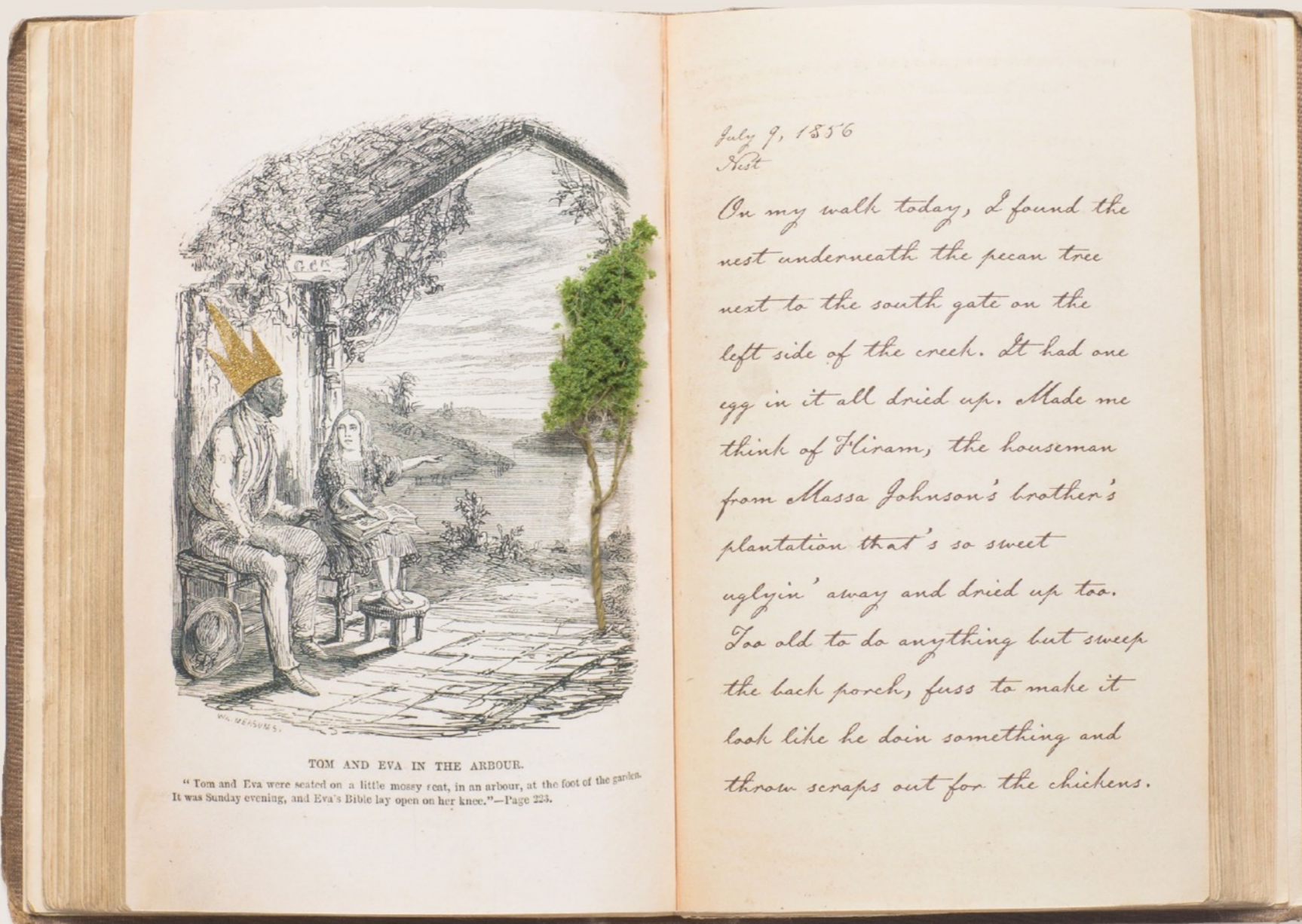
Herein these pages are notes about the objects, books and other paraphernalia and such as collected by myself, Eliza Josiah Sweetness Johnson. I take pleasure in the favor of your reading. With my pen in hand I write my recollections as to how I came to acquire them. A few other notations are here and there. Josiah was my father's name and Sweetness was my mother's. Although I live in conditions not of my own choosing under Massa Johnson, I know that there are other names heretofore I have been known by and that my father's and mother's names, and my father's and mother's fathers and mothers, and theirs were once spoken by bodies that are now dust, spoken by my kin's mouths that I can only hear and speak now when traveling to the other side.

— Eliza Josiah Sweetness Johnson



Field Note, April 12, 1854
Silver Service

What on earth would make Miss Margaret throw these at master Johnson, this lovely silver! I didn't understand why she was mad at him today, but I thought I heard her say something about him smelling like the pigstye and noticing how much that nigga baby of Delphine's looks a lot like him. He brought the gift back for her from a trip to Philadelphia, but she wouldn't take a listen and wanted nothing of them.



Field Note, July 9, 1856
Nest

On my walk today, I found the nest underneath the pecan tree next to the south gate on the left side of the creek. It had one egg in it all dried up. Made me think of Hiram, the houseman from Massa Johnson's brother's plantation that's so sweet, uglyin' away and dried up too. Too old to do anything but sweep the back porch, fuss to make it look like he doin something and throw scraps out for the chickens.

Artist Statement

Praising Cabins and the Black Imagination

And now, men and women of America, is this a thing to be trifled with,
apologized for, and passed over in silence?

—Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Approaching the cabin, after having been away from it for several weeks after installation, I was delighted to see how well it had taken root in the landscape of the Lynden Sculpture Garden. Nature had lovingly embraced it. The prairie grass had grown back after all our trampling on it, and some had even snuck its way through the planks of the cabin floor. Wasps were busy eating at the sugar—an ingredient in the wheat paste used to adhere copies of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation to the cabin ceiling. Spiders had made a home in the corners under Eliza's desk, and tiny insects that had inhabited the partially dried oak were emerging from tiny holes as if they knew it was safe. They felt at home, I assumed, and so was my project, *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities*.

This work has been a multiyear odyssey, the seeds of which were planted about ten years ago at an artist residency at the Anderson Ranch Art Center in Colorado. Susan Working, then director of the Wood & Furniture program, invited me to come for a short winter retreat. It was there that I conceived a project tentatively called *100 Chairs*. Having trained as a studio furniture maker, chairs are a frequent muse and often embody more conceptual and less functional ideas in my work. In my mind, the one hundred chairs I planned to make represented Middle Passage ancestors, and in looking for a context for a multisensory installation, I thought of sacred, spiritual music and the praise house—a small cabin of worship where enslaved bodies once engaged in spiritual practices retained from homeland memories and sanctioned by the master class that owned them (Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery*, 93-99). The one hundred chairs haven't yet been made, but as the inaugural faculty fellow at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College

Afterword

Radical Connoisseurship

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.
It is a seeking that she who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the
world and they that dwell therein.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*

Imagine Eliza, pen in hand, revising Zora's text: She placed the "g" before "he," took liberties She created for herself, as She did with her name: Eliza Josiah Sweetness Johnson. A time traveler, collector, artist, writer and, yes, a researcher, Eliza anticipates and reprises Zora Neale Hurston's gifts as anthropologist and collector of language and expressive Blackness. As Wilson notes, *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* "foregrounds Eliza's experience...and the imaginations of others like her, as a unique technology of Black agency, resistance, and survival, and as the underappreciated gift of Blackness from which all of America has benefited. There are many Elizas..."

Visits to the cabinet require a purposeful passage—to borrow Hurston's alliteration—by foot or cart across the manicured lawns of the Lynden Sculpture Garden to an edge field. The sensorial experience of *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* is prepared atmospherically and artistically, and meaning unfolds diachronically and synchronically. We approach knowing it to be the space of Eliza, an enslaved Black woman. We are pre-conditioned by an idiosyncratic knowledge of the visual economy of American slavery; our expectations are many, varied, and often unspoken. In the cabin's footprint, curiosities, and décor—including videos and wall murals—we expect to see attributes of slavery in America, an imprint of the "peculiar institution" that rendered Eliza an enslaved woman. What we encounter are visual and temporal markers borne of Eliza's imagination and collecting habits and a range of objects from Confederate currency and Jeffersonian memorabilia to a plastic Princess Leia Organa doll. As with other *wunderkammers*, the assembled curiosities defy chronology, but Eliza's connoisseurship includes future time. Like the taxidermy specimens that both embellish and elucidate the installation, time is simultaneously past, present, and future-bound. The intimacy of the domestic space and the materiality of the objects, lovingly collected and judiciously placed, confound expected relationships and metanarratives of history, place, slavery, empire, Blackness, and womanhood. Visitors stoop to watch vintage footage of a ring shout and look upward into the "attic" to find the sea; the ceiling is lined with the Emancipation Proclamation and the "exploded" wall, which serves as a ramp into the cabin, is papered with imagery from Aesop's Fables. In Eliza's home the extraordinary is made possible.



Chicago I ended up collaborating with students at the invitation of the CBMR's former director, Monica Hairston. In 2014, we produced an exhibition called *Wading in the Water of the Sweet Forever*. The installation, like *Eliza's Cabinet*, centered on an example of Southern vernacular architecture which included original video, sound, and other work. This work was created by the students, who were inspired by the metaphor of water and examples in the center's archive. We built a hybrid, Afrofuturist, full-scale praise house of reclaimed barn wood that incorporated components of a 1954 Chris-Craft boat that appeared to have washed up (in my studio) from the mid-Atlantic shores. *Eliza's Cabinet* is an evolution and expansion of those ideas.

The manifestation of *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* at Lynden has released me from frequent jaunts to flea markets and antique stores, as well as late night digital excursions on Craigslist, eBay, and Etsy, looking for authentic and imaginary materials to display and to inspire the objects that were made to inhabit Eliza's world. It has taken me awhile to release the habit of shopping for her, as well as assuming her peculiar and unusual interests through the various time periods she inhabits, although I look forward to adding to, editing, and enjoying the project during its long-term stay at Lynden. My intent has been to insert a new voice into the grand narrative of American history, an alternative to the canon, and to celebrate the *Black imagination*. The project foregrounds Eliza's experience—fictional or not—and the imaginations of others like her as a unique technology of Black agency, resistance, and survival, and as the under-appreciated gift of Blackness from which all of America has benefited. There are many Elizas and but one America. Black people's bodies, blood, sweat, tears, and ingenuity built it to a great extent, and our imaginations continue to help her thrive.

Folayemi Wilson



In October of 2016, a gathering of scholars and artists trekked to the cabin where they "poked and pried" Eliza's curiosities, each selecting an object or two that anchored their comprehension and experience. Discussed in an open forum, these objects retained a certain intimacy: at once Eliza's, but then ours. They acquired meanings that blurred the boundaries between materiality and ethereality, and between personal and professional interpretations. For Jason Young, a pair of vintage boxing gloves opened the door to critical interdisciplinary studies of Black patriarchy, masculinity, and sports in narratives of resistance and progress, and to a vivid childhood memory: watching boxing matches on television with his father. His attention to the "masculine and raced space" of televised sports in a domestic interior returned the discussion to gender expressions retained in or by Eliza's cabin and *within* each of us. Young then bound the physical (material) nature of the vintage gloves—"fight worn," as it were—to Black struggle, at once wearied but never deterred. His fellow panelists Huey Copeland, Brandy Culp, and Michelle R. Wright—followed by those attending the symposium—forged equally evocative connections.

Positioned in Eliza's imaginary world—on site and thereafter—we accept the agency, and the urgency, of her curiosity, and the peculiar freedoms it permitted. Immersed in the space and curiosities of Eliza's becoming, we take on responsibility for the history that enslaved her. This is the gift and charge of artist Folayemi Wilson. Those fortunate to know Eliza—who knows the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein—find beauty and wonder amidst adversity.

Julie L. McGee

Julie L. McGee is an associate professor of Africana Studies and Art History and associate director of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Research Center at the University of Delaware.

Director's Note

Call and Response

We are patient about projects at Lynden, allowing them to mature slowly. Sometimes we don't fully understand what we're doing—the larger significance, the pattern, the underlying theme—until we are standing in the middle of it.

Several summers ago, Folayemi Wilson and I sat on a bench overlooking the pond, considering what was then a project about a praise house and one hundred chairs. Lynden, with its forty acres, seemed like a perfect setting for a contemplative space activated by sound and animated by absence, a place to imagine who might have filled the chairs. The praise house moved to a back burner, but by the summer of 2015, as choreographer Reggie Wilson was remaking his latest work, *Moses(es)*, at Lynden for a local, intergenerational cast of sixty, *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities*—Folayemi's project in its new form—had begun to take shape.

After *Moses(es)*, we put out a call to artists, scholars, and writers to talk about Zora Neale Hurston—whose *Moses, Man of the Mountain* had inspired Reggie Wilson—and her impact on Black modernity. We gathered on a cold February day to explore the way Hurston, in her life and work, speaks to artists across generations and disciplines, and to build a bridge from Reggie Wilson to Folayemi—they were both in the room, Fo in the flesh and Reggie via Skype—and between *Moses(es)* and *Eliza*. A pattern was emerging: we could name an interest in the cultural contributions of the African Diaspora, and we could identify its beginning in our presentation of Nora Chipaumire's *Miriam* in 2013.

Winter passed and the cabinet opened in June 2016. New calls went out, one to the public, the other to performers. Visitors examined the structure and Eliza's collection with reverence and sometimes delight—as when a child discovered Princess Leia on a shelf, or an attentive adult recognized the tiny video playing archival footage of a ring shout in a recess set low in the wall. We all speculated about Eliza's age, her location in time and space. Her indeterminacy was generative, her objects, ranged about the cabinet, suggestive. For one older woman, the plants preserved in glass bottles evoked memories of the herbal remedies administered by her own grandmother during her Arkansas childhood.

Folayemi's call to Chicago-based performers brought cellist and composer Tomeka Reid; Viktor Le, a maker of site-specific rituals; the Afro-diasporic feminist collaborative Honey Pot Performance; and movement artist Anna Martine Whitehead to Lynden to respond to *Eliza's Cabinet*. A web of site visits and planning residencies spread rapidly beneath our public programming. The time spent walking the grounds or sitting quietly in the cabinet contributed to the richness and specificity of the responses. Whether adapting an existing work to travel across Lynden's acres, improvising, or creating a new piece, the artists could feel the cabinet's gravitational pull, but also the seduction of Lynden's environment, the power of history, and Eliza's strength and mutability. Reid, playing her cello on the porch of the cabinet, invited us into the imaginary Eliza's auditory world and launched an ongoing series of intimate outdoor concerts that bring us back, again and again, to the conversation about Eliza and her cabinet.

Faces familiar from *Moses(es)* appeared at these events; new faces, too. One by one, the Elizas emerged. If visitors gave Eliza memories and histories, performers gave her a family and a host of interlocutors. One could feel the frame shifting and a new urgency entering the language around the project. Whitehead called *Run de Echo* "a meditation on the spiritual labor of Blackness"; Folayemi spoke compellingly of the Black imagination as an essential element in Black survival and self-determination.

New calls continue to go out, and new responses roll in. In the summer of 2017, filmmaker Portia Cobb drew on her Gullah-Geechee roots to plant *Lizzie's Garden* next to the cabinet. She put out her own call to South Carolina, to textile artist Arianne King Comer and vocalist Benjamin Scabrook. Arsene DeLay came up from New Orleans to perform on the porch, followed by the local duo Sista Strings. This summer Reggie Wilson returns with *Fist and Heel Performance Group* to remake *Citizen*, his latest work, and to ask us what it means, in 2018, to belong. What began five years ago as discrete conversations and unique projects has grown into an approach to programming—



Second-graders from Brown Street Academy explore the cabinet. Photo: Lynden Sculpture Garden

cross-disciplinary, community-focused, artist-driven—that places the voices of artists of color at its center. It has required us to create and sustain relationships among artists, to look beyond Lynden's borders, and to stitch ourselves into our community. At the center of all this activity stands *Eliza's Cabinet*.

The cabinet was built, in collaboration with the Chipstone Foundation, to last several years. It is not only a temporary addition to Lynden's sculpture collection, but the site of ongoing educational programming. Our call to educators has brought nearly a thousand young people, from second graders to college students, to the cabinet to explore Eliza's imaginative and material worlds, to connect with the work of a living artist who takes history as her material, and to discuss slavery, civil rights, social justice, and Black identity and imagination.

None of this would have been possible without the help of Lynden's dedicated staff and all those who invested in the project: the performers; the visitors who made—still make—a point of returning for each *Eliza* program; and the funders who enabled us to realize *Eliza* on this scale. Finally, deepest thanks to Folayemi, who had a vision of the radical Black imagination, the words to articulate it, and a way to make it material.

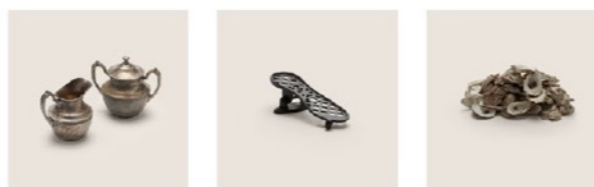
Polly Morris

Polly Morris is the executive director of the Lynden Sculpture Garden and the Bradley Family Foundation.

Many of the performances mentioned in this essay can be seen at: lynden.art/eliza



Clockwise from top left: Tomeka Reid, *Airs for Eliza*; Viktor Le, *I Am Brotha' to the Daughter, Keeper of the Dust*; Honey Pot Performance, *Ma(s) Jing Her*; Anna Martine Whitehead, *Run de Echo*.



About the Artist

Folayemi (Fo) Wilson uses constructed space and furniture forms to create experiences that reposition historical objects and/or aesthetics in a contemporary context and offer audiences new ways of thinking about and interacting with history. Wilson earned an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and is an associate professor at Columbia College Chicago. A grantee of Creative Time, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Propeller Fund, her design work is included in the collection of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. Wilson has been awarded residencies or fellowships at ACRIE, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Purchase College, and the Anderson Ranch Arts Center. She was honored in 2015 as a 3Arts awardee.

Acknowledgments

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Photographs of Field Notes and objects (above): Clarissa Bonet & Luis Bueno. All other photographs courtesy of Folayemi Wilson unless otherwise noted.

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Thank You

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Interior details from Eliza's cabinet. Clockwise from top left: objects above Eliza's desk; a view into the cabin ceiling; Eliza's desk; a silver spoon holding a miniature, Afro-wearing Thomas Jefferson statue.