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 smoke down. (And my soul gone have, oh Lord, some place to stay)
—African American Spiritual

I n 2004, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center exhibited a bicentennial 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 an evocative attraction in the center of a conven-
onous exhibition hall, giving viewers an opportunity to touch, quite literally, slavery’s wooden walls.

In Eliza’s Pejorative Cabaret of Curiosities, Chicago-based artist Fae Wilson creates a slave cell that is less an exact replica of an actual slave pen and more a testament to slavery’s enduring legacies in this, the season of our own despair. The walls of this cell are not prison walls, strong and sturdy and thick. They are rather, like the walls of Jenin, fallen and open and inviting. These walls are waiting to be stoned; they are waiting on enforcers 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 cell, 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 whispers she collars: Uncle Tom’s wallpaper, a pair of tattered boxing gloves, whose horsehair padding oozes through cracked leather. We know her in the dusty table mauls 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 gaze she bears and in her innumerable seductions, a trumpet blaring silently from the mouth of an otherwise respectfully comported free woman and slave.

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, “vandled shore over the turbulent current by the shore, on to the mil of her being. It was a desperate leap—impossible to anything but madness and despair....” We are reminded of Solomon Northrup, 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 dear 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 gravitates toward this literary icon of Eliza—seeing a soreness of soul and a 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. Neatly in corners and along the walls, on the shelves, and in the cellar specimen cases, feathers, bones, preserved bees, jars and bottle jugs, and books that characterized scientific study in the antebellum period. In her own field notes, Eliza reveals a mind curiously, fearlessly at work: “on my walk today. I found the next underneath the pecan tree next to the south gate up the left side of the creek. It had one egg in it all dried up.” Eliza is cunning 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 memory sense that is looking at these collections of 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 micro/scene, moving not only as a place that inspires emo-
tion, but also as a place that is in motion. Reflections of rippling water create the ceiling of the cabin while water mists 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. In this cabin I am a slave ship—slaves ship, and I am in 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 feverish holding they father lies, / of his bones New England peaks are made, / those are their 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 industrially from the cabin up to and through the roof, like Turner’s “Trees 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 astounding, a leveling of truths. Eliza is speaking to us, sending us a message through time and space. And though we might protest the improbable of such a testimony, and declare in witness a mere fiction, I am reminded of A. Mercy, and Tony Morrison’s fate to unfulfilled tales. “Strange things happen to the time everywhere. You know you. I know your. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read it?”

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 most contested battleground of American slavery. But it is also standing here now, providing a framework to attend to 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 lives cannot be accounted as “handsdown.” This hole in the heart of us, in all of us, is a vast emptiness, an echo chamber shouting to our stirrings, humming to us our hymns like a long-forgotten lullaby. In this, I am reminded of Clementa Pinckney’s own stillness, and the cruel cost that is past, which we have not washed away on the body of Dase, a young Black woman pulled apart, and against her will, from the comfort of her present life to the planation of her ancestral past: “I have an unnamed woman in my life today; I have a woman living on in me. This is the true nature of our past and present, the present, already incomplete and broken; sharp, dangerous shards where the stained glass windows used to be. As Sandhy Amaryn notes in Sounds of Silence, “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 impossible 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 Georgetown. We read vacuously the biographies of conflicted presidents: Jefferson and Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, too. We sympathize with them much their grappling with teeth and wringing of hands. We walk in crowds 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 created over its depiction of George Washington’s slaves as so many cowed, 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 foisted in the “refuge of states’” rights; an empty euhemerism, if ever there was one, for the preservation of a violent slaveracy. 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 wavy 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 Co-Principal Investigator of African American Religion in Kongo and the Congo: The Historical Region of Congo and South-Central Congo in the Era of Slavery (KESU Press, 2007) and co-editor with Edward L. Bass, Of The Souls of Black Folk: Race, Religion and Resistance (Oxford University Press, 2009). He is currently conducting research toward his next book project, “To Make the Slave Share: Art, History and the Politics of Authenticity.”
Herein these pages are notes about the objects books and other paraphernalia and such as collected by myself Eliza Sarah Statues Johnson. I thus pleasure in the face of your reading. With my pen in hand I write my recollections as to how I came to acquire them.

A few other notions are here and there. Joshua was my father’s name and Statues was my mother’s. Although I live in conditions not of my own choosing under Eliza Johnson I know that there are other names herefore I have been known by and that my father’s and mother’s names and father’s and mother’s fathers and mothers and there were once spoken by ladies that are now heard or heard by my kin’s months that I can only hear and speak now when traveling on the other side.

— Eliza Sarah Statues Johnson
March 4, 1854
Field June: April 12, 1854

Saturday

What an earth would make Mrs. Margaret throw these at Missus Johnson, this lovely summer! I didn't understand why she was mad at him today, but I thought I heard her say something about him something like the apparel or anything. I can't remember anything without the apparel or anything, and nothing much that Missus Johnson's looks a lot like him. He brought the gift back, and from a trip to Philadelphia, but she wouldn't take a letter and wanted nothing of them.

Field June: July 9, 1854

Note

On my walk today, I found the nest underneath the pecon tree next to the north gate on the left side of the creek. I had one egg in it all dried up. Then I think of Missus, the homemaker from Missus Johnson's brother's plantation that's so sweet, friendly, easy and kind to us. As old as she is, to be anything but near the black farm, to make it look like she do anything and throw snake, and throw snake out for the chickens.
Artist Statement

Praising Cabins and the Black Imagination

And now, men and women of America, is this thing to be trifled with, apologized for, and passed over in silence?
—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin

Appraising the cabin, after having been away from it for several weeks after installation, I was delighted to see how well it taken root in the landscape of the Lyndon Sculpture Garden. Nature had lovingly embraced it. The pristine going green had grown back after all our tampering on it, and one had even sunk its way through the plants of the cabin-floor. Wings were busy budding at the start—an ingredient in the wheat paste used to adhere copies of the 1865 Emancipation Proclamation to the cabin ceiling. Spiders had made a home in the corners under Eliot’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, Eliot’s Plymouth Cabins/Carrousel.

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 Workman, then director of the Wood & Furniture program, invited me to come for a short winter season. It was then that I conceived a project tentatively called 100 Chairs. Having trained as a studio furniture maker, chairs are a favorite muse and often render more conceptual and less functional ideas in my work. In my yard, she set hundreds down. I planned to make representable Middle Passage survivors, and in looking for a context for a millennium-long imaginations, I thought of sacred, spiritual space and the prison house—a small cabin of worship where reborn bodies once engaged in spiritual practices related to homeland memories and sanctioned by the master class that owned them (Kwon 89, Young). Radical Blackness: Spinoza’s Ethic Religion in Dance and the Abolitionist South in the Era of Slavery, 1800–99). The one hundred chairs hasn’t yet been made, but as the inaugural facility follows at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago, I ended up collaborating with students at the Institute of the CERES’ former director, Monica L. Hannah. In 2014, we produced an exhibition called Reading in the Water of the Secret Forever. The installation, like Eliot’s Cabins, was composed on a Southern vernacular architecture which included original video, sound, and other work. This work was created by the students, who were inspired by the excavation of vernaculars and examples in the center’s archive. We built a hybrid table, full-scale piano house of reclaimed barn wood that incorporated components of a 1953 Chris-Craft boat that appeared to have washed up in (my studio) from the mid-Atlantic shores. Eliot’s Cabins is an evolution and expansion of those ideas.

The manifestation of Eliot’s Plymouth Cabins/Carrousel at Lynden has released me from frequent visits to raw woods and unique stoves, as well as late-night digital discussions on Craigiest, eBay, and YouTube, looking for authentic and imaginary materials to display and to inspire the objects that were made to inhabit Eliot’s world. It is only natural that the subject of the cabin should be the subject of the topology, as well as assuming her peculiar and unusual interests through the various periods she inhabited, although I look forward to adding to, editing, and engaging the project during its long run at Lynden. My recent has been to insert a new voice into the grand narrative of American history, an alternative in the canon, and to celebrate the Black imagination. The project foregrounds Eliot’s experience—rituals or not—and the imaginations of others like her as an important part of the black agency, resistance, and survival, and as the unacknowledged gift of Blackness from which all of America has benefitted. There are many Eliots and future Americas. This exhibition and future exhibitions contain the truth.

—Folami Wilson

Afterword

Radical Connoisseurship

Research is formalized reminiscence. It is poking and prying with a purpose. I am working toward the ultimate goal of the latter—she who studies can uncover the secrets of the world and the things to dwell therein.
—Zora Neale Hurston, Dust from a Bowl, An Autobiography

I imagine Eliot, pen in hand, revising Zora’s text. She placed the “2” before “2,” took Yeats. She moved for herself, as she did with her name: Eliot. Josiah Sweeney, Johnson. A nurse turns collector, artist, writer, and, yes, a researcher. Eliot anticipates and repossesses Zora Neale Hurston’s gift as anthropologist and creator of language and experience Blackness. As Wilson notes, Eliot’s Plymouth Cabins/Carrousel foregrounds Eliot’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 Eliots...”

Votes to the cabinet require a prepared passage—to be ours (Harrison’s) affirmation—by foot or cart across the museum housed in the Lyndon Sculpture Garden to an eddy field. The sensual experience of Eliot’s Plymouth Cabins/Carrousel is prepared atmospherically and emotionally, and meaningfully, diachronically and synchronically. We approach knowing to be the space of Eliot, an embodied Black woman. We are pre-conditioned by an anthroposophical knowledge of the visual culture of American slavery; our expectations are many, varied, and often unspoken. In the cabin’s footprint, curators, and above all weary visitors, we also expect to see an analysis of slavery in America, an imput of the “peculiar institution” that rendered Eliot an embodied woman. Where we encounter is visual and temporal markers borne of Eliot’s imagination and collecting habits and a range of objects from Confederate currency and Jeffersonian musings to a passive Princess Leia Organa doll. As with other second-handories, the assembled curators defy chronology, but Eliot’s connoisseurship includes future time. Like the tidy specimen that both relishes and accumulates the installation, time is simultaneous past, present, and future-bound. The intimates of the domestic space and the materiality of the objects, loosely collected and deliberately placed, conjoined expected relationships and remembrances of history, place, slavery, race, Blackness, and somenality. Visitors steep in search of visual bounty of a ring-shaped back and look up into the “atrium” to find the see, the ceiling is fitted with the Emancipation Proclamation and the “exposed” wall, which serves as a map into the cabin, is papered with imagery from Joseph’s Faiths. In Eliot’s home the extraordinary is made possible.

In October of 2016, a gathering of scholars and artists reimagined the cabin where they “pitched and preyed” Eliot’s connoisseur, each enacting an object or two that achieved their comprehension and experience. Discussed in an open forum, these objects retained a certain autonomy at once Eliot’s, but their own. They acquired meanings that blurred the boundaries between materiality and externality, and between personal and professional interpretations. For Joseph Young, a pair of vintage boxing gloves opened the door to critical interdisciplinarity 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 racial space” of televised sports in a domestic interior retumed the discussion to gender expressions retained in early Eliot’s visions and ideals of us. Young then bound the physical material nature of the boxing gloves—"right worn," as it went—a Black struggle, at once seized and never discerned. His fellow panelist Darrell Copeland, Beauty Clipp, and Michelle K. Winglee followed by those attending the symposium—gender, identity, and executive connections.

Positioned in Eliot’s imaginary world—ont- and elsewhere—we accept the agency, the imbrication, and the peculiar freedom it permitted. Immersed in the space and curiosities of Eliot’s becoming, we take on responsibility for the history that endowed her. This is the gift and charge of artist Folami Wilson. Theirs to know and show us others who know the cosmic secrets of the world and that dwell therein—five beauty and wonder alike.

Julie L. McGuire

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

W e are patient about projects in 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, Foyohini Wilson and I sat on a bench overlooking the pond, considering what was then a project about a prize house and one hundred years of Lynden, edits to King noisy, a series of perfectly timed space activations powered by sound and animated by absence, a place to imagine who might have filled the chairs. The prize house moved to a back burner, but by the summer of 2015, as choreographer Reggie Wilson was rehearsing his latest work, Moccasin, in Lynden for a local, intergenerational collaboration of Elisa’s, Foyohini’s Festival of Earliest-Founded-Activities: Foyohini’s project in its new form had begun to take shape.

After Moccasin, we put out a call to artists, scholars, and writers to talk about Zora Nelle Hurston, whose Home, Home of the Mountains had inspired Reggie Wilson—and her impact on Black modernity. We gathered on a cold February day to explore the Lynden, in her life and work, speaks to us across generations and disciplines, and to build a bridge from Reggie Wilson to Foyohini—they were both in the room. To the flesh and Regina via Skype—and between Home and Elisa. A pattern was emerging: we could sense an interest in the cultural contributions of the African Diaspora, and we could identify the beginning in our presentation of Nora Chipaumire’s Moxhi in 2013.

Winter passed and the cabinet opened in June 2016. New calls went out, one to the public, the other to the other performers. Viewers examined the structure and Foyohini’s collections with reverence and sometimes delight as when a child discovered Princess Leia on a shelf, an animated adults recognized the tiny video playing archived footage of a ring in a recess in the wall. We all marveled about Elisa’s age, her location in time and space. Her indeterminacy was genuine, her objects, made about the cabinet, suggestive. For one other woman, the planes preserved in glass bottles evoked memories of the herbal remedies administered by her own grandmother during her African childhood.

Foyohini’s call to Chicago-based performer brought cellist and composer Tomica Reed Vikine Le, a writer of site-specific rituals; The Afro-diasporic feminist collective, Honesty Pot Performance; and movement artist Jade Marine Whitehead to Lynden to respond to Elisa’s Cabinet. A web of visits and planned performances 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 existing work to work across Lynden’s acres, or creating a new piece, the artists could feel the cabinet’s generous pall, but also the seduction of Lynden’s entrance, the power of history, and Elisa’s strength and immutability. Le, playing her cell on the porch of the cabinet, invited us into the imaginary Elisa’s auditory world and launched an ongoing series of interactive concerts that bring us back, again and again, to the conversation about Elisa and her culture.

Faces familiar from Moccasin appeared at these events, arts, too, one by one, the Elisas emerged. If visitors gave Elisa’s 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. Whirlow called Jan de Echo “a meditation on the spatial labor of Blackness.” Foyohini spoke compellingly of the Black inclusionary 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 Coteh drew her Gullah-Geechee roots to plant Lizzie Borden’s Garden across the site. She gave our own home to South Carolina to textile artist Ariane King corner and weobled Robert Sebaski. Senator De La Haye comes from New Orleans to perform on the porch, followed by the local New Orleans. This summer, Reggie Wilson returns with Foyohini and Honesty Pot Performance to reclaim Garden, his latest work, and ask us to ask what it means, in 2017, in 2018. When began five years ago as discrete conversations and unique projects have grown into an approach to programming—

About the Artist

Foyohini Wilson (1963–2010) was a choreographer and dancer based in Chicago, Illinois, widely regarded as one of the most influential Black women choreographers in the United States. She was married to Foyohini Wilson, a renowned chef and food writer. Wilson was a member of the Calhoun Foundation’s Board of Directors, and an active member of the Chicago Foundation for the Arts. She was a founder of dance theater, which originated in Chicago with a focus on community outreach and education.

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible through the generosity of the Whirlow Family Foundation, the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, the Illinois Arts Council’s program for the Arts, the U.S. Federal Government’s National Endowment for the Arts, and the Illinois State Council on the Arts, and supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois State Council on the Arts. We are grateful to the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, and the Illinois Arts Council for their support of the project.

Thank You

About the Artist

Foyohini Wilson (1963–2010) was a choreographer and dancer based in Chicago, Illinois, widely regarded as one of the most influential Black women choreographers in the United States. She was married to Foyohini Wilson, a renowned chef and food writer. Wilson was a member of the Calhoun Foundation’s Board of Directors, and an active member of the Chicago Foundation for the Arts. She was a founder of dance theater, which originated in Chicago with a focus on community outreach and education.

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible through the generosity of the Whirlow Family Foundation, the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, the Illinois Arts Council’s program for the Arts, the U.S. Federal Government’s National Endowment for the Arts, and the Illinois State Council on the Arts, and supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois State Council on the Arts. We are grateful to the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, and the Illinois Arts Council for their support of the project.

Thank You

About the Artist

Foyohini Wilson (1963–2010) was a choreographer and dancer based in Chicago, Illinois, widely regarded as one of the most influential Black women choreographers in the United States. She was married to Foyohini Wilson, a renowned chef and food writer. Wilson was a member of the Calhoun Foundation’s Board of Directors, and an active member of the Chicago Foundation for the Arts. She was a founder of dance theater, which originated in Chicago with a focus on community outreach and education.

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible through the generosity of the Whirlow Family Foundation, the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, the Illinois Arts Council’s program for the Arts, the U.S. Federal Government’s National Endowment for the Arts, and the Illinois State Council on the Arts, and supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois State Council on the Arts. We are grateful to the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, and the Illinois Arts Council for their support of the project.

Thank You

About the Artist

Foyohini Wilson (1963–2010) was a choreographer and dancer based in Chicago, Illinois, widely regarded as one of the most influential Black women choreographers in the United States. She was married to Foyohini Wilson, a renowned chef and food writer. Wilson was a member of the Calhoun Foundation’s Board of Directors, and an active member of the Chicago Foundation for the Arts. She was a founder of dance theater, which originated in Chicago with a focus on community outreach and education.

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible through the generosity of the Whirlow Family Foundation, the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, the Illinois Arts Council, the Illinois Arts Council’s program for the Arts, the U.S. Federal Government’s National Endowment for the Arts, and the Illinois State Council on the Arts, and supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois State Council on the Arts. We are grateful to the Chicago Foundation for the Arts, and the Illinois Arts Council for their support of the project.

Thank You
Interior details from Ellen's cabin. Clockwise from top left: objects above Ellen's desk, view into the attic ceiling, Ellen's desk, a chair upon a table holding a miniature. An image featuring Thomas Jefferson's statue.