

MOVING STONES

About the Art of
Edmonia
Lewis



Jennifer DeVere Brody

Moving Stones



THE VISUAL ARTS OF AFRICA
AND ITS DIASPORAS

*A Series Edited by Kellie Jones
and Steven Nelson*

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Jennifer DeVere Brody

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... who is Edmonia Lewis? All of us
have heard of her, and yet nothing very
definitive about her.

The Elevator (San Francisco's Black newspaper), 1879

As the War was drawing to a close, an
entirely new and unexpected star
burst forth in the firmament of American
Art in the person of Edmonia Lewis.

Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation
and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in
Interpretation*, 1916

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Contents

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List of Illustrations	x i
Foreword	xv
Introduction	i
1. A Head of Her Time	2 i
<i>Interlude: Faith Ringgold</i>	48
2. Animating Stones	57
<i>Interlude: Beverly Buchanan</i>	69
3. With Holding Hands	73
<i>Interlude: Kent Monkman</i>	101
4. About the Nude	105
<i>Interlude: Mickalene Thomas</i>	135
5. A Rose Somebody Knows	139
<i>Interlude: Simone Leigh</i>	152
6. About Photography	161
<i>Interlude: Zanele Muholi</i>	186
7. Engraving Edmonia	191
<i>Interlude: Maud Sulter</i>	207
Afterword	215
Acknowledgments	217
Notes	221
Bibliography	257
Index	279

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UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Illustrations

- 1.1. Charles Reade's notebook, page with "Heads," ca. 1870. Newsprint pasted on scrapbook paper. 23
- 1.2. Edmonia Lewis, *Old Arrow Maker*, modeled 1866, carved 1872. Marble. 30
- 1i.1. Faith Ringgold, *Le Café des Artistes, The French Collection Part II, #11*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas; printed, tie-dyed, and pieced fabric. 49
- 1i.2. Detail of Faith Ringgold, *Le Café des Artistes, The French Collection Part II, #11*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas; printed, tie-dyed, and pieced fabric. 52
- 2.1. Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra*, 1876. Marble. 62
- 2.2. Detail, Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra*, 1876. Marble. 63
- 2.3. Jack E. Boucher, *Green Hill, Slave Auction Block, 378 Pannills Road (State Route 728), Long Island, Campbell County, VA*, n.d., documentation compiled after 1933. Photograph. 65

D

U

K

E

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PRESS

2.i.1.	Beverly Buchanan, <i>Wall Fragments</i> , 1978. Cast concrete with acrylic paint.	71
3.1.	Edmonia Lewis, <i>Hiawatha's Marriage</i> , 1870. Marble.	76
3.2.	Edmonia Lewis, <i>Hands of Gerrit and Ann Smith</i> , 1872. Marble.	79
3.3.	Mathew B. Brady and Studio, portrait of sculptor Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, 1857. Salted paper print, hand-colored with black ink.	81
3.4.	Harriet Hosmer, <i>Clasped Hands of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning</i> , 1853, cast after 1853. Bronze.	82
3.5.	Jessica Lynne Brown, line drawing accompanying a section of poems about Edmonia Lewis in Tychimba Jess's <i>Olio</i> , 2016.	97
3.6.	Student interns Tamara Holmes and Kelli Hall retouching Edmonia Lewis's <i>Old Arrow Maker</i> at the Howard University Art Gallery, summer 1997. Photograph.	100
3i.1.	Kent Monkman, <i>Miss Chief's Praying Hands (Red)</i> , 2016. Molded silicone rubber.	103
4.1.	Edmonia Lewis, <i>Forever Free</i> , 1867. Marble.	113
4.2.	Edmonia Lewis, <i>Asleep</i> , 1871. Marble.	116
4.3.	Edmonia Lewis, <i>Awake</i> , 1872. Marble.	117
4.4.	Detail of toes and flowers, Edmonia Lewis, <i>Asleep</i> , 1871. Marble.	119
4.5.	Detail of child's genitalia, Edmonia Lewis, <i>Asleep</i> , 1871. Marble	119
4.6.	Edmonia Lewis, <i>Poor Cupid</i> , modeled ca. 1872, carved 1876. Marble.	123
4.7.	Still of Angel in Isaac Julien, <i>The Attendant</i> , 1993. 35mm film, color, 5.1 surround sound.	125

- 4.8. Edmonia Lewis, *Hagar*, 1875. Marble. 127
- 4i.1. Mickalene Thomas in her Brooklyn studio, 2021. 136
Photograph by Widlene Cadet for the *New York Times*.
- 5.1. Sarah Mapps Douglass, *I Love a Flower*, 1833. 147
Watercolor and gouache.
- 5.2. Edmonia Lewis, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1873. 150
Marble.
- 5.3. Edmonia Lewis, *The Veiled Bride of Spring*, 1879. 151
Marble.
- 5i.1. Simone Leigh, *107 (Face Jug series)*, 2019. 153
Salt-fired stoneware.
- 5i.2. *Marsha P. Johnson Wearing a Hot Pink Top While Lifting a Glass and Smiling*, n.d. Color photograph. 156
- 5i.3. Detail of garland, Edmonia Lewis, *The Veiled Bride of Spring*, 1879. Marble. 158
- 5i.4. Close-up of a rose, from Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra* (detail). Marble. 159
- 5i.5. Rose, from Edmonia Lewis, *Poor Cupid* (detail). Marble. 160
- 6.1. Augustus Marshall, carte de visite portrait of Edmonia Lewis ca. 1864–72. Albumen silver print on wove paper and cardboard. 171
- 6.2. Henry Rocher, Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1870. 172
Albumen silver print on card.
- 6.3. Henry Rocher, Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1870. 172
Albumen silver print on card.
- 6.4. Henry Rocher, Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1870. 172
Albumen silver print on card.
- 6.5. Henry Rocher, Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1870. 173
Albumen silver print on card.
- 6.6. Henry Rocher, Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1870. 173
Albumen silver print on card.

- 6.7. Fratelli d'Alessandri, portrait of Edmonia Lewis, ca. 1874–76. Albumen print on card. 177
- 6.8. Mathew Brady Studio, Erastus Dow Palmer, ca. 1870s. Glass plate collodion photographic negative. 180
- 6.9. Letter from Addie Brown in Farmington, Connecticut, to Rebecca Primus in Hartford, Connecticut, dated November 17, 1967, on the occasion of receiving two cartes de visite sent by Edmonia Lewis from Italy. 184
- 6i.1. Zanele Muholi, *Lerato Dumse, Syracuse, New York (Faces and Phases series)*, 2015. Silver gelatin print. 188
- 7.1. Edmonia Lewis, *Hygeia*, ca. 1872. Marble. 194
- 7.2. Edmonia Lewis's gravesite at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, London. 196
- 7.3. Vinnie Ream's marble statue of Abraham Lincoln (1871), captured in the background of an anonymous photograph taken at the Capitol Rotunda, Washington, DC, January 6, 2021. 199
- 7.4. Edmonia Lewis, *Bust of Lincoln*, 1871. Marble. 201
- 7.5. Antonio Alcalá, Edmonia Lewis Forever stamp (Black Heritage series), 2022. 206
- 7i.1. Maud Sulter, *Hysteria (Hysteria series)*, 1991. Black-and-white photographic print. 208

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Foreword

Here her brown face, rendered two-dimensional, appears pasted on the corner of an unaddressed envelope—destination unknown—looking out at us from the confines of a USA Forever stamp. There she is, perched in the middle of my computer screen—a pixelated Google Doodle, chiseling a cartooned version of her magnificent statue The Death of Cleopatra. Next, I see her in my mind’s eye near Niagara Falls in the 1850s, a precocious girl, selling beaded moccasins, elaborate pin cushions, and woven baskets—art she learned to make with her Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) family on her mother’s side—to sell to tourists visiting the nature-made spectacle of cascading water. Here, in 1862, she sketches, by the light of a wax candle in her boardinghouse room in Oberlin, Ohio; she is drawing the goddess Urania as a wedding gift for her classmate. There she sits in Boston, now a young woman, wide-eyed as she witnesses the Black Union soldiers of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment marching past on their way to battle, led by a youthful white colonel astride a horse, heralded and guided by white silk banners—a vision of thrilling formation in the eyes of this budding artist. Soon after this event, after the deaths of most of the men on a sandy shore in South Carolina, she stands before the passport clerk on August 21, 1865; according to the notary public for the county of Suffolk who filled out her application in Boston, she is “4’ high, about age 20, with small chin, medium mouth, and hair, eyes and complexion all Black—who displayed great talent as a sculptor.” Passport in hand, she speeds across the vast Atlantic on a steamship bound for Europe and, not long after her arrival on the continent,

D

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sets up her artist's studio in central Rome at the Piazza Barberini, where she sees Bernini's fountains on her daily outings. She sips a drink at the famed Antico Caffé Greco near her studio—the very same workspace that once belonged to the famous sculptor Antonio Canova. In her artist's loft, she strums her guitar for her supper guests. While in Rome, she carves the first sculptures of formerly enslaved, now “forever free” people from the United States alongside fictional Native subjects from Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*. Over the years, her various Roman studios host dignitaries, Pope Pius IX, President Ulysses S. Grant, and many other voyagers, many on the grand tour, who come and come again to watch her—this genius of the art world—carve Carrara marble into lifelike forms. In the 1870s, on a visit to the States, she poses before the photographer in his Chicago studio on State Street, wearing her sculpting garb and other telling costumes captured during the session. Now she smiles as King Emmanuel II of Italy presents her with a Gold Medal at the International Art Exposition in Napoli. Later, she rides the new transcontinental train to present her wares to markets in northern California. In the parlor of a San Francisco hotel, she finds herself surrounded by a throng of “white beauties”—all admiring her person. In 1876 she stands beside her monumental sculpture of Cleopatra as paying audiences view her work at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Now it is 1887 and she travels via train to Italy, accompanied by Frederick Douglass and his second wife, to view the ruins in Pompeii. Soon she moves to Paris, then as the century turns, on to London—her final resting place. There, after her death from Bright's disease in 1907, she is laid to rest in the Catholic cemetery, in a grave sheltered by a willow tree, under a plain slab headstone. In my dreams, she is back in Rome, hovering just above the winding streets composed of ancient Roman stones, as if she were a revenant, floating up, up, up the *Scalinata di Trinità dei Monti* to see the vista across the seven hills of the sacred city. And now, here, she still moves about the globe, and her touch forever inhabits her sculptures, which retain the residue of their maker . . . Miss Edmonia Lewis.

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Introduction

Moving Stones is a book about an extraordinary artist named Edmonia Lewis. In her lifetime, she was also known as Mary, Ish-scoodah, Wildfire, and most importantly, “an American sculptor of undoubted genius.”¹ Edmonia Lewis, who was of Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) and, likely, African Haitian descent, was born free in 1844 in upstate New York, “on or near the traditional territory of the Mississauga people in present-day Ontario,” and was buried in St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery in London in 1907.² Lewis led a peripatetic life, garnering fame (if not fortune) as the “only colored professor who ever attained eminence in [the sculpture] department of the fine arts,” to quote a prominent nineteenth-century “colored” newspaper’s description of her.³ An anonymous 1870 tract explained her remarkable journey: “God’s gift to Edmonia Lewis is unconquerable energy, as well as genius; and these two combined enable her to *rise* above all *prejudices* of *race* or *color*, and command the respect and honor of all true lovers of art.”⁴

Lewis succeeded in her determined quest to become a neoclassical sculptor, although avoiding prejudice proved impossible.⁵ In 1878, at the height of her fame, she reflected, “With color and sex against me, I’ve still achieved success.”⁶ Over the years, she experienced and resisted racist and sexist violence at the liberal Oberlin College in Ohio, the patronizing comments about her abilities in the abolitionist stronghold of Boston in the 1860s, and disparaging words from luminaries in her expatriate artist community in Rome, as well as in the international press. Although subject

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to opprobrium and faint praise throughout her life, in addition to genuine regard, her defiance never let others define her. She managed to carve out a life in art and, in so doing, experienced significant freedoms. Lewis forged her own refuge, and her fame as an artist resulted in her ability to frequently transcend the strictures expected of her by virtue of her era, race, nationality, class, sexual subjectivity, and gender.

Lewis told the *New York Times*, “I was practically driven to Rome, in order to obtain the opportunities for art culture, and to find a social atmosphere where I was not constantly reminded of my color. The land of liberty had no room for a colored sculptor.”⁷ Lewis felt both propelled and compelled to find a new life beyond the confines of her birthplace. She set sail for Europe on August 26, 1865, four months after the end of the Civil War, visiting London, Paris, and Florence and ultimately settling in Rome. Like many American sculptors in the generation before her, she moved to Italy to have proximity to Carrara marble and skilled Italian carvers. Thereafter, Lewis became a “transatlantic commuter” (to use James Baldwin’s term *avant la lettre*), crossing the Atlantic Ocean no fewer than eight times on steamers, to say nothing of her journeys on foot, in horse-drawn cabs, and by rail.

More than just a woman who traveled, however, Lewis became a diasporic subject who had to flee her birthplace. Her improbable journey included shifts among cultures, languages, and communities during her exile.⁸ We can think about Lewis’s exilic life and her work as emblematic of the term *diaspora*, which is derived from the Ancient Greek verb *διασπείρω* (*diaspeirō*), “to scatter,” “to spread about.”⁹ To tell her story, one must grapple with the many disparate geographical, ideological, linguistic, and aesthetic trajectories her life and art entailed. Her movements across continents and throughout the Atlantic world connect her to recent and past migrations not only of African-descended migrants who have traversed large, dangerous bodies of water to take refuge, if they survive, in the colonizing nations of Europe, but also of millions of Indigenous refugees, again past and present, whether Black, Native American, or from whatever nation across the globe.

I imagine Edmonia’s initial leave-taking must have been difficult, even if ardently desired (and here I am thinking of Louise Erdrich [Ojibwe] who wrote: “There can be no traveling unless there is a leave-taking. And traveling is all the more in earnest if the leave-taking is difficult.”)¹⁰ These journeys and leave-takings remain fractious, fraught with danger and, often, life-threatening travails. Such crosscurrents still move many, amid our global crises, propelled by profound inequity, climate change,

ethno-racist wars, the perpetual (re)construction of borders, and the rise of many nefarious forms of neonationalism. These profound movements were present as pressures in Lewis's life (albeit in different forms) and impacted her art. Edmonia's legacy and her deferred gift to us is to allow us to understand her already-complicated web of interrelation as a feature of our own. Her story challenges our own categories of inclusion and exclusion and our powers of interpretation. It is my modest, if earnest, wish for this project that the reader learn something about Lewis as her star, once again, rises in the firmament.

The pages that follow reveal more about Lewis's remarkable leave-takings and arrivals. For now, let us turn to explaining this book's interdisciplinary and intimate approach to Lewis's art and life.

Moving Stones approaches Lewis as a thoroughly modern subject whose neoclassical sculptures and life narrative afford us the opportunity to ask new questions about sculpture and embodiment in the diasporic Black and circum-Atlantic worlds.¹¹ As a person of Anishinaabe and African descent, Lewis's own complex subjectivity defies racial and disciplinary divides. It is difficult to grasp her significance from a single point of view: Her chosen mode of artistic expression, figurative sculpture, personifies the natal details of her life. The homology between her art and life exemplifies the logic inherent in three-dimensional sculpture, made in the round. Such lifelike sculptures cannot be accessed in their "totality" from any fixed position. Figurative sculptures are often made with a frontal view in mind; one side is more "finished" and presents a preferred view for public consumption. I argue, however, that such sculptures can be valued from all sides, generatively.

Most of Edmonia Lewis's sculptures were made and meant to be viewed "in the round." Mimetically, both her art and her life can be understood as multifaceted and volumetric: We must move about them, both physically and imaginatively, in order to understand them. Accordingly, this study takes a poetic and imaginative approach that seeks to amplify multiple dimensions of Lewis's art and life—to help round out, circumnavigate, and circulate the marvelous, burgeoning archive of all things Edmonia Lewis.

Put differently, this book eschews a straightforward biographical or strictly historical approach to Lewis's astounding life and art. Its methodological tools hew closer to Black feminist, performance, and queer studies as it seeks to carve out unexpected aspects of her work through its close readings of Lewis's sculptures, including not only her well-known por-

trait busts, literary Indians, mythic and biblical subjects, but also minor aspects of her work—her feminized flowers, a sculpture of clasped hands, and her cherubic children—all made of magnificent marble. In addition, this study asks about how Lewis performed her raced, gendered, and sexualized subjectivity as she posed in the few known photographic portraits of the artist. These precious artifacts were not the product of her own hand but rather, given the fact that they were taken at the height of her stature as a mature artist, we surmise that they may have been composed with her input.

This book hopes to reveal Lewis as a force in the world, past and present. To this end, its chapters mostly center on Lewis in her time and are then supplemented by interstitial interludes that examine twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists (many queer, of color, and feminist) who are meant to be seen as following in Lewis's footsteps and whose work complements her aesthetic and political concerns even, or especially, when they do so in media other than Edmonia's specialty, sculpture.

Thus, the book's jagged method moves about the work, mimicking the viewpoint we might see through the lens of a handheld camera. It zooms in to focus momentarily on specific aspects of Lewis's life and work. By doing so, this study seeks to mobilize the "cut," a term from film and Black studies.¹² Following this visual perspective requires us to think about moving stills, such that we are aware of how things are produced and created. Here, we think about editing: about how the splice sutures views, how the gap is productive, and how the viewer's knowledge that she has arrived at another viewpoint or moment is determined rather than inevitable. We do so in an attempt to attend to the "ungraspable" totality of Lewis and her sculptural work.

This brief discussion helps us think about the cultural work that the terms *moving* and *still* do to blur the boundaries between different media such as sculpture and photography and to pay attention to various contexts, processes, and lenses through which we see and understand art and life as well as their interrelations.

The relays between the shot and the scene of movement that compose cinema exist within the purview of sculpture that, like "cinema by other means" or photographs in the mind, is connected via a complex interplay of the stable and the sequential.¹³ Our binocular vision prevents us from seeing beyond a singular viewpoint in any three-dimensional image. As a result, we must see "the whole" of a three-dimensional sculpture in successive movements that may resemble a series of "cinematic stills." Several of

these ideas about movement and stasis are born out in a conversation between Tina M. Campt and film director Arthur Jafa. Specifically, the two theorists discussed their understanding of the difference between movement and motion: “Movement means ‘change in position of an object in relation to a fixed point in space.’ Motion, on the other hand, is a change of location or position of an object with respect to time.”¹⁴ When looking at the relation between moving and being still, I posit that they are inexorably connected and contingent, not oppositional. Stasis is the genesis for movement. Similarly, movement momentarily concludes in stasis.

As viewers, to see three-dimensional sculptural works, we must move around them, and in doing so, we create a connection between movement and stasis. In this way, we can begin to see how sculptures and photography worked together in the nineteenth century to create new perceptions of moving stones. This is an understudied aspect of Lewis’s sculptural works that allows us to think about them in the purview of new visual technologies such as photography. Photography stilled the motion of life in order to preserve an instant in time. When the industrialist and former governor of California Leland Stanford Sr. wanted to find out if his racehorse lifted all four hooves off the ground when it galloped, he funded the work of Eadweard Muybridge, whose photographic motion studies became the successive or sequential stop-action photographs that many consider to be a key moment in the birth of cinema. In these famous images, the horse is ridden by a Black jockey. These famous “Animal Studies” again place professionalized Black people in the main frame of technological innovation.¹⁵

I mention these innovations in “moving stills” not only to highlight their connections to “moving stones” as another way of understanding sculpture, but also to touch on communities of other professional Black workers in the West, and northern California in particular, where Edmonia Lewis and her work circulated in a consequential sojourn in the 1870s (discussed in chapter 4). Sculpture can be read in relation to cinema, even before the advent of such technology entered the scene. We can even think about sculpture in the round as a kind of prelude to cinematic technology and in relation to the invention of other viewing machines of the nineteenth century such as panoramas, stereopticons, magic lanterns, and even galleries of art. I take such technological innovations of art projection developed in the Victorian era seriously as a way of opening up a space for scholars of cinema and sculpture.

Methodologically, then, I ask that we move about Lewis’s work as if we were taking a cue from the camera movements featured in the seven-minute

experimental film *Static* (2009). Black British filmmaker Steve McQueen (b. 1969) made this short independent film to be shown exclusively in art galleries. The roving camera in the film moves around one of the most famous neoclassical sculptures, *Liberty Enlightening the World*, better known as the Statue of Liberty (versions of which were designed by Lewis's contemporary, French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi [1834–1904]), installed on Ellis Island in New York in 1886.¹⁶ McQueen's avant-garde film remakes this iconic nineteenth-century sculpture by showing it abstractly. The film's disjunctive cuts and shots defamiliarize the neoclassical sculpture through the skillful use of montage. One of the key effects of McQueen's camera work is to render the magisterial and massive "Lady Liberty" in a new light. The film plays with our perception of moving images on screen, in particular, their size-distance ratio and even the speed with which they were shot. Its opening sequence features an extreme close-up that shows only the oxidized corrosion of the surface of the colossus, rendering the figure abstract and disorienting and thus allowing viewers to see the sculpture anew. In the film, Bartholdi's iconic neoclassical female figure appears as sheer texture, without clear form. I contend that Lewis's figurative work can also be viewed from such an abstracted and disjointed perspective.

These technical issues point out the problem of locating oneself in space and explore the idea of the statue's liberation from its historical setting and the way the film's deep focus can undo how we see relationships between its form and content.¹⁷ I play with the idea that Lewis's sculptures can be read in these productive, postmodern ways that distort and perhaps reveal different aesthetic experiences. This approach seeks to understand the latent capacity of her work that might engage more views, move viewers—literally and figuratively—such that we see her works as dynamic moving stones that are also traveling across space and time. In this way, Lewis's figurative, free-standing marble sculptures can be seen as fractured and fragmented depending on how, from where, what angle and at what moment in time one views them. We understand that Lewis's statues were, and are, subject to change and dislocation as they move about galleries, in different ship's holds that crossed the Atlantic, over railroad tracks that traversed the United States, and now on trucks that speed along highways in specially made crates as well as in the holds of airplanes that fly about the globe.

By tracking McQueen's camerawork, I ask less what Lewis's sculptures *mean* in strictly art historical terms (what they represent iconographically) than what they *do* in, for, and about inhabited worlds of the past, present, and future. I examine how her sculptures elicit and solicit our affect and

performative desire. Such queer takes on Edmonia Lewis are meant to flesh out unlikely aspects of her work and to serve as oblique references to my subjective readings that provide unexpected ways of thinking about Lewis and her art.

Such concerns bring us to another experimental filmmaker, Sir Isaac Julien, whose own critical and artistic vision serves as another intertext for Lewis's work. Julien is an auteur who graduated from St. Martin's School of Art in London and whose work often references art historical objects. Several of his films feature the museum as a privileged *mise-en-scène*. Julien was instrumental in promoting other Black British independent filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s through his participation in groups such as Sankofa, Ceddo, and the Black Audio Film Collective. While still a student at St. Martin's, Julien codirected the experimental documentary *Territories* (1984), about the police brutality taking place in the Notting Hill neighborhood of London. As would become his signature, the film wove together fragments of material that included footage from Notting Hill's annual Carnival, televised bits of the ensuing riots in 1981 that protested the ongoing police violence, and other images, all set against a nondiegetic soundtrack of voices, music, and street sounds. This film produced a visualscape that eschewed Realism and straightforward storytelling in favor of imagistic, imaginative, and emotionally truthful scenes from actual life. Julien's own critical-artistic visions and ever-sculptural cinematic installations serve as an impossible, queer inspiration for interpreting Lewis's work.

Julien's vast knowledge of art history extends to the way he captures classical paintings and sculptures in many of his films, which also include angels as leitmotifs (chapter 4). His short-format art films featuring the museum include *The Attendant* (1993) and *Baltimore* (2003). *The Attendant* is set in a museum of slavery, Wilberforce House Museum in Hull, England, and a theater where scenes from the opera *Dido and Aeneas* are performed. This eight-minute film, with its largely nondiegetic score, presents a series of montages that create a surrealistic fantasy. While a full reading of this complex narrative work is beyond the scope of this project, I mention it because it showcases one of the earliest instances of Julien's interventions in art-historical conventions. It is one of the first films he made that features sequences and close-ups of white, neoclassical sculptures made in the mode of Edmonia Lewis's works.¹⁸ There are other filmic features such as angels (or putti) who twirl in 360-degree circles or paintings that transform before the spectators' eyes from two- to three-dimensional

form, following the Victorian practice of tableaux vivants. In *The Attendant*, the large-scale history painting *The Slave Trade (Slaves on the West Coast of Africa)*, created by François-Auguste Biard in 1833, comes to life as actors replace the painted characters and enact imaginary scenarios.

In the past decades, Julien's film work has been installed *in* museums, as he sets out to explore, if not explode, tensions between two- and three-dimensional forms, bringing the screen to life in actual, architecturally open spaces. Julien's multiscreen, multichannel video installations themselves challenge generic categories as well as ontological differences between film and sculpture in what he has named "the sculptural possibilities of the moving image." These works are experienced in what one critic calls "sculptural multiscreen architecture."¹⁹ Their installation also critiques the hierarchical and even historical categories of these supposedly distinct artistic genres: Julien has exhibited his film stills as works of art and displayed screens such that they appear to be resting on plinths, like sculptures.

In Julien's now classic film *Looking for Langston* (1989), the director deployed collaged montage techniques similar to those once described by the famed Russian film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, who also concerned himself with new forms of perception and memory, promoted by the use of the montage in cinematography. Eisenstein deconstructs different logics for viewing architecture, which in his example includes sculpture. Eisenstein's essay clearly describes the alternate means of perception from "the imaginary path followed by the eye . . . [such as] impressions in front of an immobile spectator. In the past, however, . . . the spectator moved between [a series of] carefully disposed phenomena that he absorbed sequentially with his visual sense."²⁰ Eisenstein showed the difference between how movement works for a stationary viewer of cinema and the peripatetic "roving" spectator required by sculpture. Julien's oeuvre also engages different embodied modes of perception. In *Looking for Langston*, a queer homage to the Black Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes (1901–67), Julien makes brilliant use of tableaux vivants, and moving tracking shots of still figures show how film works to elicit dynamic responses.

The changing temporality created by Julien's works that rely on the device of the tableau creates a disjunctive rhythm that depends on the cut as the spatial referent that sutures the moving image. Julien has said that his work seeks to "make theoretical films of desire" as a means of contesting racism and homophobia in British culture and throughout the diaspora. These questions about race, gender, and sexuality matter in both Julien's and Lewis's art. Julien's recent hybrid sculpted/filmic installations are

designed to move us queerly through different times, spaces, places, and emotions in ways that resemble how we can approach Lewis's sculptures that have been installed in museum settings. All such works are moving and move us: they defy a singular stance, literally and figuratively. An aspect of these works always exists beyond the curve or the boundary mobilized by the cut and therefore require a subsequent imaginary suture.

Julien's celluloid gilded putti appear in a number of his films and were included in a 2016 installation of stills at the Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco.²¹ Notably, young actors portraying these figures first appear in *Looking for Langston*, and they flit in 360-degree turns throughout *The Attendant*. Nina Kellgren, Julien's cinematographer for both works, studied sculpture as well as photography. This fact grounds the arguments here in terms of connections between sculpture and film.

Kobena Mercer has written about this phenomenon in his book on Alain Locke, the gay philosopher and eminence grise of the Harlem Renaissance. Mercer discusses the cleansing trope of classicism that both uncovered and recovered the homoerotic sculptures made by Harlem Renaissance artist Richmond Barthé, whose work was featured in Julien's 2022 installation *Once Again . . . Statues Never Die*, as well as in *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism*, a show curated by Denise Murell at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2024. Julien's winged putti, filmed as cutouts that spin around and around in different moments of Julien's film, are rendered in black-and-white and color: They might be read as the queer progeny of Lewis's cupid discussed in chapter 4.

Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote in 1780: "The sculptor's art is not unlike that of Dancing, where the attention of the spectator is principally engaged by the attitude and action of the performer."²² I trace how sculptures, when literally animated, can be seen to "come to life"—or become "live," enlivened entities, with results akin to those of kinesthetics (movement or dance), to reiterate Reynolds's analogy. Notably, Enlightenment pronouncements such as Reynolds's preceded the invention of kinetic (actually moving) sculpture, which we now think about as "mobiles," to use the neologism coined by Alexander Calder (1898–1976) in the early decades of the twentieth century. Calder's mobiles were inspired by the movements of a dancer he saw in Paris: the multitalented Black American performer Josephine Baker. The invention of the mobile marks another moment of moving sculpture whose source is concomitant with the movements of a

Black woman. Calder's mobiles were made of wire so as to be suspended from the ceiling, like the performances of Black female high-wire artist Olga Kaira, known as "Miss La La," who was painted and drawn by Edgar Degas (1834–1917). In Degas's *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando* (1897), the off-kilter, contorted perspective from which we see the high-wire performer conveys a sense of motion since the subject, Miss La La, is frozen in the midst of a whirl on the wire. The painting captures the performer in medias res, suspended within a dizzying rotunda whose architecture, with its rhythmic triangular segments, reinforces this sense of a moment, moving. According to Griselda Pollock, the art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) saw a similar concatenation of stilled movement in the "petrified stasis of classical sculpture's gestural repertoire [which he described further as] a repository of once-animated performances and dancing rituals, that carried in mnemonic form the legacy of once-enacted rituals and sacrifices, themselves the register in social and collective action of materially determined—if psychically experienced—emotions about life, death, desire and want."²³ These ideas reference a long-standing tradition of connecting sculpture and movement. Think, for example, of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (first performed in 1611), where the drama culminates in the moment in which the audience witnesses an actor playing a statue transmogrify into a living being. In this famous scene (act 5, scene 3), the actor playing Hermione gives viewers pleasure by juxtaposing the proximity between art and life that sculpture enacts. Such practices of vivifying stone go back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, itself a source for Shakespeare's drama.

Here, I draw on these ideas to animate the affective valences of sculpture that extend, or rather emanate, from this medium as such. The performative acts staged during the nineteenth century known as *tableaux vivants* are another iteration of such transformations that bring two-dimensional pictorial images to "life" in dramatic ways—either at home in parlors or in theatrical productions. In these popular theatrical events, actors composed themselves into scenes from famous paintings for the pleasure of the viewing audiences seated in the theater. They would hold themselves still to produce the moment of "realization." In so doing, these staged events transformed artworks known two-dimensionally into three-dimensional forms. They proposed and staged a relay between "striking a pose" and "freezing a frame," a relationship of connections between stasis and movement that were *realized* in the fullest sense of that verb, or in Martin Meisel's sense of "realizations" that looks at the connections among

the representational arts of theater, dance, and sculpture in the Victorian era as well as in the Julien films mentioned above.²⁴

Sculptures perform “types” and resonate with specific contexts and ideas. They move us, literally and figuratively, as they carve space and beckon us to move about them. Adrienne Kennedy explains that one of the impetuses for her brilliant play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) was “the statue [she] saw of [Queen] Victoria in front of Buckingham Palace. . . . [It] was the single most dramatic, startling, statue [she’d] seen. Here was a woman who had dominated an age.” She continues: “In my play, I would soon have the heroine, Sarah, talk to a replica of this statue. Finally the dialogue with a statue would be explicit and concrete. And the *statue* would reply; the *statue* would inform my character of her *inner* thoughts. The *statue* would reveal my character’s secrets to herself.”²⁵ It should come as no surprise that Kennedy, the student of Victorian culture who teased out her era’s repressed hysteria, imagines this surrealist scene of an externalized “body double” in dialogue with an actor on stage—engaging the possibilities of projection and introspection among these propped objects before us.

Beginning in the Victorian era, the practice of lighting statues in galleries as if they were actors became prevalent. Some were covered with red velvet cloth so that the white marble took on a slightly “rosy,” almost flesh-like hue, or were given a yellow wash in the mode of Antonio Canova, or were lit so that they would be shadowed to elicit greater drama and affect. Like architecture, sculptures carve space, marking places in such a way that our bodies must negotiate them, relate to them in space and time, and engage the haptic and the optic. Event, sculpture, and film were always already sutured in the art of Edmonia Lewis’s time—the time of tableaux vivants, panoramas, and other mixed-media displays of live and still, of sculpture performed as a cinematic event. As Liz Grosz says in *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, “We can think of time [and, I would add, sculpture] only in passing moments, through ruptures, nicks, cuts, and in instances of dislocation.”²⁶ Consequently, I want to think about the deep connection among sculpture and bodies, as objects in motion. If we believe that *all* matter is gestural, we might understand that pose in sculpture is the building block of theater, dance, and performance.

“How do we remember a sculpture?” David Getsy asks in his study *Body Doubles*.²⁷ If we imagine statues as immobile, unchanging, unseeing, and mute, they hardly seem appropriate objects for performance; but, in fact, they do change in part by the discourse imparted to them and in part

through our bodily relation to them. Sculpted bodies are famously “life-like”: We cannot invoke them without setting off a signifying chain, a Möbius strip of referential movement. Their formation retains residues of feeling, touch, audiences, the artist’s hand, remnants that have been memorialized and transformed, transported, and translated, but remain.

In a sculpture class I took in North Carolina in the mid-2000s, we students were instructed to throw a mass of clay and then “read” its gesture. Mine landed on the far edge of the table. I felt its diagonal gesture was lurching and tentative. It was during this session that I realized that the sculpture studio is a theater of movement. It is a space of shifting glances, complex choreographies, states of being, and constant movement. I remember moving around the live nude model placed in the center of the studio. As we did so, we were able to form and reform flesh and clay, anatomy and geometry—adding muscle to maquette. We were meant to hone our technique in order to transform the figure before us, which became fodder for the imagination. We had to keep coming back into place as we engaged the live model. I learned to comprehend the moving materiality required to make sculpture, and to contemplate its mass, space, and temporality.

To make her sculptures, Lewis needed not only technical skill and technological knowledge but also philosophical and historical knowledge about embodiment that entailed understanding composure, composition, compartment, and anatomy as well as market forces. Lewis’s selections were *sui generis* and distinct while still being in conversation with her coevals, who themselves were also arguing about notions of the “Antique,” which is to say Roman-era copies of Greek sculptures, as well as the many popular updates of such idealized genres as the putti, the Native American, heroic leaders, dying queens, and biblical subjects. Neoclassical sculptors wrestled with how to make statues that were at once reminiscent of established ideals and yet somehow also innovative and newly distinct from previous models. They struck this balance by updating the subjects they sculpted (such as the many images of contemporary leaders in “ancient” guise) or molding new subjects that included modern props in the place of ancient lyres. Sculptures convey a sense of the past even as they portray modern subjects.

During her life as a sculptor, Lewis created clay studies, sketched in pencil, carved and chiseled hard marble with tools she sometimes made herself, put up her own bozzotti and polished her precious works. This was arduous work to which she committed herself over many years before she was able to employ assistants: Each strike, each perambulation about a work of sculpture in progress, required her to engage all of her senses in

meaningful movements that coordinated eye, mind, arm, hand, legs, feet, and heart. In focusing only on finished products, we forget the fact of production, the forging of a work, willing it to life with one's own moving motive and emotions. This too was an important aspect of Lewis's life-long dedication to moving stones.

The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839–Today, a large-scale exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010, interrogated various ideas of “moving stones” and helps us to read Lewis's work in terms of other concurrent and subsequent visual and affective technologies. For example, the invention of the photo-sculpture in France in the 1850s: This human-technology hybrid used a special room with twenty-four separate operators stationed in the round. A model would stand in the center of the room, and, when directed, the camera operators would each take a photo that was then sketched onto plates and then “drawn” into clay to produce a rough maquette of the model. This forerunner of the 3-D printer, designed to democratize and “automate” sculpture, is another example of how different visual media worked in concert.²⁸

Each of these innovations paves the way for understanding sculpture as a kind of cinematic or perceptible form, and as performative to the extent that it is composed of takes, of temporality, and is not “static” space. Such ideas of sculpture's durational instantiation inform my theoretical understanding of how Lewis's motivation to be a neoclassical sculptor may not have been only commercial or whimsical but plausibly also about modernity and motion, to say nothing about her motivations to create her own genealogical formations.²⁹ As Kobena Mercer explains, “Art invites us into a concentrated act of looking, thinking and feeling that takes us out of the ordinary as we reflect on what we behold in the very moment of beholding it. Before we can say what art is about, our sensory engagement tells us that form comes first. The primacy of the aesthetic dimension, however, receives the least attention when it comes to black artists.”³⁰ Close reading of Lewis's art along such lines is a central goal of this book.

Perception, then, provides an important window on the performative aspects of sculpture and its cinematic elements. “While a visual object is presenting one side to the eye,” Jean-François Lyotard wrote, “there are always other sides still unseen. A direct focused vision is always surrounded by a curved area where visibility is held in reserve yet isn't absent. This disjunction is inclusive. Perceptual ‘recognition’ never satisfies the logical demand for complete description.”³¹ The lack of satisfaction fuels the desire

to return to the scene of the still unseen. This brings to mind the process of carving a likeness that depends on the cut, concepts of re-memory, and the openness of the seemingly closed, complete image that is in fact on and even in the move. This is “cinema by other means,” according to Pavle Levi.³² Perhaps this is why Richard Powell titles his brilliant book on Black portraiture *Cutting a Figure*, and why Fred Moten champions “the break” as an iterative mode of Black performance.³³ Such markings make meanings memorable—creating connection and distance in the break.

Finally, the field of performance studies also helps to shed light on the work of what historically were mixed-media forms in which sculpture proper and embodied performances were realized and cathected.³⁴ As we move through this book, I hope that you will be attuned to various and varying feelings (presumed to reside inside the body) that are engendered by thinking about our encounter with sculptures in this “expanded field of vision”—even or especially those pieces signed by and assigned to the name Edmonia Lewis and often accompanied by the Latin phrase “Facit a Roma” (Made in Rome). This is to say that in offering some broad propositions about sculpture in the round, I mean for them to “apply” to Lewis’s work in particular.³⁵

During the nineteenth century, Lewis’s sculptures were well known throughout the Atlantic world; however, knowledge about her became scant after her death shortly after the turn of the century, and many of the sculptures she produced were damaged or forgotten, and some still remain “lost.” Although she was mentioned with some regularity throughout the annals of African American history and claimed by both feminist and lesbian feminist art and history, only in the past few decades has there been a robust resurgence of art and scholarship about her. Nevertheless, Lewis’s contributions to the visual arts of an African American diaspora remain paramount, not only because of her ability to live as an artist or because of her achievements as a female sculptor in a so-called male-dominated field, but also, and more significantly, for her compositions and the skilled work evident in her copies of masterworks. In short, for the art she made. Her smooth copy of an ancient bust of Octavian, *Young Octavian* (ca. 1873), was thought to be among the very best carved reproductions of the bust being sold in Rome during her lifetime.³⁶

This book reads both Lewis’s less-discussed pieces and the marginalized aspects of her more famous works through a queer lens. In particular,

the book analyzes two pendant sculptures of allegorized infants, a statue of a winged cupid, her sculpture of a couple's hands, and her use of roses throughout her work in order to produce queer readings and new interpretations. In so doing, it attends to the modes through which we can approach her sculptures: ekphrastic descriptions, photographs, imagined haptic encounters, and digital prints. Again, attending to the different media through which we might come to know Lewis and her work fulfills my desire to think about how different media, when read together or against one another, can open up aspects of visual culture. Scholarship by Kobena Mercer, Isaac Julien, Imani Perry, and José Esteban Muñoz, among many other queer artists and writers, teaches us that *how* we look at a subject is always already fraught with questions of unexplained desire. The book follows these and other queer studies by looking *for* as much as *at*, if not "looking after" (to invoke Kara Keeling's work) or *about*, in order to counter more straightforward, linear accounts.³⁷ Even the short biographical note in this chapter provides only the most basic contours about her and therefore is designed to be neither definitive nor fixed, even as it proves the thesis that "a black artist always becomes an actor in her own show."³⁸

To think about the question of how Lewis acts in her work and life requires many methodological modes, each of which meets certain limits registered via silences, gaps, and breaks.³⁹ Lewis's work and life have been obscured by the very categories of (disciplinary) difference through which we can see traces of her—race, place, subjectivity, ethnicity, gender, and nation. Lewis's works and her life could be viewed through many lenses: Native American folklore, American history, and politics; African American and Indigenous histories and the intersections between them; transnational art history; European history; Atlantic studies; feminist, gender, and queer studies; aesthetics; movements of global capital; literary studies; histories of abolition; women's education; global nineteenth-century studies; theories of race and ethnicity; and other disciplines too numerous to name here.

Lewis's multiple movements confound ethnic notions about Black and Native female subjects in the era of mass enslavement of peoples of African descent and the continuing violence of genocide against Native Americans and other migrants across the globe—a time when Lewis's queer artistic life in Italy verged on an impossibility. Although she could be viewed as a singular queer subject for her time and ours, it is important to remember that she was not anomalous. As Philip J. DeLoria, for one, reminds us, to invoke the idea of the anomaly is to reconfirm stereotypes that

limit horizons of expectation.⁴⁰ Indeed, we should assume that there were, and still could be, many more Miss Edmonia Lewises. Tiya Miles makes a similar argument in her magisterial book *Night Flyer* (2024) about another historical nineteenth-century heroine, Harriet Tubman.⁴¹

We expand our focus so that it is multidirectional and able to account for different media and modes of remembering, which is also to say, forgetting. The mixed methods of the transdisciplinary field of performance studies help us to unearth Edmonia Lewis's life and work. As a result, I draw on my knowledge of performance studies, visual studies, queer studies, Indigenous studies, and Black feminist theory, each of which requires one to "think otherwise" about the almost always contentious ways that race, gender, sexuality, difference, and class are curated, displayed, and constituted. I grapple firsthand with Lewis as a "transitory figure perceived through glimpses and furtive glances, by fictive traces and fugitive moves," as well as the ethical imperative of honoring such subjects' right to opacity.⁴²

Lewis was a spinster, or what the novelist George Gissing called, "an odd woman."⁴³ She never married nor, as far as we know, did she bear children.⁴⁴ In my understanding, Edmonia Lewis led a "queer," nonnormative life by virtue of being (1) a professional, (as she would have said) colored woman artist; (2) a sculptor in stone at a time when such work was deemed "masculine"; (3) a spinster; and (4) the subject of lesbian and queer affections, past and present. In other words, the specificity of Edmonia's life and work can lend itself to evident queer readings (though some readers might consider this a tendentious approach).⁴⁵ Lewis does appear in *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, and was claimed by the Guerrilla Girls as a queer "ancestor."⁴⁶ I hope, however, that thinking about Lewis via such queer approaches can bring about fresh ways of reading her art that work against essentializing or reifying her sexuality as such.

While it may be impossible to determine or define Lewis definitively as (a) "queer," it is nevertheless possible to identify and amplify queer aspects of her oeuvre. Examples include her sculptures of female heroines such as the biblical Hagar (whom she carved stating, "I have strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered") and Cleopatra—both of whom have frequently been characterized as sexual outlaws.⁴⁷ In her later works, Lewis sculpted flowers and sensuous feminized forms that contrasted with her deployment of masculine poses in some of her photographs—and can lend themselves to readings from feminist and queer

perspectives. Throughout this book I speak queerly about the *production* and performances of formal aspects of her work and less about her own possible queer gender performance or any idea about her “actual” sexual subjectivity.⁴⁸

In *American Negro Art* (1960), Cedric Dover described Lewis as “an attractive young woman of East Indian appearance—many Negroes of part American indian [*sic*] origin (her mother was a Chippewa) have their twins in Asia and Southern Europe. She had, too, an appealing intensity and forthrightness, heightened by an uncultivated voice, and a tell-tale boyishness increasingly emphasized by clothes reminiscent of the more unfeminine feminists of the period.” A few paragraphs later, Dover references her as “the dark brown boyish girl.” Dover concluded his summary of Lewis: “Her end, like her beginning, is a mystery or a conspiracy of silence.”⁴⁹ This statement was written before her grave in London had been located, at a time when she appears to have disappeared from the historical record. Dover’s diction aligns with the discourse of illicit sexuality; the language to describe her might not yet have existed either in common parlance or in art historical vocabularies. While most chroniclers of Lewis’s story maintain that no hint of “scandalous” sexuality exists, multiple ways of interpreting her work suggest she may have led a queer life.⁵⁰

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymological root of *to queer* means “to turn,” “to twist,” or “to curve.” In following its subject, this book is speculative and performative, circuitous, recursive, queer: It asks us to train our eyes on movements and motion as a means of dissolving differences between media, the past and the future present, the now and the then, the living and the still. This is to pose (as) problems of perception not merely what there might be to see but how to see around, about, or perhaps beyond the boundaries of the archive itself. Such journeys through the archives should seek to open the fixed boundaries between the lost and the found by looking askance at, or queerly about, the purportedly ephemeral evidence.

Moving Stones offers new ways of reading Lewis’s queer’ life at home and abroad that reverberate in the present. I mention Lewis’s interactions with other free Black women of her time, in contrast to most accounts, which tend to mention her only as an isolated anomaly in the all-white context of other American artists in Rome. I am curious about how portrait photographs of Lewis circulated among Black queer women from the nineteenth century to the present. This speculative aspect of my book

thinks about her as one of many “colored” girls who led “wayward lives, [as] beautiful experiments”—to paraphrase Saidiya Hartman, who glosses the word wayward as that which is “errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild.” While the women in Hartman’s study are all twentieth-century subjects, they had their corollaries in the nineteenth century. As Hartman writes, they created “possibility at a time when all roads, except ones created by *smashing out*, are foreclosed.”⁵¹ I take up Hartman’s topic of the radical lives of Black girls to illuminate Lewis’s nineteenth-century work with chisel and awl—which she used literally to smash out a meaningful living. Aptly, smashing was a nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century term for queer sex as well as an adjective that signified something marvelous; it is again popular in the twenty-first century as a way to denote any sexual activity. All three of these meanings help us to see Lewis’s ability “to make a way out of no way” and to forge a life for which she had few, if any, models. As was the case with her original sculptural subjects, she had to create sui generis forms that did not always conform to expectations about her.

This book’s subtitle features the word *about* as an analytic and theoretical proposition. This is a book *about* Lewis’s life narrative as a work of art, *about* sculptures as moving objects, and *about* the engagement of contemporary artists with both of these subjects.⁵² Deploying the word *about* as both a preposition and an adverb suggests how the term denotes and connotes movement, intensity, and topicality. To be “about” something is to maintain a certain distance from the subject of an inquiry: to approach, to lurk, to approximate it.⁵³ The spatial valences of the word, particularly in British English, connect it to ideas of temporality and affect. Each chapter of the study resonates with the terms set out here and demonstrates how setting stones in motion produces new approaches to understanding the nineteenth century’s most acclaimed international professional female “colored artist” and her works.⁵⁴

These myriad meanings of *about* allow us to promote the idea that movement is integral to sculpture. We must look askance or awry, which is to say, behind, before, beyond, around the edges and at the bottom of her life and work—incorporating a theoretical approach that also focuses on haptic-optic relations. Although we associate the optic with relatively distant vision—that which lies beyond one’s sighted stance—and, relatively speaking, we understand the haptic in relation to the proximate—that within one’s sited or sighted stance, these terms are connected.⁵⁵ As

the sculptor Aria Dean (b. 1993) conveys in distinguishing painting from sculpture, “Sculptors are interested in how something works, how it moves, how it enters discourse.”⁵⁶ As I write these words, my computer claims it is “moving items into place.” The haptic, optic, and even sonic surround us.

Moving Stones offers an approach to the artist’s work and life that is rife with desire—my own and others’. A more colloquial understanding of *about* suggests being engrossed in an intense passion for one’s topic. To be “all about Edmonia Lewis” is to commit oneself with the most ardent devotion.⁵⁷ Such desire for Lewis and her obscured body of work might move us to seek out the erotics of touch (hers and ours), the evidence of ephemera (in the forms of photographs, letters, clippings), and the imagined queer futurity of the archive composed of such eroticized ephemera.

Chapter 1, “A Head of Her Time,” discusses my initial encounter with Lewis in an archive in the London Library and gives an abbreviated biographical sketch of the artist. Chapter 2, “Animating Stones,” continues theorizing about sculptures as moving, even animate, objects and concludes with an analysis of the materiality of marble that “colors” Lewis’s work. Chapter 3, “With Holding Hands,” analyzes Lewis’s hands as tools and provides a close reading of a sculpture she made of the clasped hands of an abolitionist couple. Chapter 4, “About the Nude,” discusses naked putti that Lewis carved in the 1870s, making her among the first and likely the only female sculptor of color to produce nude statues. Chapter 5, “A Rose Somebody Knows,” focuses on Lewis’s penchant for sculpting roses in the latter part of her career. Chapter 6, “About Photography,” looks at the significance of photography in Lewis’s art and life. Chapter 7, “Engraving Edmonia,” analyzes Lewis’s carving of headstones and changes made to her gravesite in London before turning to a discussion of commemorative sculptures.

Since her death in 1907, many different artists and media makers (and an increasing number of curators and art historians) have paid tribute to Lewis, including poets, musicians, multimedia performance artists, novelists, children’s authors, comic book writers and illustrators, photographers, filmmakers, and digital artists. A 1969 portrait by one of her early admirers and most deft interpreters, the brilliant artist Romare Bearden, presents a three-quarter-length view of a seated Lewis in a gorgeous collage—the background is a vermillion that highlights the figure’s cerulean blue clothing. In this work, Lewis’s brown hands are folded in her lap as if mimicking the pose of one her photographic portraits discussed in chapter 6. One of the scraps used in the composition to depict

the right side of her face is a photograph of the bronze sculpted head of what looks to be Queen Nefertiti. The other side is composed of grey rough stone. A triangular white earring dangles delicately from her one visible ear. The work is titled, appropriately, *Homage to Edmonia Lewis*. It serves as an apt visual accompaniment to Bearden's superb short study of Lewis and her art in the book he coauthored with Harry Henderson, the 1993 study *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*.

In a nod to this approach of creating a collaged compendium of artists, each of the chapters outlined above is followed by an "interlude," that focuses on an artistic work by a contemporary artist. These riffs on Lewis's work and life connect her and her art to subsequent artists well beyond her specific *métier* and time period. The terms and conditions of these interruptions suggest the ways that art is subject to change, in multiple senses. Specifically, I connect the following twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists (in order of appearance) to aspects of Lewis's life and art: Faith Ringgold (1930–2024), Beverly Buchanan (1940–2015), Kent Monkman / Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (Cree) (b. 1965), Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971), Simone Leigh (b. 1967), Zanele Muholi (b. 1972), and Maud Sulter (1960–2008). Each of these seven interlocutors has something to say about Lewis or an aspect of her artistic legacy: They participate in what Christina Sharpe would call "wake work" that has kept and keeps Lewis current.⁵⁸

It is perhaps no accident that the majority of these artists identify as colored or queer, or both, and as a result, can be read in proximity to queer aspects that some readers might see in studying Lewis's art and life.⁵⁹ The ludic interludes serve as a way to look back with new eyes at her work: to perform a kind of about-face. The term *about-face* originated with the English army and was deployed in the United States during the Civil War. It is defined as a complete, sudden change in position or 180-degree turn. The interchapter sketches perform an about-face and seemingly turn against the previous views of Edmonia and her work. The idea of the about-face works with the larger theoretical framework of *about* used throughout this study of Edmonia Lewis. It too has a queer valence, for at least since the 1990s (and perhaps earlier in drag culture) the phrase "about face" has been used in queer communities, as in the About Face Theatre in Chicago or the recent art history volume edited by Jonathan Katz.⁶⁰ Without doubt, all of this collective work confirms curator Kinshasa Holman Conwill's contention that "reading both the facts and the between-the-lines emotions of the lives of [extraordinary artists such as Edmonia Lewis] is a vivid and moving experience."⁶¹

Notes

Introduction

- 1 “Edmonia Lewis: An American Sculptor of Undoubted Genius, An Honor to the Colored Race; Sketch of Her Early Life and Art Studies—Some of her Greatest Works—Life in Italy,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, 1879. In addition to her personal names, Lewis was referred to by a litany of terms and descriptions that sought to render her Other, such as “The Miscegan Sculptor,” used in the *Daily Graphic: An Illustrated Evening Paper* (New York), 1873, 58.
- 2 Miles, “A Singular Maker’s Many Migrations,” 11.
- 3 *The Elevator*, August 30, 1873. Lewis and many of her contemporaries subscribed to the racial designation “colored.” Throughout this book she will be referred to by multiple terms in accordance with the tangled and shifting historical record that continues to complicate all racial designations produced in various discourses.
- 4 “How Edmonia Lewis Became an Artist,” unsigned tract, 1870 (emphasis in original), Harvard University Library, Gift of Hon. Charles Sumner, Boston. I thank Tiya Miles for sharing this document with me. Melissa Benbow analyzes this important document in her dissertation, “Before Black Bohemia.”
- 5 On neoclassical sculpture, see Rheims, *19th Century Sculpture*, 15–48; also, Gilroy-Ware, *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain*.
- 6 Quoted in the *Lyon County Times* (Silver City, NV), December 25, 1878.

- 7 Quoted in “Seeking Equality Abroad,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1878, 5.
- 8 S. Hall, *Writings on Visual Arts and Culture*. See also Henderson and Bearden, *A History of African-American Artists*, 55. Harry Henderson and Romare Bearden discuss Lewis’s “accented” English, which they attribute to her having spoken the Ojibwe language as a child.
- 9 *Oxford English Dictionary*, “diaspora,” updated 2014, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/diaspora_n?tl=true.
- 10 Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*.
- 11 See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; Roach, *Cities of the Dead*; Mercer, *Travel and See*; and, especially, Copeland and Nelson, *Black Modernisms in the Transatlantic World*.
- 12 See Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture”; Diawara, “Englishness and Blackness”; Powell, *Cutting a Figure*; Moten, *In the Break*. We could even think about the early cutter of profiles, the enslaved Moses Williams (1777–1825), who made silhouettes in Philadelphia, and the work of Kara Walker.
- 13 See Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*.
- 14 Camp and Jafa, “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death.”
- 15 See Gordon, *Indecent Exposures*, 20. In one early ad featuring another of Stanford’s horse, Abe Edington, there is a reference to Abe being “driven by C. Martin.” The horse in question was Sallie Gardner, pictured in the series of photographs “Sallie Gardner; or, The Horse in Motion” from 1878. The original horse, Occident, photographed in 1872, appears only in a woodcut as the original photograph was lost. See Solnit, *River of Shadows*.
- 16 See Handlin, *Statue of Liberty*. Bartholdi first devised a version of the statue when he was twenty-two years old, while working in Suez in the 1850s. It went through many iterations, becoming more classical and less “Egyptian” as it evolved. The statue was a feat of engineering. See also Amy Sherald’s monumental oil painting *Trans Forming Liberty* (2024).
- 17 In my mind, McQueen’s approach to the famous monumental sculpture renders the statue as an animated, moving stone. The eight-minute film plays with the size-distance problem of locating oneself in space and explores the idea of the statue’s liberation from its prior historical suturing to contoured form and “stable” architecture. The word *statue* etymologically comes from the Latin verb *statuere* (to stand). Movement and stasis are perceptual and profoundly imbricated, even dependent modes that sculpture is situated uniquely to address. See Harasawa et al., “Effects of Content and Viewing Distance.” See also

- Garland-Thomson, *Staring*; Young, *Embodying Black Experience*; and Lingo, *Mochi's Edge and Bernini's Baroque*.
- 18 He also does this in *Baltimore* (2003), shot in the Baltimore Museum of Art, which owns a copy of Edmonia Lewis's sculpture *Night*, a version of her award-winning *Asleep*, discussed in chapter 4.
- 19 Julien and Gilroy-Ware, *Lessons of the Hour*, 28. See also Maidment and Seput, *Isaac Julien*.
- 20 Eisenstein, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form," 1. In an interview between Mark Nash and Adam Finch, Nash notes how the multiscreen editing in Abel Gance's 1927 film *Napoléon* affected him and Julien when they both saw it in London in 1980. Gance used an experimental format he named Polyvision, which shifted from a single panoramic image shown across three screens to a variegated display of three distinct images on each screen. See Maidment and Seput, *Isaac Julien*, 84.
- 21 On the exhibition, titled *Vintage* and shown April 22–June 18, 2016, see "Isaac Julien at Jessica Silverman San Francisco," Contemporary Art Library, <https://www.contemporaryartlibrary.org/project/isaac-julien-at-jessica-silverman-san-francisco-18494>.
- 22 Reynolds quoted in Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 25.
- 23 Pollock, "The Grace of Time," 190; Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*.
- 24 Meisel, *Realizations*.
- 25 Kennedy, *People Who Led to My Plays*, 118.
- 26 Grosz, *Nick of Time*, 5.
- 27 Getsy, *Body Doubles*.
- 28 It reminds me of a passage I read in Harriot Hunt's autobiography, *Glances and Glimpses*. Hunt commissioned a headstone from Lewis. Hunt found a palazzo in Florence with a mirrored room that afforded viewers the chance to see multiple aspects of a single statue of exquisite beauty placed in the center of the space. "Each of these mirrors," she wrote, "reflects the statue at different angles, and consequently, exhibits some particular point more prominently or accurately than the others. Artists study the statue through the mirrors, and they can estimate the beauty of each separated part, and form a better judgment of the perfection of the whole." Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses*, 425.
- 29 The most recent research includes the exhibition catalogues Brody, *Edmonia Lewis*; and Harris and Richmond-Moll, *Edmonia Lewis*.
- 30 Mercer, *Travel and See*, 9.
- 31 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*.
- 32 See Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*; and Marks, *Touch*.
- 33 Moten, *In the Break*.

- 34 Meisel, *Realizations*; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Nead, *Haunted Gallery*.
- 35 In this context, we might also think about a renewed desire for depth, as in Rickerby Hinds’s hip-hop tableaux vivants, work by Isaac Julien, and the commercial success of *Avatar* shown in 3-D—which seems to signal a move away from our immersion in flat digital screens toward the use of touch screens and 3-D technology that allows us to “visit” galleries, including the Smithsonian, where Lewis’s famous sculpture *The Death of Cleopatra* is now installed. See Linscott, “Virtually and Actually Black”; and Linscott, “Extended Reality (XR).” Thanks to Michael Gillespie for these sources.
- 36 Beard, “Judgments in Stone.” For Lewis’s bust, see “Young Octavian,” Smithsonian Museum of American Art, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/young-octavian-14633>.
- 37 Keeling, “Looking for M—.”
- 38 Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left*.
- 39 For the generic objectifying catalogue titles of actual museum collections, see for Lewis, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*. There are at least two explicit references to Edmonia’s work in this devastating compendium of profound “found” titular artworks: a mention of *Forever Free* listed on page 92 and *The Old Arrow Maker and His Daughter* (93). Like *Moving Stones*, Robin Coste Lewis’s narrative poem seeks to “explore and record not only the history of human thought, but also how normative and complicit artists, curators, and art institutions have been participating in—if not creating—this history . . . and as an homage includes titles of art by black women curators and artists, whether or not their art included a black female figure” (emphasis added). Lewis, “Preface,” in *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, 35.
- 40 DeLoria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 1–14.
- 41 Miles, *Night Flyer*.
- 42 Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 7, 11.
- 43 One of the first articles to assert this “oddness” was the “black lesbian bibliography” section of “‘Ain’t I a Woman [sic],” *Off Our Backs: A Women’s News Journal* 9, no. 6 (1979), 25. This section was written by J. R. Roberts. The work was expanded into *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography*, to which Roberts added a foreword by Barbara Smith. Artist yétúndé olágbajú sees the folds in Lewis’s work as “holding erotic queer longings.” Author’s conversation with the artist, March 2024. Lewis is included in Summers, *Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*.
- 44 Gissing, *The Odd Women*.

- 45 An example comes from Naurice Frank Woods Jr., who, in an extensive footnote in his excellent biographical chapter on Lewis, critiques scholar Scott Trafton for seemingly “forcing a lesbian identity upon Lewis, using her associate with ‘the flock’ as a leading cause for assumption [and] . . . implying possible relationships with Adeline T. Howard and Adelia Gates, a painter who accompanied Lewis to Naples with Frederick Douglass and his wife during their visit to Italy. As with other attempts to define Lewis as a lesbian, Trafton offers no evidence to substantiate the claim.” Woods, *Race and Racism in Nineteenth-Century Art*, 238.
- 46 Summers, *Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*. See also the Guerrilla Girls’ *When Racism and Sexism Are No Longer Fashionable, How Much Will Your Art Collection Be Worth?* (1989), one of the group’s public service messages that mentions Edmonia Lewis in a list of women artists. Guerrilla Girls, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*, 58. The name “Edmonia Lewis” is also one of the group’s adopted pseudonyms.
- 47 Lewis, quoted in Brown, *Rising Son*, 466.
- 48 Katz, *About Face*.
- 49 Dover, *American Negro Art*, 27, 28.
- 50 Without the scholarship of Black art historians, artists, and curators (many of whom were also feminists), Edmonia Lewis may well have remained “lost.” This project would not exist without the work of Cedric Dover, Romare Bearden, Albert and Harry Henderson, Marilyn Richardson, Judith Wilson, Kirsten Buick, Kinshasa Cornwill, Samella Lewis, Richard Powell, Lisa Fearington, Kimberly Pinder, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, David Driskell, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Regina Perry, Freida High Tesfagiorgis, Shawyna Harris, Tiya Miles, Leonard Simon, Charmaine Nelson, Naurice Frank Woods, Jr., Maud Sulter, Elizabeth Alexander and many, many more. I follow Kirsten Buick’s call to focus on developing more complex models for understanding Lewis in relationship to her art. As such, I focus on Lewis’s active doing of her art and identity. As Buick explains, “If we work from the premise that process is a space through which the artist moves freely, a context, which changes as much for the artist as it does for the audiences of objects created by the artists, then perhaps we can begin to conceptualize artistic intent as the infinitive ‘to do.’” *Child of the Fire*, xvi.
- 51 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 226, 228 (emphasis in original).
- 52 Fittingly, Edmonia Lewis appears as a composite character in Iagiaba Scego’s lyrical novel *La linea del colore* (2020), published in English as *The Color Line* (2022). Scego’s fictionalized account continues Lew-

is's connection to African diasporas that resulted in a Black presence in Italy going back thousands of years. Scego's beautiful narrative alternates between the life of a character based on Edmonia and Sarah Parker-Remond and the story of a researcher, an Ethiopian woman. The novel cuts across time in order to imagine the composite nineteenth-century Black emigrant to Italy and the African woman from the area colonized by Italy.

- 53 Kirsten Buick provocatively suggests that “one can characterize Edmonia Lewis’s slavery works by their ‘distances’: the time when they were created relative to the end of slavery; the place where they were created relative to where slavery occurred; even Lewis’s own removed experience in that she was never a slave.” Buick, *Child of the Fire*, 72. *Moving Stones* builds on Buick’s foundational study as well as the dedicated work of Marilyn Richardson, who is completing a comprehensive biography of Lewis. My book has also benefited from insights in Charmaine Nelson’s *The Color of Stone*, as well as the excellent biographical chapter in Naurice Frank Woods Jr.’s *Race and Racism in Nineteenth-Century Art*.
- 54 Eugene Warburg (1825–67) was a contemporary sculptor from New Orleans. He too worked in the neoclassical style. His brother Daniel was an engraver and a stonemason. Like Lewis, the brothers Warburg were “mixed race,” though, as Paul Kaplan documents, Eugene, who owned slaves, sold some of them to finance his move to Europe in the 1850s. A small Parian marble sculpture of a character from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Dred* exists, as well as stones laid to create the floor of a church in New Orleans, and there is a neoclassical portrait bust of John Young Mason, who served as the US minister to France. See Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 29. Also, this Warburg’s seventh cousin, Aby, was the famous German art historian (discussed above; see note 23).
- 55 Laura U. Marks uses the term *haptic visuality* to describe how touch and sight work together. This relay between touch and sight of sculpture and, in Marks’s work, even film invites us to understand perception as a moving form. See Marks, *Skin of the Film*.
- 56 Aria Dean, quoted in “Aria Dean Is Having Fun Being Herself,” interview with M. H. Miller, *New York Times Style Magazine*, August 21, 2022, M273.
- 57 Here I am riffing on Meghan Trainor’s pop song “It’s All About That Bass,” from her album *Title* (Epic Records, 2014).
- 58 Sharpe, *In the Wake*. See also the photographic work by Afro-Cuban artist Gisela Torres, *Looking for Edmonia (Self-Portrait)*, 2020, <https://www.giselatorres.com/new-page-1>; and the video about one of Lewis’s sculptures by Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, *Cleopatra at the*

Mall (2024), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/909996>.

- 59 This is also true of the Choctaw-Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson (b. 1972), the first Native American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, in 2024, with his multimedia work entitled *The Space in Which to Place Me*. Cherokee artist America Meredith painted a portrait of her, and she was included in the Smithsonian Museum’s exhibition *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* in 2020. The show was organized by a panel of Native curators. Sadly, it was open for only a month before the Renwick Gallery was closed due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 60 Katz, *About Face*. One could also imagine Benjamin’s backward facing “Angel of History” in this scenario; see *Illuminations*, 257–58.
- 61 Conwill, “Introduction,” 14. This is the catalogue that accompanied Lynda Roscoe Hartigan’s exhibition of the same name.

Chapter 1. A Head of Her Time

Interlude epigraph: Faith Ringgold, *Picasso’s Studio, The French Collection Part I*, #7.

- 1 Founded in 1841, the London Library moved to St. James’s Square in 1845. London’s history is significant for Lewis. Once known as Londinium when it was part of the Roman Empire, London was ruled by Boudicca (a woman) when it was fighting against Roman incursions. The imperial cities of London and Rome, once linked, play a part in our story of ancient sculptures and the diasporic movements of our central figure, who lived in both cities during her lifetime. Roman rule of Britain ended in the fifth century. London then dates as the seat of government from 1066, becoming the home of Parliament and subsequently the capital of the United Kingdom in 1707. I thank my colleague Sarah Derbrew for help with this information. See Derbrew, *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity*.
- 2 Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence.”
- 3 The first use of the camera to capture evidence of a crime appeared on stage in Dion Boucicault’s play about ocular evidence, entitled *The Octoroom* (1859). See Erdman, “Caught in the Eye of the Eternal.”
- 4 The famous abolitionist Gerrit Smith (discussed in chapter 3) wrote a column, “Heads of the Colored People,” in Frederick Douglass’s newspaper, the *North Star*. The vignettes in his column, printed between 1852 and 1854, described everyday black New Yorkers working in industries. In his biography of Douglass, David Blight writes, “In the term ‘Heads,’ Smith brilliantly parodied reigning racial theories