Contestation in Aesthetic Fields:

Legitimation and Legitimacy Struggles in Outsider Art

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Abstract:

Legitimation is often theorized as a form of consensus and implicitly treated as an end-state that obtains after the unfolding of a process. Conflict and disagreement are recognized as part of legitimation processes; however, scholarship emphasizes consensus-building over contestation. Moreover, as legitimacy processes are always ongoing and never final, such contestation can persist even in legitimated fields. We bring together Baumann's (2007) general theory of artistic legitimation and field theories (Bourdieu 1993; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) in order to develop an approach to artistic legitimacy that accounts for conflict and contestation as much as consensus in legitimacy processes. We use a historical case study to build theory on legitimacy struggles in aesthetic fields. Specifically, we examine the legitimation of Outsider art, an aesthetic field defined as work by artists who produce outside established art worlds and who come from disadvantaged social worlds. Artist William Edmondson serves as an exemplar to ground our discussion of the Outsider field as we focus on resources, opportunity spaces, and legitimating discourses (Baumann, 2007) over time, to produce a multilevel and multifaceted approach to legitimation in aesthetic fields. In this way, our approach calls attention to ongoing legitimacy struggles in legitimated fields. We hypothesize that legitimacy struggles are more common in fields where judgement criteria are ambiguous, multiple players have a stake, and/or where resources are changing.

1. Introduction

In January 2016, a carved limestone sculpture by the American artist William Edmondson (1874–1951) sold at Christie's New York for $785,000 (US) in a bidding war that lasted more than five minutes.[1] As part of an "inaugural" sale of Outsider art (Miller 2016), this work, *Boxer*, set a new world record for Outsider art at auction (see Figure 1). The sale price was more than three times Christie's high estimate of 250,000 USD, establishing Outsider art as a stand-alone category for the auction house and marking the creation of a blue-chip auction market for Outsider art.[2] The sale received extensive news coverage in art periodicals and the general press. Coverage focused on Edmondson and his work, but importantly, also on the wider significance of the event for Outsider art.

Figure 1 About Here

The success of Edmondson's *Boxer* in the auction market is an important event in the Outsider art field. We use a case study of Outsider art, with a key focus on Edmondson, to shed light on legitimation processes in aesthetic fields. While there is ample evidence of the achieved legitimacy of Outsider art, our research reveals a fissured terrain in which players in the field have failed to come to consensus on core aspects including how to frame the aesthetic significance of Outsider artists and their work, which areas of the wider art world to connect to,

and what to call the field. In attending to such contestation, our case study sheds light on the multifaceted process of legitimation. For a field to be legitimized, social structure, history, and culture must align favorably (or be made to do so), providing fertile soil for new aesthetic claims. People must act as aesthetic entrepreneurs to cultivate them, possibly leading to consensus, conflict, or both. Moreover, as we argue, "legitimacy" is an ongoing process, not a final, static state; consequently, field-level contestation, which we refer to as "legitimacy struggles," is also ongoing.

A static conception of achieved legitimation is unsatisfactory. Logically, if legitimacy is a process, there is never an actual end-point where legitimacy becomes permanent and fixed, only a place where the analyst pauses. Further, sociologists recognize the maintenance of social order is inherently conflictual (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Legitimacy projects in the arts are no different (Bourdieu, 1983). However, we argue that research on legitimation often de-emphasizes conflict as scholars seek to understand how consensus occurs in legitimacy processes. In contrast, we show that conflict is part of the legitimation story, and that it persists in already legitimated fields. As Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 12) put it, "there is constant jockeying going on in fields as a result of their contentious nature."

Baumann's (2007) General Theory of Artistic Legitimation provides important sensitizing concepts for our study, as developed below. However, it lacks explicit consideration of ongoing contestation in artistic legitimation. Our revision of theory on artistic legitimation overcomes problems inherent in static conceptions of legitimacy and calls attention to ongoing legitimacy struggles in legitimated fields. We also contend that some fields may have a greater propensity for legitimacy struggles, and propose hypotheses, developed inductively from the case study, about this propensity. Specifically, we consider ongoing contestation within

legitimacy to be more prevalent in fields where judgement criteria are ambiguous, multiple players have a stake, and/or where resources are changing.

Our argument proceeds as follows: We consider sociological literature on legitimation, in general, and on artistic legitimation in aesthetic fields, in particular, demonstrating shortcomings in the extant literature. We then explain how Outsider art is defined by practitioners in the field, and show why Edmondson is relevant as an exemplar. After discussing our methods, we present our case study, which demonstrates that there is continual motion in the artistic legitimation process and provides a springboard for our discussion of legitimacy struggles.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Legitimation Processes, Consensus, and Contestation*

Legitimation is recognized as a *process*. Nevertheless, scholars often cast it as an unfolding that results in an *end-state* of legitimacy. This downplays contestation, especially ongoing contestation. For instance, Baumann's (2007) theory links legitimation in art to *success* in social movements to show how a range of creative forms "achieve artistic legitimacy" (p. 47). Similarly, Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway (2006) describe legitimation as a general social process, which proceeds through four phases: innovation, local acceptance, diffusion, and general legitimation. While metaphors of diffusion suggest passive emergence of legitimacy, historical sociology stress the agency of cultural entrepreneurs in legitimacy projects (DiMaggio, 1982; Johnson, 2007; Lena, 2019). Nevertheless, these studies emphasize (new) consensus that emerges after a "progression" to legitimacy (Lena, 2019: 85), and largely ignore conflictual processes and competing frames inherent in legitimation projects.

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Zelditch (2001: 9-10) writes, "The assumption that consensus is a necessary condition of legitimacy has been fundamental to all theories of legitimacy," even though consensus should be defined "as minimally as possible," because legitimacy "requires consensus only somewhere, not everywhere." Baumann (2007: 49) states, "Legitimacy, of course, is not a dichotomous variable, but rather can be present in widely varying amounts and among various constituencies." This suggests that legitimacy, therefore consensus, is stronger in one arena and weaker elsewhere, but does not address the possibility of contestation at the site of legitimacy. Studies that do consider problems of consensus (Fine, 1996; Centola, Willer, and Macy, 2005; Willer, Kuwabara, and Macy, 2009) offer little assistance in understanding the role of contestation in field-level legitimation processes.

Although Johnson, et al. (2006: 59) state that the "establishment of legitimacy is a contested process that unfolds over time," they do not examine or theorize contestation. Indeed, relatively few studies examine actual contestation in legitimating processes, especially at the field level. Some studies of micro-institutionalism within organizations have shed light on conflict with respect to local, internal legitimation (Drori and Honig, 2013; Landau, Drori, and Terjesen, 2014). At field level, Luyckx and Janssens (2016) and Mora (2014) demonstrate conflict among fields in legitimation processes, but tell us somewhat less about conflict over legitimation that sits at the heart of a single field or about ongoing legitimacy struggles.

Research in organizational studies provides insights into conflict within fields, though not always relative to legitimacy processes. Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004: 645) discuss competing discourses that exist at organizational and field levels, defining a competing discourse as "another structured set of interrelated texts offering alternative social constructions of the same aspect of social reality." They argue that organizational fields always contain several sets

of discourses, which may be contradictory, and can also be influenced by discourses from other fields. Relatedly, the institutional pluralism approach suggests that organizational fields contain multiple, often competing, institutional logics (Greenwood, et al, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). In this approach, institutional logics motivate action and sensemaking, and can be used to support claims for organizational legitimacy. Actors in the field are seen as capable of deploying more than one institutional logic, and may do so strategically. More importantly, some fields, such as the health and education, display "enduring, competing logics" (Greenwood et al, 2011: 323), and it is likely that the cultural and creative sectors display this characteristic (Navis and Glynn, 2010). This literature often focuses on organizational-level responses to institutional pluralism, only sometimes relative to organizational legitimacy. Nevertheless, the effects of institutional pluralism are clearly evident in arts organizations (Glynn and Lounsbury, 2004; c.f. Zolberg, 1981).

Particularly relevant to our argument is Fligstein and McAdam (2012). Although less interested in legitimacy per se, they also argue that strategic action fields are characterized by routine contestation. They argue that this kind of contestation comes from actors in the field continually "jockeying for position" (p. 13). This jockeying is our main concern; however, their theory largely focuses on more substantial "episodes of contestation," often during a crisis precipitated by disruption in proximate fields. Fligstein and McAdam also argue that fields are complex, mezzo-level social orders that are affected by macro-level changes in their environments and by micro-processes. Empirical studies of the legitimation of innovations reinforce this by demonstrating the interaction among the micro, mezzo, and macro-levels and pointing to the existence of multiple groups that fuel contestation (Cattani et al., 2017; Sgourev, 2013).

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2.2. *Legitimation in Aesthetic Fields*

Sociological literature on consecration (artist-level) and legitimation (field-level) in art has coalesced around several key issues, including "modes, agents and processes" (Lizé, 2016a). Consecration research has examined the construction of aesthetics or the effects of aesthetic discourses on artists' reputations or creative success (Corse and Westervelt, 2002; DeNora, 1991), the long-term development of artists' reputations (Fyfe, 2000; Heinich, 1996; Lang and Lang, 1990), and canon-formation (Corse and Griffin, 1997). While this research is important, it nevertheless focuses on achieved legitimation of artistic reputation (though Lang and Lang speak about waxing and waning of reputation), as well as on individual artists rather than field-level processes.

Groundbreaking work that supports a sociology of legitimation in aesthetic fields considers how interested contemporary patrons develop aesthetic discourses, which work for their own social situation against a backdrop of social change (DeNora, 1991; DiMaggio 1982). Relatedly, Baumann (2001) and Lena (2019) demonstrate that cultural entrepreneurs can elevate a non-art genre into the realm of art (c.f. Schmutz, 2016), while Giuffre (1999) shows how the activities of artists positioning themselves in the art world changes the shape of the career structure (c.f. Cattani, Ferriani and Allison, 2014). The importance of aesthetic entrepreneurship is well established in this literature.

Aesthetic entrepreneurship is central to the Outsider world. However, in Outsider art the artists themselves do not vie for position, as we will explain. Instead, "cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu, 1984; Lizé, 2016b) are the aesthetic entrepreneurs. This includes academics, curators,

dealers, collectors, and museums, along with "discoverers." Directly relevant to our study is Ardery (1997), who argues that the rise of interest in folk and Outsider art in the 1970s can be traced to a generation of academically trained artists marginalized as a result of the overproduction of artists in newly-minted MFA programs in the postwar period and the New York City-focused system that could not absorb them. These artists were discoverers and promoters of artists and the field.

Baumann's (2007) general theory of artistic legitimation highlights the sociological consensus that "recognition of art is a social process that cannot be reduced to a reflection of artistic merit" (p. 47). Baumann explains legitimation with three factors: *a changing cultural opportunity space*, which is related to wider changes in the social world, *the institutionalization of resources and practices*, which in the arts can relate to actions of museums, critics, dealers, auction houses, collectors, and universities, and *a legitimating ideology* (Baumann 2001: 405; Baumann, 2007; Lena, 2019), all of which, we show, are crucial factors in the development of the Outsider field. However, to fully understand how Outsider art is legitimated, we need a way to understand more fully the competing ideologies and legitimacy struggles that are evident in the field but not accounted for in Baumann's approach.

An aesthetically inflected sociology of the arts, which lends explicit attention to the "aesthetic field" (Alexander and Bowler, 2018), offers the potential for scholars to understand unsettled systems of aesthetic classification at the field level. The term *aesthetic field* draws attention to struggles over artistic merit, what counts as art (versus what does not), and who gets to bear the honorific title of artist (c.f. Becker, 1982). In the Outsider art field, these issues are particularly fraught, as we will show, due (in part) to the problematic way that the mainstream appropriates artifacts as art but then insists that they occupy a marginal or degraded position. All

subfields within the restricted field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993) are also aesthetic fields, even those where objects and practices are already defined as belonging within the conceptual and hermeneutic boundaries of art. This is because aesthetic classifications, along with the games that people play over them, are never free of contestation and conflict. Indeed, Becker (1982: 131) sees aesthetics as "an activity rather than a body of doctrine."

Debates about art and aesthetic systems take place against prevailing discourses in the overarching field of power (Bourdieu, 1993; 1996). As Bourdieu argues, all fields of action are embedded in the field of power. Many fields are subsumed by larger fields and fields may also have subfields. Some fields overlap or interpenetrate others. There is some looseness in Bourdieu's use of the terms field and subfield. For instance, he discusses the "field of restricted production," as a *sub*field of the field of cultural production, but it is also described simply as a field. Fields comprise sets of nested, interlinked subfields and are embedded in supra-fields, with the top level being the "field of power."[3] For instance, the postwar contemporary art field is a subfield of the mainstream art field. Outsider art is a field in its own right, but similarly is a subfield of the mainstream field. We use the term "field" for all of these.

Within fields, agents vie for position with (and for) different levels of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic power. Fields are foremost sites of struggle. Bourdieu (1993) suggests that legitimacy arises from "the field of production…as the site of the *struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate*, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated" (p. 78, emphasis added). Bourdieu includes dealers, collectors, auction houses, critics, universities, and museums, along with artists and the arts-consuming public as "agents of consecration" in restricted fields (1993: 121).

Bourdieu uses the French word *champ*, translated to English as "field." The English term is more ambiguous than the French (Thomson, 2012: 66). While English-speaking audiences may easily imagine a bucolic farmer's field, Bourdieu was not thinking of a meadow (*pré* in French). The different discourses competing in a *champ* are decidedly not a thousand flowers blooming. *Champ* implies a contested terrain, a battlefield during war, or a sports field (Thomson, 2012: 66-7). We emphasize this more precise understanding of fields as *champs* because, as we demonstrate, Outsider art is legitimated through conflicting aesthetic discourses and their purposeful construction by aesthetic entrepreneurs in a contested field.

Baumann (2007) uses a different vocabulary than Bourdieu, but his theory of opportunity spaces, resources, and legitimating discourses fits well with Bourdieusian notions of fields, albeit with less indication of contestation. Baumann argues that discourses and frames are situated within ideologies that change over time, but his work does not tell us much about contemporaneous contestation and the competition among ideologies and discourses. Empirical research has also underplayed the role of conflict in artistic legitimation (but see Hammou, 2016), as it tends to focus on an end point where legitimacy is achieved.

Overall, then there is insufficient understanding of the complexity of artistic legitimation, particularly with respect to ongoing legitimacy struggles in artistic legitimation, which are part of a complex, multifaceted, and never-ending process that is intertwined across multiple levels in a field. Our research addresses this gap, augmenting Baumann, by recognizing ongoing struggle as is suggested in field approaches of Bourdieu (1993; 1996) and Fligstein and McAdam (2012), and adding nuance by identifying enabling conditions of contestation dynamics.

3. Methods

Luyckx and Janssens (2016: 1598) suggest that "the analysis of legitimation over time requires a historical approach," which

> is used to enable the exposition of theoretical ideas and constructs as they are embedded within the story told. The value…lies therefore in the *inductive generation of new theoretical constructs*, which may transcend the specific historical case(s) in which they were originally examined. (emphasis added)

Our case study of the legitimation of Outsider art over the last one hundred years or so aims to generate theory on legitimacy struggles. William Edmondson serves as an exemplar to ground and concentrate our discussion of developments in the Outsider art field, much as Bourdieu (1996) used Flaubert as a focus in his analysis of the French literary field. We draw on scholarship of art historians and curators who have documented the critical reception of Edmondson during his lifetime and the more recent resurgence of interest in his sculpture. This complements our research on Outsider art more generally, allowing us to understand Edmondson as central to what has become a designated group of canonized Outsider artists. Experts carry both resources and discourses, key aspects of Baumann's theory; thus, their writing is particularly relevant as source material.

Our main approach is historical. However, our understanding of the contemporary situation is supported by Bowler's experience in the Outsider art field (see the online Appendix for details). We draw on fieldnotes which include interviews with art historians, collectors, curators, dealers, and others with specific interests or specialist expertise in Outsider art, as well

as with living Outsider artists. Interviews were conducted both formally and informally, and focused on such issues as the participant's interests in and understanding of the field, their thoughts on the term Outsider, and trends in the field and the market for works. This material supplements our discussion of the contemporary state of the field.

Edmondson's case serves as an exemplar of developments in the Outsider art *field*. Edmondson is an appropriate choice, for several reasons. First, he is an archetypical Outsider artist. As an important canonized master of Outsider art, his situation is representative of other artists in a similar position in the field. Second, his work was present in important moments in the legitimation of the field (notably, an influential exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1937 and the sale of his *Boxer* in 2016). Third, the development of the field is a complex story and it is appropriate to concentrate on one exemplary artist in order to cover relevant points concisely in an article-length format.

This leads us to our scope conditions: The consecration of Edmondson as an artist occurred alongside the legitimation of the field of Outsider art, but we do not aim to develop a theory of consecration of individual artists. We do not address contests that are not central to the legitimation of the field, such as scandals about individual works (Alexander and Bowler, 2018), or mundane disagreements or conflicts typical in art worlds (Becker, 1982). Neither do we address issues of canon-formation (Corse and Griffin, 1997) or critical interpretations of the meaning of artworks (Griswold, 1987).

The historical data are presented in two sections. The first entails an account of the legitimation of Outsider art over time. We start with early visibility for Edmondson and the later emergence of "Outsider art" as an established field of cultural production within the mainstream art world. The second focuses on contestation in the field, especially around legitimating

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discourses. But first, we must consider the category of Outsider art, as it is defined in specific ways by the field that may not be obvious to the readers of *Poetics*. As we develop the case study, we draw on Baumann's framework to observe the opening of opportunity spaces, the institutionalization of resources and practices, and the growth of legitimating discourses, extending his approach to show where conflict occurs, even after the field is legitimized. Our approach is consolidated in the Discussion (Section 5).

4. Case Study

4.1. What is Outsider Art?

In 1972, writer and scholar Roger Cardinal (1972) created the term "Outsider art" as an Anglophone variant of artist Jean Dubuffet's *art brut* (literally, "raw art") coined in the mid-1940s (see Rhodes, 2000). The Outsider field defines Outsider artists by two salient characteristics. First, it defines Outsider artists as individuals who *create outside established institutions of art*. This means that Outsider artists do not have formal training in artistic practice, and that they create without (apparent) interest in rewards, either material or symbolic. Owing to this "disinterestedness," Outsider art is valorized by experts in the field as an unmediated expression of originality. Isolated from the influence of the academy and the market, Outsider artists and their aesthetic visions are positioned as more "pure" (Bourdieu, 1993) than conventional artists, who are seen as shaped by their artistic training and to some extent compromised by their selling in markets. Second, the field defines Outsider artists as those who *come from and work in unconventional or disadvantaged social worlds*. Typically, they have experienced at least one of a variety of disempowered states including poverty, mental illness, institutionalization, or other forms of social marginalization. Importantly, Outsider art is defined

by the *social position of the artist*, not by characteristics of the artwork; it is not identified by "style" or "genre."

The Outsider field, like the restricted field of cultural production, is governed by a rule of "loser wins" (Bourdieu, 1993: 39) wherein the pursuit of profit is rejected in favor of disinterestedness. Outsider artists are positioned as the embodiment of a creative force uncontaminated by the market or conventional social mores (Ardery, 1997), and their authenticity is fundamental to the established art world's embrace of Outsider art (Bowler, 1997; Fine, 2004).[4] Assumptions that Outsider artists produce without the influence of artistic conventions or market considerations positions Outsiders as innocents (or "naïve geniuses"), which proponents contrast with the jaded artifice of the established art world.

Edmondson stands as an Outsider artist whose authenticity is beyond reproach. Born one of six children to formerly enslaved parents on a farm in Tennessee, he held jobs as a railroad worker, a farmhand, and after an injury, a janitor in Nashville. Edmondson began sculpting in the later part of his life, in the early 1930s. His first carvings were tombstones for the local Black community. He worked in limestone, using salvaged material from discarded curbstones or demolished buildings to create religious statuary, animals, everyday characters (nurses, schoolteachers, and preachers), and famous personages (Eleanor Roosevelt and boxing champions Joe Lewis and Jack Johnson). Many of his sculptures have thick, rectangular blocks as a base because they were originally produced as funeral statuary (Fuller, 1973; Lovett, 1999).

Artists who are considered leading exemplars of Outsider art match the definitional ideals closely (see Table 1). Edmondson is not alone in meeting the criteria of an "authentic" outsider. Other major Outsider artists include Martín Ramírez (1895-1963), widely regarded as a master of 20th century self-taught art, whose drawings and collages were produced within the second of

two Californian psychiatric hospitals to which he was committed after emigrating from Mexico (Espinosa, 2015) and Bill Traylor (ca. 1853-1949), an African-American tenant farmer who was born into slavery. Traylor began making art in later life, around age 86, producing a body of over one thousand vibrant paintings and drawings in a span of four years (Umberger, 2018). Although the thread of Edmonson is woven into the tapestry of the Outsider field in unique ways, Edmonson's case is strongly illustrative of the development of the field, as we show.

Table 1 About Here

"Outsider art" refers to a specific subfield in the art world that focuses on the work of creators who are Outsiders *by the field's definitional characteristics*. Outsider art *must not be confused* with art made by just anyone outside the mainstream art world. New art-school graduates, struggling artists, rebellious mavericks, and innovators in an avant-garde may indeed be outside the mainstream art world, but they are not Outsider artists as defined by the curators, dealers, art historians, and critics who serve as gatekeepers to the field. The crucial differences are that artists who are (lower-case-o) outside are trained, orientated toward an art world, and actively seek cultural and/or economic capital though their work.

Our concern in this paper is the now-established field of Outsider art, based on the formal definition of Outsiders as untrained, marginalized creators not only working outside art worlds but also uninterested in them. We should be clear that in using the term Outsider, we are following language that is dominant in the field, and will discuss debates on this as part of the case study.

4.2. Emergence and Legitimation of the Field of Outsider Art

Christie's Outsider art sale that included *Boxer* described Edmondson as an "Outsider" artist. Although the term was coined well after his death, Edmondson, along with a variety of other artists, was well-suited to be claimed as a preeminent representative of what would later become the field of Outsider art. We sketch important early moments in the pre-history of Outsider art and then turn to the coalescing of the field in the 1970s and beyond.

4.2.1. *Discovery Narratives and "Savvy Supporters"*

By definition, Outsider artists create with minimal awareness of the market. As a consequence, Outsider work needs to be "discovered" (Dubin, 1997; Fine, 2004: 85). Discoverers first recognize the aesthetic significance of works (sometimes saving them from destruction) and possess the social and cultural capital to introduce them to the established art world. The field valorizes discoverers, due to their capacity for recognizing the raw, untutored genius of Outsider artists. The discovery narrative is crucial to the Outsider art field as it establishes the authenticity of artists in a manner alien to the mainstream art world. In the mainstream arena, artists can—indeed, must—work to establish themselves, but self-taught artists who are too self-interested cease to meet the definition of Outsider.

Sidney Hirsch, who lived just six blocks from Edmondson, first encountered the sculptor's work around 1936. Hirsch taught art at George Peabody College and was a member of a poetry circle at Vanderbilt. He introduced Alfred Starr (a poet) and Elizabeth Starr (a painter), to Edmondson.[5] The Starrs, early patrons of Edmondson, brought photographers Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Edward Weston to Edmondson's work space. Photographs of the artist and his work

would become part of the iconography of the art world narrative that surrounds Edmondson (Fuller 1973: 22; Cheekwood, 1999: 150; Lovett 1999: 23-4).[6]

It was through Dahl-Wolfe that Edmondson came to the attention of Alfred H. Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), who arranged for an exhibition of Edmondson's work at MoMA in 1937—the first solo exhibition of a Black artist at the museum. This early exhibition was informed by a view of American folk art as a kind of "primitivism" with stylistic qualities that bore similarities to modern art in terms of abstraction and economy of form (Fuller 1973: 24; Sims 1999: 71). The casting of artwork as "primitive" is problematic and will be given critical attention shortly. A crucial point at this juncture is that Outsider art (and folk art, to a great extent) did not exist as an institutionalized subfield of the art world until much later (Ardery, 1997). Nevertheless, the *resources* provided by the early discoverers and their agents, the *opportunity space* created by aesthetic modernism, and *discourses* around "primitivism" and "authenticity" put artists such as Edmondson in an "unorganized social space" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 5) that would eventually coalesce into the Outsider field.

4.2.2. *From Stone Cutter to Canonized Master*

Edmondson continued to sculpt after the MoMA exhibition, receiving support from the Works Progress Administration during the 1939-41 period, and remained active until a few years before his death (Lovett, 1999: 29). However, the audience for self-taught art remained circumscribed and, as with other artists later claimed as Outsider masters, Edmondson's work sold for modest prices to a limited number of collectors, throughout his lifetime and well into the second half of the twentieth century.

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Outsider art began to emerge as a distinct field in the 1970s (Ardery, 1997) and is today

recognized as a legitimate market in international art. Indicators of the field's legitimation

involve the institutionalization of resources and practices, such as the existence of scholarly and

critical publications on Outsider art (in sociology, see Ardery, 1997; Bowler, 1997; Espinosa,

2015; Fine, 2004; Zolberg and Cherbo, 1997); the recognition of Outsider Art as an area of

expertise among art historians (shown by publications and university courses on Outsider Art);

the mounting of exhibitions with significant attendance and media attention; the rise of

specialized dealers and galleries (routinizing buying and selling); an increase in private and

institutional collections (thereby increasing the monetary resources of the field); and rising prices

at auctions, galleries, and art fairs, including the New York-based Outsider Art Fair, founded in

1992 (which also brings in more financial resources), not to mention the emergence of the blue-

chip auction market for Outsider art, with the sale of *Boxer*.[7]

The entry of Edmondson's work into the aesthetic field and its transition from unknown-

artisan carvings to artwork that could break sales records is best understood through the

"mainstreaming" of Outsider art, which indicates its widening legitimacy. Bowler (forthcoming)

shows that mainstreaming is indicated by three developments. (1) The presence of Outsider

artists' work in exhibitions or collections at major museums. Mainstreaming is especially notable

when Outsider art appears in institutions not predominantly concerned with folk or self-taught

art. (2) The development of a critical discourse about Outsider art and artists, which broadens an

earlier focus on artist biography to address the *aesthetic qualities* of works (discussed more fully

in Section 4.3 below). (3) Canonization, or gatekeepers' recognition of individual Outsider artists

as creative masters.

Edmondson, and several other canonized Outsiders, have increasingly been included in major museum exhibitions, a significant departure for works traditionally shown in venues that specialize in folk and Outsider art (see Table 2). For example, Edmondson's work was prominent in the influential 2013 exhibit of Outsider art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection* (Percy and Zimmerman, 2013). The exhibition featured several carvings by Edmondson and work by a number of well-known Outsider artists, including Traylor and Ramírez. It received extensive coverage in the press, including a laudatory review in the *New York Times* describing the show as a "breakout moment" for Outsider art. Work by Edmondson and Ramírez was described as "canonical." Referred to as one of the "giants" in the exhibition, Edmondson was said to have "achieved greatness," as his "carved limestone graveyard memorials and headstones have turned out to be *among the best sculpture*…of the 20th century" (Smith, 2013: n.p., emphasis added). It is important to underscore the significance of this quote for what it is missing: the inclusion of the Outsider appellation. This absence places Edmondson not simply in the specialist canon of American Outsider artists but also in the more prestigious canon of 20th century American sculptors.

Table 2 About Here

4.3 Contestation in Legitimation

We have outlined Edmondson's role in the pre-history and the more recent mainstreaming of the Outsider field, and noted the actions of gatekeepers such as discoverers, photographers, and museums in the process. This is a story, in two movements, that shows a

progression from a proto-field to a legitimated one. This account is not wrong, but is incomplete, as we have purposely de-emphasized contestation. Contestation is a crucial aspect of legitimization which linear accounts elide. We now consider conflict in legitimating processes and aesthetic fields as *champs*.

Baumann (2007) shows that *a legitimating discourse* is foundational to the legitimation of a field. Our case shows that fields may contain multiple, contradictory discourses, an idea that Bourdieu anticipates but which is not extant in Baumann's theory. Indeed, three distinct legitimating discourses are used in the Outsider field. The first emphasizes the biography of artists, framing them as "primitive," by virtue of race, lack of training, mental illness, or other disempowered forms of social status. In this discourse, Outsider artists are said to possess a type of authenticity that conventionally trained artists lack. The second frame, often presented as an antidote to the first, takes a formalist stance that seeks to highlight the aesthetic similarities between Outsider work and the work of recognized masters from the Western canon, most often as evidence of some presumed universal language of form. Although generally positioned as opposing strategies, both decontextualize artists and works from their social and cultural traditions.

The third legitimating discourse places some Outsider artists in the context of the African diaspora in the Americas (or in related discourses that challenge narratives that privilege white, male creation). The narratives surrounding Outsider art have been augmented as larger political sensitivities shift, notably with the emergence of discourses that focus on the embeddedness of artists in socio-cultural contexts (see Chong, 2011; Corse and Griffin 1997; Lopes 2002; Peterson 1972). Political movements, such as civil rights and feminism, opened opportunity spaces for the canonization of previously ignored or devalued artists. Africana artists and

scholars have created their own art history from the ground up (e.g. Beardon and Henderson, 1993),[8] documenting the lives and works of Black artists, including self-taught artists like Edmondson, and providing a critique of the dominant white, Western canon.

4.3.1. *Modernism and the "American Primitive"*

Modernism opened up an opportunity space for Outsider art, with resources from art-world gatekeepers such as Barr and institutions such as MoMA. Discourses on modern art and socially constructed views on race shaped the initial legitimating discourses of Outsider art in general and Edmondson in particular, casting the work as "primitive." Early modern artists also valued what they called *art brut* as a source of creativity uncontaminated by Western rationalism and social convention. They valorized the artistic production of asylum patients as an "authentic" art through which the "inauthentic" character of modern bourgeois society could be critiqued and rejected (Bowler, 1997). These ideas fit snugly with the modernist notions, prevalent in aesthetic discourse at that time, of pure expression.

In the 1930s, Dahl-Wolfe worked for *Harper's Bazaar*. She showed her Edmondson photographs to publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, president of the corporation that owned the magazine. He refused to publish them on explicitly racist grounds (Fuller 1973: 22-24; Lovett 1999: 24). As Dahl-Wolfe explained, Hearst "had this terrible prejudice about black people and he wouldn't allow them to be shown as anything but servants, so I couldn't get them [her photos of Edmondson] into the magazine" (Dahl-Wolfe, quoted in Bearden and Henderson, 1993: 353). Against this background, the Edmondson's 1937 exhibition at MoMA might be viewed as a radical gesture at a moment in American history when "art" was considered something made exclusively by and for educated whites.

As we noted, Barr, a great proponent of modernism, organized this exhibition after seeing Dahl-Wolfe's photographs. Museum director Josef Helfenstein (2004: 46) describes Barr's vision of modernism as "multicultural" and "pluralistic," one that recognized the aesthetic significance of non-traditional forms of artistic production. Before the MoMA exhibition, the opportunity space for Black folk artists such as Edmondson was closed (or non-existent) due to racism and the focus of the art world on European-inspired white American artists and European old masters. The exhibition Barr mounted nurtured the nascent opportunity space by extending the legitimating discourse initially provided by modernists interested in asylum art. It also contributed to the institutionalization of practices, providing a precedent for exhibiting self-taught, and Black, artists.

Though Helfenstein suggests Barr's intentions were benign, there were important differences in the treatment of Edmondson and his works, compared to other MoMA-shown artists. No announcement appeared in the museum's bulletin and, in sharp contrast to the careful documentation that survives other exhibitions, no photographs of the installation exist (Helfenstein 2004: 49). The reception accorded the exhibit, which garnered significant press coverage, focused almost exclusively on the artist in a way that reinforced prevailing stereotypes about race and rural poverty, with Edmondson characterized as "simple," a "Southern Negro," who was "happy in his work."[9] As Helfenstein notes, "In general, most reviews dealt in a uniformly simplistic way with the exotic strangeness of the 'Negro primitive' and provided almost no information or discussion about the objects, not to mention formal or any other artistic criteria" (2004: 52). And as Cooks (2011: 25, 29) points out, Edmondson was unknown up to the very moment he was exhibited, and just as quickly forgotten by MoMA, who did not collect any of his work when the show finished.

Edmondson's exhibition occurred in a series of MoMA exhibitions of American folk art intended to showcase "a diverse array of 'primitive' tendencies" (Cooks, 2011: 25), including literally immature work in the show *Children's Work* (1938) (Cahan, 2016: 192). *Sculpture by William Edmondson* (1937) followed two MoMA exhibitions, *American Sources for Modern Art* (1933) and *African Negro Art* (1935), which presented, respectively, Inca, Aztec, and Maya artifacts and West African pieces as "primitive" sources for modernism (Cooks, 2011: 24-5). In appropriating works from an indiscriminate mix of contemporary and historic periods, by known and unknown creators, and lumping historical and contemporary tribal art and contemporary folk together as "primitive," these exhibitions reinforced the aesthetic legitimacy of modern, contemporary art movements in (white) America and western Europe, by "demonstrating" modern art's atavistic roots. The racist and colonialist discourses which underpin this "demonstration" are visible from today's perspective, as underrepresented groups have mounted challenges to the exclusionary practices of art worlds, including the practices of "othering" (Said, 1978). Placing African-American art as precursor, some kind of proto-modernism, devalues the work in its own right (Cahan 2016; Cooks, 2011).

Given the racial politics of the 1930s, this appropriation, while deeply problematic, might be seen as an unfortunate sign of its times. However, the atavistic trope continued fifty years later in the MoMA show, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984). This exhibition, which did not include Edmondson, only slightly softened the demotion of vast swathes of human creation by the inclusion of quotation marks around "primitivism" (Cahan, 2016: 247-49; Price, 1989).

About the same time, a travelling exhibition, which originated at the Corcoran Museum of Art, *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980* (1982-83), played an especially important role in

establishing the artistic value of folk and Outsider art. This exhibition is important because it highlighted and condemned the marginalization of Black artists (providing a symbolic resource), while also providing a showcase for their work (a practical resource). Close to four hundred objects by twenty artists, including Edmondson, made up what has been described as a "landmark" event in the field (Percy and Zimmerman, 2013). The exhibition also spurred debates about the institutional marginalization of Black artists and Black visual culture more broadly (Majeed 2017: 6). At the same time, the exhibition was criticized for presenting artists in isolation from their cultural traditions: Mary Schmidt Campbell, former Executive Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, wrote that the artists were "presented as unmoored from their communities, a group of quaint and eccentric men and women who share an exotic tendency toward fervent aesthetic revelation" (1982: 346).

4.3.2. *Edmondson and the African Diaspora*

An additional discourse exists for Edmondson and other Black Outsider artists. These claims relate to the idea of de-centering the white, male artist as the archetype of creativity. Though the specific racial dynamics of Edmondson's case are not generalizable to all Outsider artists, analogous claims are made for non-Black artists in the field, with similar dynamics around other axes of disadvantage.

Scholars drawing from an Africana perspective argue that Edmonson's work drew on images and iconography brought from Africa in the diaspora. As Thompson (1999: 3) writes, "Edmondson brought together African and Western visual ideas in sleek streamlined sculptures that have been critically esteemed for more than fifty years." Here, the life and work of artists are not isolated from their cultural and historical context and, importantly, are neither romanticized

or devalued as "primitive." This placement of Edmondson and his work represents a direct challenge to the two conventional strategies of appropriation discussed above, demonstrating how legitimating discourses that support Edmondson and Outsider art are contested.

A key area of contestation relates to the institutional racism that was, and is, evident in the mainstream art world (Trouillot, 2015). When scholars write on Edmondson as an African-American artist, they necessarily react to prior framings and their problems. Bearden and Henderson (1993), African-American artist and white journalist, respectively, co-wrote the important *A History of African American Artists*. With reference to Edmondson's reported style of speaking and his penchant for giving credit for his creativity to God, Bearden and Henderson (1993: 351) write, "Edmondson knew what people expected a black man to say." This framing of Edmondson, as careful and canny in the face of oppression, is particularly interesting as it opposes the standard story of the naïve Outsider. The early reception of Edmondson emphasized his religiosity in a way that presented him in a manner consistent with the racist trope of the simple, rural Negro. As Lovett (1999: 27) states, "Edmondson's 'God-inspired' art fueled whites' modern nostalgia for an existence that was simpler and morally uncomplicated" (c.f. Griswold, 1992). For art world insiders interested in the discovery of artistic producers uncontaminated by social and aesthetic conventions, Edmondson's religious beliefs—specifically, the idea that he created solely for his "Heavenly Daddy" rather than artistic fame and fortune—functioned to legitimate Edmondson's disinterestedness and, hence, authenticity.[10]

Two Centuries of Black American Art, curated by prominent African-American artist and scholar David Driskell in 1976 (the year of the American Bicentennial) is noteworthy. A travelling exhibition that originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the show met with favorable reviews and gained largely positive media attention, as well as good attendance

figures (Cooks 2011). As "the only comprehensive exhibition of art by Black Americans ever to be presented by a major American art museum" (Cooks, 2011: 87), it also received conservative backlash from often well-known art critics who "were limited by a conception of Blackness that separated Black art from the art world even as it was exhibited within it" (Cooks, 2011: 106).

This points to debates that are part of the contested terrain. Edmondson is now claimed as part of the wider canon of 20th century sculpture, which leads to the question of whether or not he should be referred to "simply" as an artist or as an African-American artist. African-American art historians have noted the problems associated with absorbing Edmondson into the white, Western canon, and pointed out that Edmondson, and Black artists in general, have been ignored or excluded from the white art world. The term "post-black," created by curator Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon in the late-1990s describes the stance taken by some Black artists who do not want to be labeled by racialized categories created by the dominant culture for purposes of exclusion and disenfranchisement (Golden, 2001: 143). Is Edmondson an artist who should not be limited with labels? This question begs prior ones: Is it limiting to be described as an Outsider artist? Is it limiting to be described as an African-American artist?

Becker (1982: 135) writes, "The heat in discussions of esthetics usually exists because what is being decided is not only an abstract philosophical question but also some allocation of valuable resources." Certainly, debates with respect to African-American art are linked to resources, as Black artists have been devalued and given fewer resources due to individual and institutional racism. Work by Black artists is still under-collected by mainstream museums (Cooks, 2011: 109), under-exhibited, or exhibited in problematic ways (Cahan, 2016). The framing of Edmondson as part of the African Diaspora points to Outsider art as a challenge to the (white, Western) canon. Instead of inserting artists like Edmondson into the canon and leaving it

intact, this critique seeks to shed light on the racialized politics of classification and thereby to de-center the canon.

4.4. The Persistence of Contestation in a Legitimated Field

4.4.1. *What's in a Name?*

We have demonstrated conflicting claims, historical and contemporary, in the aesthetic discourses underpinning legitimation of Outsider art, using Edmonson as an example. All three competing legitimating discourses remain active in the field, and thus, contestation persists in the face of legitimation. In addition, the name of this field of art is contested. As with the legitimating discourses, discursive practices relating to naming are not trivial and disagreements can be heated. Borum (1993), in an often-quoted phrase, describes this as "term warfare."

Christie's and other major players in the field use the term Outsider; competing terms include Visionary, Self-Taught, Intuitive, and Vernacular. Proponents of "Outsider" argue that it implies artists who are situated some distance from prevailing aesthetic and social conventions but who nevertheless have singular, original visions. In this way, proponents see the Outsider artist—or, more accurately, the discoverer, collector, dealer, and/or curator on the Outsider's behalf—as uniquely positioned claim to originality (Fieldnotes). This is achieved through a focus on artists' biographies. Other commentators argue that "Outsider" is patronizing, and that "self-taught" is a more neutral term (c.f. Borum 1993). "Outlier" has been proposed as a concept that elides the fixed binary of inside vs. outside (Cooke 2018a). Yet despite numerous and repeated calls for an end to the term Outsider, it persists.

Some of our informants use "self-taught" alongside "Outsider." A few refuse "Outsider" completely, using only "self-taught," while others acknowledge problems with the term but

continue to use it as the best descriptor available, and still others strongly prefer the positive connotations of "Outsider" (uncontrived art) despite, or in some cases without awareness of, its patronizing aspects (Fieldnotes). Certainly, "self-taught" has not supplanted "Outsider" in the field: "*Outsider art is probably the most recognized term for this field and I use it because of that fact,*" states one influential insider.[11]

Debates over the name of the field are directly related to the market for this field of work. An important seller of Outsider art says:

> *One of the things I sort of joke about is that people like it* [the term Outsider] *when they're buying, but not when they're selling…as though by calling it Outsider you're holding it back from its potential as contemporary or postwar art. I don't see that as being the case…[but] more and more I am seeing high-end dealers and collectors trying to get the work considered in the larger contemporary space.* (Fieldnotes.)

In this way, a different basis for contesting the use of "Outsider" is not the scholarly concerns with othering practices, but instead, the claims by some players that it limits the market potential of works. Further, the seller asserts:

> *People who I know really embrace the "Outsider" title* [include] *dealers* [who] *sometimes like it…for promoting certain artists as Outsider artists. Sometimes I see people using the name or the description as a crutch to focus attention away from the actual art and more onto the story because with Outsider you associate it with a narrative.* (Fieldnotes.)

Discoverers and living Outsider artists may concur that "Outsider" is marketing terminology, but they maintain that it is the art that is important, not the label. As one artist states:

The Outsider thing is…[a] *kind of a place-saver, in a way. I think we in general look at ourselves as talked into this category—it's fine, but it doesn't affect the way we make our work. We understand that this is a market term… Artists are artists wherever we're shelved.* (Fieldnotes.)

As noted above, Outsider art is discovered and brought to market through discursive practices referencing authenticity that relate to Bourdieu's notion of "loser wins." However, for Outsider artists, it is also true that the "loser loses." Authenticity and the narrative associated with it, which are inherent in the Outsider appellation, contribute to the romanticization of poverty, mental illness, and other forms of social disenfranchisement. The artist's biography, ironically, reinforces the value of the work at the same time as it restricts it. As Cooks (2011: 30) put it for Edmondson, his "class, race, rural location, and spiritual inspiration, which once endeared him to the modern art world, were also the characteristics that kept him artistically and socially outside of it."

The emphasis on biography and narrative in the Outsider field is an increasing practice in the mainstream art world, as an Outsider art expert attests:

What I am seeing…[is] *art by people who are not necessarily your iconic white male*

artists seeping into the art world…female artists, African-American artists, art by people

from all sorts of walks of life becoming part of the larger discourse, and as a result…the

conversations are going to include more about biography, more about positioning, where

the artist was coming from, what made them tick, why they felt the need to create, what

they were using to create, the popular culture they were exposed to…I think this all

incredibly important for creating and understanding what the larger holistic art world in

a given time and a given place is all about. (Fieldnotes.)

In this way, changes in the mainstream art field provide symbolic resources for legitimating

discourses that rest on the importance of Outsiders' biographies (as in traditional discourses

about Outsiders and art), their artworks (as with attention to its aesthetic features), and their

identities (as in claims for Edmondson by Africana scholars and related claims along other

identities for non-Black Outsiders).

Systems of classification and naming operate within structures of power, as Bourdieu

reminds us. "Outsider" implies not simply a difference, but a hierarchy of social relations. The

art world insiders assign a position of marginality to the work of disempowered individuals,

which therefore, leads to contradictions that naming terms cannot solve. No matter how much a

given insider values the work or what terminology they use, the rules of the field dictate that at

least part of the value of the work lies in the fact that it was created by someone who was

marginal to both the art world and mainstream society. In this sense, the legitimation of Outsider

art opens up a reconsideration of the politics of classification.

4.4.2 *Resources*

Baumann (2007) argues that changing resources are an important part of the legitimation process. Resources, both material and symbolic, played a role in the growth of the Outsider field, as we discussed as we covered the legitimation of the field (Section 4.2). At the same time, resources have been withheld from Outsider artists due to the definitional trope that Outsiders do not care about material rewards. Drawing work from the most disadvantaged people enacts the potential for—and frequent reality of—exploitation (see Espinosa, 2015). Early portrayals of Edmondson presented him as unmotivated by money, thereby fitting into the classic narrative about the purity of the Outsider artist's vision. During his lifetime, Edmondson sold his sculptures cheaply, and after his death in 1951, his niece sold remaining works for low prices in the range of $20 (Lovett, 1999: 29).

Contestation in the field also relates to changes in resources. This was notable in the late 20th century: the competing legitimizing discourses arose as actors were attracted to a visible field which offered the potential for income (for dealers, auction houses, and selling collectors), prestige through owning and showing Outsider work (for buying and holding collectors, and curators), and career building through research and publication (curators and scholars). The growing resources increased the number of actors jockeying for them (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Relatedly, the development of the blue-chip auction market with the record-breaking sale in 2016 increased visibility, portended significant potentials for financial returns, and reinforced the legitimacy of the field. However, it also changed the balance of power in the field between dealers and the blue-chip auction houses, creating uncertainty among art dealers, who feared that higher prices at auction would undercut their own business models (Fieldnotes).

5. Discussion

We considered moments in Outsider art over time, focusing on resources, opportunity spaces, and legitimating discourses (Baumann, 2007), to produce a multilevel and multifaceted approach to legitimation in aesthetic fields. To recap, opportunity spaces, both structural and symbolic, emerged from larger aesthetic and social fields. The opportunity space can be traced to a modernist aesthetic, coupled with Freudian psychology, that led to an early consideration of "asylum art" as a pure form of expression (Bowler, 1997). Moreover, without the development of a "pure aesthetic" (Bourdieu, 1993) in the restricted field of cultural production, Outsider art would not exist. The pure aesthetic opened an opportunity space for the Outsider field and provided it with a legitimating discourse, through the romantic notion of "loser wins" (Bourdieu, 1993; Ardery, 1997).

Aesthetic modernism provided a slim opportunity space in the 1930s for art that would later be seen as Outsider art, as folk and self-taught artists were coopted as evidence of the atavistic roots of creativity. At this time, resources provided by discoverers, collectors, galleries, and museums in the US, linked to this interest in "American primitivism" and a wider interest in folk art. Social movements, most notably the civil rights movement, in the 1960s, again widened the opportunity space in numerous ways. Ideologies of racial and social equality encouraged the rediscovery of Black or minority ethnic, working-class, or impoverished artists. As Cahan (2016: 3) notes, there is a strong connection between racial politics in America and the visibility of artists of color. These social movements, in a variety of ways, encouraged scholarship on and by people from previously marginalized groups. They also closed down, or tried to close down, certain ways of speaking about minority groups. The opportunity space for overtly racist aesthetic fields narrowed significantly, although mainstream museums were a bit slow in

understanding, as judged by several controversial exhibitions well into the 1980s (Cahan, 2016; Cooks, 2011).

In these ways, the civil rights movement and romantic vision of the artist were symbolic factors that provided the opportunity space for Outsider art as it emerged and coalesced as a field from the 1970s. Structural features also played a significant role. For instance, Ardery's (1997) discussion of the growth of the Outsider field in the 1970s emphasizes an external, structural feature that affected the opportunity space for Outsider art, by placing studio artists in the role of discoverers and collectors. However, Ardery presents a linear, largely non-contested, process of legitimation: a group of professional artists champions folk and Outsider art, thereby legitimizing it. Lena (2019) provides a complementary, but also largely linear, take on aesthetic entrepreneurs and opportunity spaces, as she demonstrates that the legitimation of several types of "vernacular" art in the US is linked to the erosion of high culture and the rise of the high-status omnivore.

Institutionalization of resources and practices is evident in the mainstreaming of the field. Discoverers found creators outside the artworld and brought their works into the field; collectors joined them in buying Outsider works. Dealerships and museum exhibitions dedicated to Outsider art increased, critics specializing in Outsider art published, and the blue-chip auction market emerged with the pivotal sale of *Boxer*. Bourdieu's approach calls attention to role of these actors as creators of the creators, or what we might term aesthetic entrepreneurs. Notably, however, canonized masters of Outsider art, are claimed by a variety of different groups, including specialists and collectors in Outsider art, in art that decenters the white, male canon (e.g. African diaspora art), and in modern sculpture or post-war art.

We identified three different, competing discourses: a biographical discourse which fetishizes "Outsider-ness" and downplays aesthetic analysis; a decontextualized-formalist

discourse, often posed as a counter-frame to the first; and a diasporic discourse which locates Black artists in cultural traditions. Over time, legitimating discourses accumulated, but like an accretion of sediments, new discourses did not displace the old ones. Rather, the range of legitimating discourses expanded, allowing old and new ideas to coexist, uneasily, side by side. Each idea was brought into the field by aesthetic entrepreneurs, people who positioned themselves, their artists, and their aesthetic strategies in the field.

Less evident in the framework of opportunity spaces, resources, and discourses is the placement of legitimation in the field of power. As Bourdieu reminds us, legitimation in fields, such as Outsider art, are affected by wider struggles. An opportunity space may open up, due to changes elsewhere (such as the civil rights movement), but the field of power may not have changed. Black artists, critics and curators have gained voice, promoted an aesthetic sensibility, and made claims to resources. Nevertheless, the creative expression of poor people and ethnic minorities is still sometimes categorized in colonial and racist ways, despite critical discourses that have challenged patronizing conceptions of the Outsider as unspoiled genius. Indeed, as contemporary artist Kerry James Marshall, provocatively put it in a catalogue essay for a major Traylor exhibition, "The way I see it, Bill Traylor has always been the property of a White collecting class" (2018: 26). Marshall notes that many in the art world laud the untrained genius of Black Outsiders, but turn a blind eye to contemporary Black artists.

The definition of Outsider always places Outsider artists as somehow different from other artists. We have sketched the problematic nature of casting anyone as being completely "disinterested" (which can be a reason to pay them less for their work) and of the great white "discoverer" (which can be paternalistic). The exploitation of Outsider artists is distinct from (if related to) issues of the casting of Outsider art as prop for Modernism, devaluing Outsider work

in subsuming it to biography, or devaluing of African American art due to racism, but they are all related, all grounded in less lofty notions about marginalized people as ripe for exploitation. As a counterpoint to the possibilities and realities of exploitation is the canonization of a handful of great artists like Edmondson, who is increasingly understood to be a master in the field of 20th century sculpture.

The Outsider field is indubitably a *legitimated field*. There is a consensus both in the Outsider field and in the broader, mainstream one, that excellent artwork can be created by untrained people outside the established art world and that this work should be brought into market systems and given museum attention. There are networks of dealerships, specialist museums, art fairs, and auctions specifically dedicated to the field. Substantial funds are involved in the buying and selling of Outsider art, and the field has penetrated into the mainstream, as Outsider artists receive significant attention. Overall, we have interpreted the growing legitimacy of the Outsider field using both Baumann's framework, complemented by field theories (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) to produce a useful synthesis.

Baumann talks about *a legitimating discourse* as foundational to legitimation processes in artistic fields. However, his approach does not provide us with tools for understanding *multiple (competing) discourses*, especially within fields that have been legitimated. Here we turn to Bourdieu, who discusses positions and position taking and the ongoing struggle to claim the right to consecrate. All art worlds have elements of contestation; however, such features are particularly notable in Outsider art where, as we have observed, legitimacy struggles occur at precisely the place from which legitimacy springs. This allows us a useful opportunity to understand the role of contestation in legitimation and legitimacy struggles in legitimated fields.

5.1. *Towards a Theory of Legitimacy Struggles*

Our analysis of the field of Outsider art shows ongoing contestation at the heart of the field, even as the field gained legitimacy. This points to a number of factors that should be considered in a theory of legitimacy struggles. First, at any point in time, fields are in an ongoing state of *legitimizing*, rather than an end-state of static legitimacy. Previous research recognizes that legitimacy is a process (Baumann, 2007; Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway, 2006), but often discusses the process, even where that is contested, as if it stops at an end point of legitimacy (e.g., Cattani et al., 2017; Sgourev, 2013). Second, fields are legitimated through the actions of institutional entrepreneurs, as has been shown across many studies (e.g. DiMaggio, 1982; Lena, 2019; Mora, 2014). Our case study leads us to identify potentially important factors, or enabling conditions, that increase the likelihood that a legitimated field will encounter legitimacy struggles. As these were drawn inductively from a case study, they should be examined and rigorously tested in future research.

We hypothesize that legitimacy struggles, even in fields that have achieved an overarching consensus on their general legitimacy, are more likely to occur in (a) fields where *judgements are ambiguous because they lack objective, strongly institutionalized evaluative criteria*, (b) fields where *multiple, disparate groups* have a *stake in the game*, and (c) fields where *the stakes are changing*.

5.1.1. *Ambiguity*

The arts clearly lack objective or widely accepted criteria for judging aesthetic worth (Chong, 2013; Sgourev, 2013), and Outsider art is no exception. *Ambiguous criteria* are likely to

increase legitimacy struggles, because they make it easier for different groups in the field to make competing claims on the basis of the same evidence. More objective criteria, once established, may make it harder to contest an existing order. To cite one example, there may be other ways of keeping records, but double-entry bookkeeping is firmly entrenched due to its apparent objectivity, even as it functions as a rhetorical device underpinning legitimacy of commerce, trustworthiness of businesses, and of business decisions (Carruthers and Espeland, 1991). Sectors that rely unambiguously on making money (literally, the "bottom line" in double-booking accounting) draw legitimacy from their profitability. Compare this to Thumala, Goold, and Loader (2011) who find multiple narratives put forward by industry insiders to legitimate the private security industry. They write:

> When what is being sold…is security, a social good that is ultimately impossible to realize by means of a purchase… [Therefore,] the activity of selling…is always likely to be attended by ambivalence… This underlying legitimacy deficit—one wired into the very idea of private security—may also mean that the industry's legitimation work is destined always in some sense to remain unfinished. (p. 299)

While private security may represent a field with significant reputational problems and therefore an "unfinished" legitimacy project, we believe that all legitimacy projects are unfinished, in that legitimation is always ongoing. Moreover, this example lends support to our argument that ambiguous criteria for judgement of value underpins legitimacy struggles.

5.1.2. *Multiple, disparate groups with a stake in the game*

Outsider art brings together collectors, distributors (discoverers, museums, dealers, and auction houses), critics, and academics, all with different training, interests, and world views. This leads to struggles over specific issues alongside a shared interest in preserving the overall legitimacy of Outsider art as a field. *Multiple, disparate groups* are necessary to contestation, first for the trivial reason that two or more groups are needed to contest one another. More importantly, groups who draw on different institutional schema or come from different fields are more likely to contest legitimating discourses (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Cattani et al, 2017; Greenwood, et al., 2011; Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy, 2004; Thornton et al, 2012).

In order for legitimacy struggles to occur within, indeed, at the heart of a field, these groups must be part of the field, and moreover, they must share an interest in the legitimacy of the field—they must have *a stake in the game*. Otherwise, the struggles may result in the splitting or de-legitimation of the field. Field players share the belief that self-taught artists can create works of genius. This idea has worked as a centripetal force as the field coalesced and grew, despite conflict over legitimating discourses and other key matters. However, some contemporary Outsider art collectors, who loved the label when they were building their collection, are now arguing against the existence of the field as they hope to market their works for greater prices in the more mainstream, "postwar contemporary art" market. They are supported in this move by some dealers. Should significant numbers of Outsider field players shift their allegiance to the mainstream contemporary art field, the Outsider field may contract or fragment.

5.1.3. *The stakes are changing*

The mainstreaming of the Outsider field in the latter part of the 20th century brought visibility and resources (including the monetary and symbolic value of Outsider works). Resources provide incentives for established players to claim their view as the correct one and to defend their position in the field, while newer aesthetic entrepreneurs work to establish theirs, and changes in resources can lead to conflict among established players. Since the record-breaking sale of Edmondson's *Boxer*, higher prices for canonized masters have shifted the balance of power in the field toward the auction market, forcing dealers to reconsider their relationship to collectors, the art, and artists, as dealers resist sidelining that would result if blue-chip auction houses obtain consignments from collectors who would otherwise sell through dealers.

Changing stakes increase legitimacy struggles in field-level processes, by changing the balance of power and/or available resources. Increasing resources may attract new actors with contrary views, leading existing groups to vie for control of these resources with new entrants (Cattani et al., 2017). Logically, declining resources may lead to actors abandoning the field, but equally, they may fight more viciously for their share of a diminishing pie (Drori and Honig, 2013). Legitimacy struggles may also occur as groups seek to attract new resources (Mora, 2014).

5.1.4 *Consensus and the nature of conflict in legitimacy struggles*

In his study on the artistic legitimation of French rap music, Hammou (2016: 80) suggests that future research might "deepen consideration of the notion of consensus." He finds that artists and executives act *as if* rap is a legitimate art form, despite personal opinions to the

contrary. We have similarly demonstrated that, in Outsider art, consensus can be relatively thin when there is a shared interest across disparate parties in the overall legitimation of the field. However, in Outsider art, debates are not whether the works are legitimate art—agreement on this is achieved—but how to situate, understand, and frame the work. We believe that this kind of contested consensus is common in cultural fields, as they tend to embody the factors discussed above.

We have noted that Bourdieu (1993:78) sees the cultural field as "the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate;" however, our study suggests that such a monopoly is not necessarily achieved even in clearly established fields. In this way, we agree with Fligstein and McAdam (2012:11) as they argue that legitimacy devices (in their case "institutional logics") tend "to imply way too much consensus in the field." Instead, they argue that fields comprise "different interpretive frames reflecting the relative positions of actors within the strategic action field." This characterizes the Outsider field, and we find that differences in interpretive frames are particularly notable in terms of the legitimating discourse proposed for the field.

Both Bourdieu (1993, 1996) and Fligstein and McAdam (2012) theorize continual, ongoing struggle, or jockeying for position, and argue that change as grows out of challenges from newcomers who drive out established figures. In Bourdieu, the avant-garde challenges the now-conventional moyen-garde, who have previously displaced what becomes the old guard in an ongoing cycle, a dynamic which also occurs in contemporary art (Grenfell and Hardy, 2003). The Outsider field shows less of this kind of displacement of older artists by newer ones, possibly because it is discoverers who seek to endorse "their artists" rather than the artists who struggle against other artists (c.f. Giuffre, 1999). Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 8-9) also see an "incumbent/challenger" dynamic in fields. In their model, "exogenous shocks" lead to the "onset

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of contention" as they create turbulence in the field. However, after an "episode of contention" comes a period of "settlement." In the Outsider field, some new challengers come from adjacent fields, bringing with them new ideas that form new legitimizing discourses. However, just as there is no evidence that the new legitimizing discourses are displacing the old ones, there is no evidence of settlement in the field. Thus, the Outsider field, possibly like some other cultural fields, exist somewhere in between a constant churning of claims and the displacement of incumbents by challengers, and it is in this middle space where ongoing legitimacy struggles may be most likely to occur.

6. Conclusion

Baumann (2007: 48) describes legitimation as "a process whereby the new and unacceptable is rendered valid and accepted." In line with Baumann's (2007) general theory, we have shown how the somewhat disparate forms of creative expression of disadvantaged people were identified and brought together, eventually, under the rubric of Outsider art. We show how opportunity spaces opened up, through changes in the mainstream art world and in the wider society, and that resources (money, prestige, visibility) for the field came from discoverers, collectors, dealers, and auction houses.[12] We have discussed legitimating discourses, which emerged over time, joining rather than displacing previous ones. Contradictions and contestation also emerge through the practices of bringing Outsider works to market and in the naming of the field.

Baumann (2007: 49) reminds us that legitimacy is not dichotomous; things can be more or less legitimated, relative to any given audience. Relatedly, Zelditch (2001) discusses the impossibility of total consensus, and recommends defining consensus narrowly. This leads to

questions, such as how wide a consensus is needed to count as consensus and whether a field can be legitimated but also contested? We have taken inspiration from Bourdieu's (1993) treatment of cultural fields, and fields in general, which he sees as arenas for constant struggle (c.f. Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). In this way, we show contestation is part of the legitimating process and argue that legitimacy is achieved, even in the face of continuing contestation, as indeed, legitimizing is a continual, never-ending process. Consensus can emerge when actors share an interest in the legitimacy of the field as a whole, even as they jockey for position within it, and artistic legitimacy can be based on multiple, competing discourses, rather than on a single, stable consensus. Legitimacy with contestation may be particularly visible in fields, such as the arts, for which there are no fully agreed upon standards of judgement, for which there are multiple, disparate groups who have a stake in the legitimacy of the field, and where resources are changing. Future research could examine different fields for the presence competing ideas, contestation, and different degrees of legitimation.

Our case study provides a window on contested legitimation processes, focusing on legitimacy struggles at the heart of the Outsider art field. We started our paper with the sale of *Boxer*, the personification of a prizefighter. Drawing on Bourdieu, we focus on contestation in an aesthetic field, or in the *champ esthétique*, to coin a phrase. The Outsider field is an arena where, in Bourdieu's terms, battles take place; it is a boxing ring if you'd like, but one that is affected by historical shifts in the wider society. The sale of *Boxer* as a great work of art is an achievement of a century of legitimation and contestation from the "discovery" of "asylum art" to the canonization of Edmondson as a great artist—but as Outsider, African-American, posthumously "post-Black," or label-less? Legitimacy struggles could resolve, solidify, or fracture such issues, and will surely raise others.

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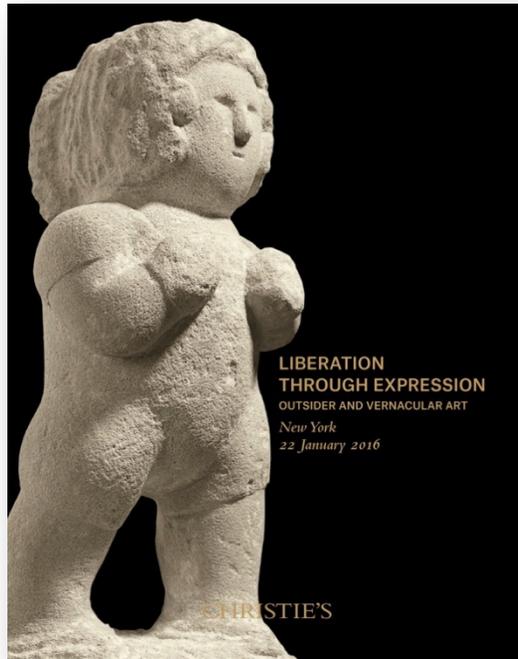
Table 1: Attributes of the most recognized Outsider artists.

Artist (dates)	Definitional Criteria – Ideal Outsider Artist		Indicators of Importance in the Outsider Field [a]	
	Formal art training?	*Axis of Disempowerment*	*Work in major museum collection?*	*Highest price at auction (USD)* [b]
James Castle (1899 – 1977)	No	Disability	Yes	47,500
Henry Darger (1892 – 1973)	No	poverty, childhood institutionalization, orphaned as a child	Yes	745,076
William Edmondson (c1874 – 1951)	No	racism, poverty	Yes	785,000
Martín Ramírez (1895 – 1963)	No	racism, poverty, institutionalization	Yes	271,692
Bill Traylor (c1853 – 1949)	No	racism, poverty, slavery	Yes	507,000
Adolf Wölfli (1864 – 1930)	No	orphaned as a child, institutionalization	Yes	795,000

[a] **Note**: The presence of artworks of an artist in the permanent collection of a major museum and a visible presence in the blue-chip auction market are used here as capstone indicators of that artist's status. The artists included have been the subjects of scholarly monographs and major exhibitions and are referred to in the field by such appellations as "masters." Their work has received critical acclaim, is sold by blue-chip galleries, and is in the collections of well-known private collectors.

[b] **Source**: AskArt and ArtNet, art auction prices listings.

Table 2. Exhibitions (1992 – 2019) indicating the mainstreaming of Outsider art [a]	
Date	**Exhibition and Notes**
2018-19	*Outliers and American Vanguard Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Jan. 28 – May 13, 2018). Traveling to High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA (June 24 – Sept. 30, 2018) and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA (Nov. 18, 2018 – March 18, 2019). Exhibition including Edmondson that featured 250 works spanning 100 years by more than 80 self-taught and academically-trained artists.
2017	*Visions from Above: The Life and Work of William Edmondson*. Cheekwood Estate and Gardens, Nashville, TN (Oct. 7 – Nov. 12). Exhibition in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of Edmondson's solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, NY.
2014-15	*William Edmondson and Friends: Breaking the Mold*. Cheekwood Estate and Gardens (Sept. 27, 2014 – Jan. 4, 2015). Exhibition including work by Edmondson (including *Boxer*) and more than twenty artists inspired by his work.
2013	*Great and Mighty Things: Outsider Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA (March 3 – June 9). Exhibition discussed in text.
2004-05	*Bill Traylor, William Edmondson, and the Modernist Impulse*. Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL (Oct. 22, 2004 – Jan. 2, 2005). Traveling to Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL (Feb. 1 – Apr. 3, 2005), Studio Museum in Harlem (Apr. 20 – June 26, 2005), and The Menil Collection, Houston, TX (July 22 – Oct. 2, 2005). Exhibition pairing Edmondson with prominent Outsider artist Bill Traylor, placing the work of both men within the context of American modernism, drawing attention to the aesthetic connections between their work and the modernist avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century.
1995-96	*The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Feb. 26 – Apr. 30, 1995). Traveling to Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL (June 22 – Sept. 10, 1995), Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, KS (Oct. 22, 1995 – Jan. 7, 1996), National Academy of Design, New York, NY (Feb. 15 – May 5, 1996). Exhibition of approximately 100 works by 80 artists, including Edmondson.
1993-95	*Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present*. New Orleans Museum of Art (Oct. 23, 1993 – Jan. 30, 1994). Traveling to University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley (March 2 – July 10, 1994), San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, CA (Dec. 3, 1994 – Jan. 15, 1995), Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (March 4 – May 7, 1995), and North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC (June 10 – Aug. 27, 1995). Exhibition of 270 works by 80 Southern self-taught artists, including Edmondson.
1992-95	*Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art.* Exhibition organized by the National Museum of American Art (Smithsonian). Originating at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT (Oct. 18, 1992 – January 10, 1993), and traveling to IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York, NY (Feb. 9 – April 10, 1993), Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA (Nov. 5 – Dec. 30, 1993), Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN (Jan. 1 – March 27, 1994), and The Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA (May 1 – June 26, 1994). Concluding at the National Museum of American Art (Smithsonian), Washington, DC (Oct. 28, 1994 – Feb. 26, 1995). Exhibition of work by more than ninety African-American artists from the museum's collections, including Edmondson.

[a] **Note**: This table shows all major museum exhibitions featuring or including Edmondson's work for the period 1992-2019. Exhibitions were selected to illustrate the mainstreaming of Outsider art, focusing on Edmondson's work. It excludes museums specializing in folk and/or Outsider art and it is not intended as a comprehensive list of exhibitions of Edmondson or Outsider art.

Sources: Exhibition catalogues/descriptions: Cheekwood (2014, 2017), Cooke (2018b), (1995), Helfenstein and Stanilus (2004), Percy and Zimmerman (2013), Perry (1992), and Yelen (1993).

Figure 1: Christie's (New York) sales catalogue. Edmondson's *Boxer* (detail) is the cover image. *Liberation Through Expression: Outsider and Vernacular Art,* New York, 22 January 2016, ©2016 Christie's Images Limited.

Endnotes:

[1] The sale price of *Boxer*, the record price for Outsider art at the time, was surpassed in October 2018 by Sotheby's in a single-owner auction from the collection of the late actor Robin Williams.

[2] These claims are supported by interviews with art world insiders (Fieldnotes).

[3] We see creation, production, and reception as subfields that are embedded in a larger suprafield. C.f. Childress (2017) who considers creation, production, and reception as separate, but interdependent fields.

[4] The salience of authenticity is underscored in a recent study by Hahl et al. (2017); however, the authors construct artificial biographies and do not actually engage with Outsider art.

[5] See Fuller (1973: 20, 27n.9) on early buyers of Edmondson's work.

[6] To some observers, such photographs reinforce a stereotypical view of naïve creation (Cooks 2011: 25-29).

[7] A second Outsider Art Fair, in Paris, began in 2013. A trade magazine devoted to developments in the field, *Raw Vision*, was first published in 1989. In 2014 Christie's hired a new specialist in Outsider art, within the context of staffing cuts in the auction sector more broadly.

[8] James A. Porter, often referred to as the founder of Black art history, and Alain Locke were important figures who laid the groundwork for subsequent scholarship on Black artists. See Lovett (1999) and Sims (1999).

[9] Cooks (2011: 30) shows that these statements are drawn directly from MoMA's press release.

[10] The reference to "Heavenly Daddy" is from a 1941 interview with Edmondson in the *Nashville Tennessean* (Bearden and Henderson, p. 354; 508n.17; Lovett, p. 28).

[11] Relatedly, questions may be raised about the applicability of "Outsider" to artists like Edmondson whose work now sells in the upper six-figure range. Within the field, however, "Outsider" describes the conditions under which the artist produced. For artists like Edmondson, who are deceased and did not profit from their work, the descriptor Outsider is not considered contradictory. The situation is more difficult for contemporary Outsider artists who achieve monetary or critical success or who cease to appear disinterested. A different but related issue concerns some contemporary Outsider artists who reject the label. (Fieldnotes.)

[12] Lena (2019: 70) discusses a broad range of factors in the opportunity structure for the arts, all of which could be discussed relative to Outsider art, but word limits preclude attending to these. Other important factors include the professionalization of the Outsider Art Fair, the cachet of Outsider art among art-world heavyweights like Cindy Sherman, and the relative affordability of works in the Outsider market.