

A column for Cabinet: An Arts and Culture Quarterly: The Thing

***While living in New Mexico, I came across a glass display case at the university's medical library that contained ephemera from the Tuberculosis retreats located in the surrounding desert in the teens and 1920's. One group of patients, eschewed the shacks for a sanitarium and produced their own wildly macabre and curious zine. One panel documented a longer history of TB treatments within the greater US and included a fragile drawing made by a Kentucky TB patient, uncannily similar to the creature in question.

Prepared for the Speleological Oral History Record in April of 1912 by Phineas Hamil of the Kentucky State Cave` Society

In a more southerly county of Kentucky- and before the Civil War- Stephen Bishop, a slave speleologist, of African and white descent, dunked his hands in a sluggish and warm underground stream located within the cave that he regularly described as "grand, gloomy, and peculiar" to the tour groups he led for his master; when his hands emerged from the stream, he held within them a small, blind, luminescent creature from the phylum arthropoda. This freshwater troglodyte was the size of his fingernail. Stephen Bishop knew everything about these caverns –the fugitive slaves that took shelter underground before they continued northward, the paleo-indian mummies, the slender glass lizards, the pistolgrip mussels, the black gypsum deposits. However, he was not familiar with this animal. It was laterally compressed – not unlike whale lice or skeleton shrimp- and when he cracked open its legs they were hollow; its body cavity was an open space where tissue, sinuses and blood loosely floated.

Several years later, Dr. John Croghin, the new owner of the cave and of Stephen Bishop, had twelve wood and stone huts built within the cavern because he believed that the perpetually cool and humid air would heal the botched lungs of tuberculosis patients. Several died, the rest fled to drier climes, but one remained long enough to draw the only extant drawing of Stephen Bishop's Troglodyte. The last specimen was found that year of experimental cavern treatment, in a silty pond not far from the huts. The creature was hardly breathing and it could not stand the weakest light, averting its so-called face, (which was translucent and smooth, save an orifice for eating) from the candle's flame. Underneath the drawing, the artist cum tubercular patient inscribed in careful cursive: Croghin's Troglodyte. Despite Stephen Bishop's eventual manumission and the departure of other freed slaves in the township to Liberia, he stayed behind and died there. * * *

"The Thing", a column in Cabinet: an Arts and Culture Quarterly, invites writers to conjure an imaginary history for an object that appears to have no easily locatable provenance or use. Mary Walling Blackburn wrote the above description of an unidentified organic form for the magazine issue that focused on the Average.

Although this Cabinet column is supposed to give license to fantasy, certain aspects were

lifted from the historical record. For example, tuberculosis (TB) was often treated in arid desert climes and Albuquerque was one of the “White Plague” (as it was then referred to) destinations. Another fact cited is that Dr. John Croghin owned and operated an unsuccessful TB sanitarium in Mammoth Cave. Finally, Stephen Bishop, was a flesh and blood slave spelioologist who, according to some sources, declined manumission and a second life in Liberia. Contrary to some reader’s perceptions, the quote within the article’s guesswork, is in fact Bishop’s. He often gave tours to New England litterati (as Emerson and Thoreau’s constituents were known to trek here) and lectured with a similar erudition. Bishop was adept at discovering parts of the cave previously unknown to 19th century Kentuckians and locating signs of ancient Native American exploration. The cave was originally a saltpeter mine operated by slaves. (Saltpeter is a nitrate-rich soil used in gunpowder production).

Kleitman, the “Father of Sleep“, the first sleep researcher and author of the seminal text, “Sleep and Wakefulness”, investigated circadian rhythms at the cave in 1938. He set up a bed on the gunpowder floor of the cave. In a photograph, the milky water pitcher, the flowered coverlet, the manner in which he kneels beside his patient communicate a sort of tenderness generally not associated with scientific research.

Today, the cave is situated within a National Park and offers an artist residency.

In my original article for Cabinet-- where Albuquerque and tuberculosis are cited—I would like to provide further information. The back alleys of Albuquerque often provide a clear view into the backyards of many houses. Situated at the backend of many lots are small inhabitable shacks that were originally built to house TB patients who had traveled to New Mexico for treatment. In 1913, 50% of ABQ households contained a TB patient. 90% of these patients had traveled from out of state for treatment in New Mexico. Most of the sanitariums have been demolished. But another telltale remain of TB architecture are back porches with awnings, where patients with blood-filled lungs inhaled cool night air. Conversely, the stone huts in Mammoth Cave was filled with moist air and its patients died within a year.