

- 9 Bruno Latour, "A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans," in *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 174–215.
- 10 On distributed intelligence, see Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).
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- 15 Michael Polanyi, "Skills," in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958; repr., London: Routledge, 1998); and Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966; repr., Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 16 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 3–63; and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Appadurai, *Social Life of Things*, 64–94.
- 17 See, for example, "Objects in Motion: Visual and Material Culture across Colonial North America," ed. Wendy Bellion and Mónica Domínguez Torres, special issue, *Winterthur Portfolio* 45, nos. 2–3 (Summer–Autumn 2011); and Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014).
- 18 An outstanding anthology in this vein is Fred R. Myers, ed., *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: School of American Research Press, 2001).
- 19 Robin Kelsey in Martha Rosler et al., "Notes from the Field: Materiality," *Art Bulletin* 95, no. 1 (March 2013): 21–23.
- 20 Tim Ingold, "Toward an Ecology of Materials," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 427–42, at 431–35.
- 21 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, *Posthumanities* 27 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- 22 Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009).
- 23 Some good starting points: Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2010); and Jessica L. Horton, "Ojibwa *Tableaux Vivants*: George Catlin, Robert Houle, and Transcultural Materialism," *Art History* 39, no. 1 (February 2016): 124–51.

Jennifer Jane Marshall

Nashville, New York, Paris, and Nashville

William Edmondson, Mobilized and Unmoved

A major figure in the history of American art, William Edmondson was a prolific sculptor during the 1930s and 1940s. He began by making gravestones but quickly expanded his practice to include stand-alone works that he summoned from stone—angels, boxers, horses, church ladies, birds, and rams. In histories of folk art, Edmondson holds forefather status; he was “discovered” by white aficionados during an era in which self-taught art gained critical and curatorial attention. He is best known as the first black artist to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA): *Sculpture by William Edmondson* (1937).

Edmondson's sculptures have been gifted, trafficked, and exchanged through an international art-world economy. In 1938 MoMA included one of his *Mary and Martha* pieces in

1 Louise Dahl-Wolfe, *William Edmondson, Sculptor, Nashville*, ca. 1933. Gelatin silver print, 9½ × 8¾ in. Center for Creative Photography, Louise Dahl-Wolfe Archive, 93.73.62. Image © Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation/Art Resource, New York © 2017 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

its sprawling exhibition *Three Centuries of American Art* seen at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Major pieces now reside in public collections around the United States, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum (see fig. 2), the Newark Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Private collectors in Pasadena, Detroit, and Santa Fe have held works. *A Boxer* by Edmondson recently sold at auction for \$785,000, the highest price ever paid in the market for American outsider art.¹ Given Edmondson's prominence, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson devoted an entire chapter to him in their landmark textbook on African American artists. In it,



they wrote: “Except for a trip to Memphis, he never left Nashville.”² Elsewhere, the historian Bobby Lovett summarized the story this way: “Edmondson began his life on a former plantation in southwestern Davidson County, Tennessee, and ended it less than three miles away, in the city of Nashville.”³ Writers often repeat this plantation-to-plot trajectory in their accounts of Edmondson, its narrative interest turning on the contrast between the artist-at-home, entangled in the material conditions of race, class, region, and rock, and the far-reaching success of his work.

This contrast offers critical perspective on discussions of transnationalism and new materialisms in American art history. It reminds scholars to pay close attention to the motions of objects in narrating the circuits of the global art world. It also directs attention to how transnational forces coalesce in those objects—forces, in Edmondson's case, that include both the artistic ideology of primitivism and the historical displacements and migrations of diaspora. Above all else, it focuses attention on the unevenness and inequities of global exchange. Who gets to move and who controls movement? These are not universally enjoyed privileges in art or commerce. Edmondson made things that moved. He himself did not. He “died at his home,” read his *New York Times* obituary; “buried in Mount Ararat Cemetery in Nashville,” wrote Bearden and Henderson.⁴ In a poem inspired by Edmondson's life and work, Elizabeth Spires wrote as though in the artist's voice, and in a way that subtly drew out the biblical referent behind the name of the cemetery where he was interred: the mountain where Noah's ark finally landed—an appropriate resting site for an artist who made so many animals. “I died and went to Ararat,” Spires ventriloquized. “I'm here. I'm home.”⁵

In what follows, I will consider the rhetorical insistence on Edmondson's local immobility, especially what this trope has offered (and continues to offer) the mobility of his sculptures. This will, perforce, entail a discussion of primitivism: an antimodern form of modernist appropriation that suffuses Edmondson's reception, permitting the traffic of his sculptures. Providing contrast to these objects-on-the-move, I will end by examining Edmondson's gravestones. Unlike the works that have circulated from private homes and gardens, through galleries and to museums, Edmondson's tombstones



2 William Edmondson, *Crucifixion*, ca. 1932–37. Limestone, 18 1/8 x 11 x 6 1/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of Elizabeth Gibbons-Hanson

the right, the inwardly intrusive plinth, and the plummeting porch all cut slight angles from the image's cardinal axes, introducing subtle movement from the margins—in accordance with his life story. Edmondson sculpted in a workshop in his backyard but entertained visitors from all over the map, including Dahl-Wolfe (California-born, world traveling, and New York-based). Others came, too: the photographers Consuelo Kanaga and Edward Weston (from out of state); the painters Arnold and Lucille Blanch, Alexander Brook, and Doris Lee (all from New York); such members of the white Nashvillian cultural elite as Sidney Hirsch, Puryear Mims, and Alfred Starr; and black Nashvillians who lived nearby in the Edgehill neighborhood. To all these visitors, Edmondson sold works; sometimes he gave them away. *Crucifixion* (fig. 2), for example, was in the MoMA show in 1937; it went home with Dahl-Wolfe. She gave it to Elizabeth Gibbons, a fashion model and friend, who housed it in Los Angeles and later donated it to the Smithsonian.⁶ Dahl-Wolfe's photographic portrait of Edmondson visually suggests all the to-and-fro motion of both his admirers and his works, and it enjoyed wide-ranging mobility of its own, carried via newsprint to homes

remain in one place. In this way, they serve as handy material metaphors for the story of Edmondson's "never leaving," even as they provide an object lesson for thinking about this immobility otherwise. Still in situ, these monuments might allow art historians to review "immobility" as "endurance," and "stuck" as "staying." These monuments are models, I will argue, for how to reckon with the specificities of place—for how to understand any given spot within the always-global currents of art and its history.

Long before Bearden and Henderson formalized the central paradox and appeal of Edmondson's life story, images of the sculptor sealed his narrative fate. When newspapers reported on the curiosity of a Southern black man honored by a one-man show at MoMA, if they ran any photograph at all it was Louise Dahl-Wolfe's *William Edmondson, Sculptor, Nashville* (fig. 1). The portrait was a fitting choice. Its composition goes a long way to reinforce his biography, keeping the sculptor in place, while introducing busyness from outside. The line of the rooftop on the far right combines with the stone block at bottom left (inclined inward) and the plummeting roof of the porch line in the upper left quadrant (running vertically) to pin Edmondson in one spot at the center. Edmondson's torso is erect and firmly rooted, the only plumb line in the picture. By contrast, the roof at

and offices from Dodge City to Niagara Falls.⁷ For all the movement in and of the photograph, however, Edmondson is still hemmed in by it, arranged decisively against the domesticating backdrop of his workshop.

The portrait remains popular, frequently reproduced whenever Edmondson appears in print or museums. Yet, an alternative rhetorical history can be constructed, different from the one Dahl-Wolfe insinuates, a view that would permit stories of an artist-on-the-move. In 1937 the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that Edmondson was in New York when curators from MoMA approached him; they “induced” him to consent to the show.⁸ An oral history taken from one of Edmondson’s former employers seems to substantiate this account. In the early 1960s Gertrude Bosley Bowling Whitworth remembered: “I was in New York . . . and bought a New York paper and there was . . . a picture of Will Edmondson.” (She refers to the Dahl-Wolfe portrait discussed above.) “We went to the place where the show was . . . and there was Will, and he looked up and said ‘Oh God, there’s Ole Miss.’”⁹

Why these anecdotes have never appeared in the Edmondson literature, stuffed so full of stories, should inspire suspicion. They are relatively easy to find. The article from the *Pittsburgh Courier* was saved in MoMA’s clipping scrapbooks, and the Whitworth remembrance was collected by the Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville, the biggest repository of Edmondson’s work and the most active originator of related scholarship. Even as the evidence seems stacked against the veracity of these accounts, it is telling that stories of Edmondson going North never appear; they don’t fit the narrative. Instead, circulation of Edmondson’s work required that the “Negro from Nashville” stay in Nashville: an “artist unmoved,” in the words of a local write-up in 1937.¹⁰ Edmondson had to stay local in order to go global; to remain a figure of the past to get a show at “the Modern”; to settle in one spot so that his works could leave.

These ironies are all well and ruefully remarked on in any history of cultural appropriation and primitivism, and there is no mistaking that it was precisely these racialized acts and ideas that served as the circulatory forces enabling Edmondson’s cosmopolitan success.¹¹ They did so (at least) in triplicate. First, as a black artist, working in the medium of carved sculpture, Edmondson could be imaginatively annexed to the artistic traditions of West Africa, traditions that had proven ripe for the borrowings of Parisian modernists—including the transplanted Romanian Constantin Brancusi, an artist with whom Edmondson is often compared.¹² Second, Edmondson’s process of carving works by hand from found natural materials tied him to the modernist direct carving movement, an approach that the interwar practitioner William Zorach called the “simplest,” “oldest,” and “most natural” way to make sculpture.¹³ Finally, as a self-taught artist, separated from the dominant art world by race, region, and class, Edmondson bore all the hallmarks of a folk artist, a so-called naïf.

These primitivist ideologies required submission from Edmondson, demanding deference to a web of preexisting social and material conditions—Africa, say; or limestone; or the simplicity and tradition of handicraft. In this, they are parallel in operation and effect to all those constructions of Edmondson as the “Negro from Nashville.” They are prescriptions, in other words, rather than descriptions; they impose demands on how to tell Edmondson’s story and fail to defer to the facts it offers. But what if the story of Edmondson’s lifelong locality were told differently? What if it reckoned with the facts that remain?

Edmondson’s limestone sculptures constitute an archive, enduring alongside the paper trail left by the mostly white writers of newspaper human-interest stories and popular-press art criticism. The pieces offer hints to art historians. They are records of Edmondson’s creative practice and also testaments to the material and geographic conditions within which he operated.

Working with stone blocks that friends and neighbors salvaged from local construction sites for him, Edmondson chose to carve “stingily,” as he put it, using chisels and sometimes sharpened railroad ties to remove only as much of the rock as was needed to evoke the spirit of the form.¹⁴ This process allows viewers to see both the shape of the original stone and its original purpose, perhaps a curbstone or building foundation. Since Edmondson did not smooth many of his chisel marks, he also left legible traces of his artistry: sites of manual struggle, evidence of creative negotiation, indexes of reckoning—and with local Tennessee limestone, no less. In this way, even while on the move from one collector to the next, Edmondson’s sculptures insistently betrayed their origins, carrying “home” with them wherever they went. Edmondson responded sensitively to the conditions of the limestone at his disposal. He deferred to facts, even as he carved imaginatively toward depths; he keenly perceived the close-at-hand, all the better to survey a broader horizon—marked so often in his imagination by flight (his many angels and mourning doves). In these habits of making, Edmondson performed what the scholar John Davis has recommended to historians of American art: “thorough and grounded immersion in a particular place,” so as to achieve, ironically, a “more nuanced study of transnational . . . mobility.”¹⁵ A “site-ontology approach” is what geographers call it: careful attention to one place and the many, varied, long-moving, and wide-ranging forces that have combined to produce it—accruing and crystallizing like so much limestone.¹⁶

What about those of Edmondson’s objects that never left Nashville, the things that stayed behind? In a handful of the city’s black cemeteries, more than a dozen burial sites are still marked by Edmondson’s tombstones. The only things that remain are the markers; figural embellishments were removed, either for sale or preservation, long ago. The traces of these removals are often apparent; in one case, a hole marks the spot where an ornament once fit—probably a mourning dove (fig. 3). But the headstones still stand, and in their forms we can occasionally glimpse the silhouettes of Edmondson’s most prized works. They are “terminal commodities” in the sense



3 William Edmondson, *Lizzie Stokes Monument*, ca. 1937. Limestone. Greenwood Cemetery, Nashville, Tenn. Photo: Mark Schlicher, reproduced with permission



- 4 Edward Weston, *Stone Sculpture*, William Edmondson, 1941. Gelatin silver print, 7½ × 9½ in. Center for Creative Photography, Edward Weston Archive, 81.110.104. Image © Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation/Art Resource, New York © 2017 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
- 5 Cyrus Bowens, *Graveyard Sculpture*, ca. 1920. Wood. Photo: Muriel and Malcolm Bell Jr. for Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Univ. of Georgia Press, 1940)

used by Arjun Appadurai: things taken out of exchange thanks to “a specific ritual biography,” in this case, burial.¹⁷ Usefully, Appadurai’s discussion draws attention to how the object withdrawn from circulation is not suddenly passive with this change of status; it is not emptied of human agency. This is true of Edmondson’s monuments. For these, remaining in one place is an action, not an inaction—the result of work applied, decisions made.

These locally enduring pieces offer a wealth of important historiographic information.¹⁸ They bear death dates spanning from 1935 to 1946, ranging from the start of Edmondson’s artistic activity until well after the MoMA show and the flurry of national attention to which it gave rise. The death dates also reveal how many of the remembered were Edmondson’s contemporaries. Their parents had been enslaved, but they were born after emancipation: Jennie White, born in 1885; Lizzie Stokes, born in 1887; another born as early as 1874; another in 1890. Like Edmondson, they were part of that generation who grew up during the critical period between Reconstruction’s end and its white supremacist comeuppance. Some stones commemorate lives cut short. Henry Armstrong died at age thirty-one in 1944. His mother, Lettie, lived just around the corner from Edmondson, suggesting a geography of patronage traversable entirely on foot.

Paradoxically, however, careful attention to the materiality of Edmondson’s local monuments also permits views of transnationalism and diaspora. One headstone in particular points that way. Seen in one of Weston’s photographs, a memorial made of a pair of angled bones indexes a global range of cultural origins (fig. 4). Its smooth and sinuous forms (unusual in Edmondson’s oeuvre) recall a set of African American grave markers in Sunbury, Georgia, made by Cyrus (sometimes Siras) Bowens (fig. 5). These carved wooden forms appeared in a 1940 volume of New Deal ethnography, *Drums and Shadows*, which is chiefly how they remain visible to history now.¹⁹ The art historian Maude Southwell Wahlman has more recently made the case that the incorporation of “crooked trees and twisted roots” in Bowens’s work “relat[es] to

signs of Funza, the Kongo spirit.”²⁰ The organic, nonobjective look that characterizes Edmondson’s upward-thrusting forms would also feel at home in another transatlantic current: one triangulating Africa and the American South by way of Paris. That city’s penchant for modernist experimentation was well known in Nashville. Edmondson’s patrons Sidney Hirsch and Alfred Starr had circulated there among the likes of Gertrude and Leo Stein (Hirsch in particular, who developed a later correspondence with Leo’s bohemian lover, Eugénie “Nina” Auzias),²¹ and there is evidence that Hirsch, at least, enjoyed talking with Edmondson on topics of art and its history, disseminating transatlantic salon modernism through the medium of friendship. Edmondson visited Hirsch frequently, walking up the short hill that separated their homes.

Edmondson’s bone monument demonstrates that global networks always converge differently at specific locales. It also dispels any sense that transnationalism has any backwaters; every spot, instead, is a real and concrete center. (Look again at Edmondson in the Dahl-Wolfe portrait, his body, at center, defining the field.) The geographic model of the “network,” then, might be a more apt tool than the map when it comes to locating Edmondson’s memorials. “Instead of having to choose between the local and the global view,” Bruno Latour writes, “the notion of network allows us to think of a global entity—a highly connected one—which nevertheless remains continuously local.”²²

The gravestones mark one such place, a here and a there simultaneously (so fitting for funerary markers). In view of these stones, the trope of “never leaving” transforms into a “politics of staying”—a model of endurance (I borrow the phrase from the artist Theaster Gates) for how to refold the map of transnationalism and find the world at home.²³

Notes

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- 1 Robin Pogrebin, “‘Boxer’ Sells for \$785,000 at Christie’s,” *New York Times ArtsBeat Blog*, January 22, 2016, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/blogs/artsbeat/2016/01/22/boxer-sells-for-785000-at-christies/>.
- 2 Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 349.
- 3 Bobby L. Lovett, “From Plantation to the City: William Edmondson and the African-American Community,” in *The Art of William Edmondson* (Nashville, Tenn.: Cheekwood Museum of Art; Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1999), 15.
- 4 “William Edmondson, a Primitive Sculptor,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1951, 11; and Bearden and Henderson, *History of African American Artists*, 354.
- 5 Elizabeth Spires, “Ararat,” in *I Heard God Talking to Me: William Edmondson and His Stone Carvings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 45.
- 6 Details about the work’s provenance can be found in its curatorial object file: *Crucifixion*, 1981.141, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
- 7 “God Guides His Chisel, Says Negro Sculptor,” *Dodge City [Kans.] Globe*, October 29, 1937, Public Information Scrapbooks, Museum of Modern Art, New York, microfilm reel 8, frame 515; and “New York Negro Sculptor Says His Chisel Is Guided by God,” *Niagara Falls Gazette*, October 30, 1937, Public Information Scrapbooks, Museum of Modern Art, New York, microfilm reel 8, frame 520.
- 8 “‘Natural Born’ Sculptor Gives One-Man Show in N.Y.,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 30, 1937, 6.

- 9 “Oral Interview with Gertrude Bosley Bowling,” ca. 1960–61, courtesy of Eleanor Whitworth, Family Archive, Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville. Edmondson worked as a farmhand on the Whitworth’s family farm, called Whitland.
- 10 Newspapers routinely used this nickname in headlines on the artist. See clippings in Public Information Scrapbooks, Museum of Modern Art, New York, microfilm reel 8, frames 515–51.
- 11 The following sources on Edmondson are the most explicit about the role that primitivism played in his reception: Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Tessa DeCarlo, “‘The Innocent Negro’: William Edmondson and the Guilty Politics of Folk/Outsider Art,” *Oxford American* 39 (May–June 2001): 42–53; and Lowery Stokes Sims, “The Self-Taught among Us: William Edmondson and the Vanguardist Dilemma,” in *Art of William Edmondson*, 71–78.
- 12 Scholarship linking Edmondson to West African traditions includes Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008), 97–99; and Robert Farris Thompson, “Edmondson’s Art,” in *Art of William Edmondson*, 3–14. For comparisons to Brancusi, see DeCarlo, “‘Innocent Negro,’” 47; and Edward Puchner, “Godly Fruit in the Modern Era: The Evangelical Church, the African American Experience, and a Redefinition of American Folk Art” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana Univ., 2012), 93.
- 13 William Zorach, “Tools and Materials IIC: Carved Sculpture,” *American Magazine of Art* 28 (March 1935): 156; and *Zorach Explains Sculpture: What It Means and How It Is Made* (New York: American Artists Group, 1947), 191.
- 14 Bearden and Henderson, *History of African American Artists*, 351.
- 15 John Davis, “Only in America: Exceptionalism, Nationalism, Provincialism,” in *A Companion to American Art*, ed. Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 331.
- 16 Geoffrey Alan Boyce, David J. Marshall, and Jeffrey Wilson, “Concrete Connections? Articulation, Homology and the Political Geography of Boundary Walls,” *Area* 47, no. 3 (2015): 289.
- 17 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 23.
- 18 John Michael Vlach has focused specifically on understanding William Edmondson’s efforts as a monument maker within the larger context of African American traditions of mourning, burial, and remembrance. Vlach, “From Gravestone to Miracle: Traditional Perspective and the Work of William Edmondson,” in *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1991), 109–26.
- 19 Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1940), 167. Judith McWillie notes that this photograph, along with oral histories taken then and later, constitutes the primary record of the site since its renovation in the 1980s, when the wooden pieces were removed into the collection of a local history museum. McWillie, “Art, Healing, and Power in the Afro-Atlantic South,” in *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*, ed. Grey Gundaker and Tynes Cowan (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1998), 70.
- 20 Maude Southwell Wahlman, in “The Hidden Charms of the Deep South,” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 1, *The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf*, ed. Paul Arnett and William Arnett (Atlanta, Ga.: Tinwood Books in association with Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 2000), 87.
- 21 Sidney M. Hirsch Collection, Vanderbilt University Library, Special Collections.
- 22 Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369–81, at 372.
- 23 I am grateful to Christina Michelon for bringing this apt phrase to my attention. Lilly Wei, “Theaster Gates: In the Studio with Lilly Wei,” *Art in America* 99, no. 11 (December 2011): 126.