

Black Aporia:

Edgar Arceneaux's Constellations of Conceptual Materialism

By Hannah Waiters

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Approved By:



Jacqueline Francis, Department Chair, Visual & Critical Studies



Kathy Zarur, Thesis Director, Visual & Critical Studies



Genevieve Hyacinthe, Thesis Advisor

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Abstract

Edgar Arceneaux's art practice gives material form to Blackness as an index of racial and cultural identity. Arceneaux's approach builds on the Black conceptual materialist practice of Fred Wilson. Wilson and Arceneaux are material historians, confronting the present with the past in order to critique dominant art historical discourses and institutions. Arceneaux appropriates Jacques Derrida's aporia and materializes its key characteristics —impasse, suspension, irresolution, improvisation, entanglement, and violence into his artworks—as visualizations of Black freedom and possibility. This thesis considers Arceneaux's drawing *Detroit* (2009), the interactive installation *Library of Black Lies* (2013-2018), and the sculpture *Orpheum Returns— Fire's Creation* (2010). In these works, to varying extents, Arceneaux creates a critical constellation where he juxtaposes historical elements from the past— ranging from vernacular artifacts and architectures to iconic Black art historical works—with material culture signifying the urban, Black experience. Arceneaux's works thereby provide a means of reflecting upon the ongoing tactics of assault, exclusion, and silencing waged on Black lives.

Keywords: sugar-crystal, art institution, impasse, wake work, conceptual art, Black material culture, urban detritus, Blackness, improvisation, Jacques Derrida

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This project on critical constellations of Black vernacular artifacts and architectures on iconic Black art historical artworks—signifying the Black urban experience—in Edgar Arceneaux's evolved over the course of my graduate studies. I build on my earlier work questioning the possibilities of Black Diaspora archives of liberalism. It reflects the influence of Jennifer González, Christina Sharpe, Julian Myers Szupinska, Reagan P. Mitchell, Jacques Derrida, and Walter Benjamin.

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Introduction. Arceneaux's Materialization of Erasure as Possibility

Seeking to find the forgotten, the omitted, or the invisible elements in history, one must
infiltrate the intimate spaces of domestic museums.

— Jennifer González, “Against the Grain: The Artist as Conceptual Materialist”

Detroit's Rerouting Conceptual Art with Blackness

In 2009, Los Angeles conceptual artist Edgar Arceneaux (born Los Angeles, 1972) produced *Detroit* (73” x 61”; *fig. 1.1*), a large scale, monochromatic graphite drawing of an open and isolated desert landscape, within which a collapsed man lies prostrate. The man lies in such a way that his contours echo the shape of the mountains on the far horizon of the composition. Two parallel white lines evoke the sense of a road. They lead from the bottom of the picture plane into the scene where they frame the fallen man. In the upper portion of the drawing, Arceneaux has painted using a stencil the word Detroit in capital letters, as if it were the headline of a newspaper. By inserting the word “DETROIT” into a sparse and desiccated landscape that looks nothing like a city, Arceneaux brings a sense of impasse to his drawing. If this is a drawing accompanying a newspaper headline for an article about Detroit, what kind story is Arceneaux telling about the city?

To answer this question, it is critical to note that the *Detroit* scene just described is created through Arceneaux's appropriation of an iconic conceptual land artwork by Walter De Maria

entitled *Mile Long Drawing* (dimensions variable; 1968). *Mile Long Drawing*, in turn, stemmed from De Maria's earlier work *Mile Long Parallel Lines* (1962), which involved building two mile-long walls outdoors. De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing* is a photo-documentation of two impermanent lines De Maria rendered in chalk situated to frame a prostrated man—the artist himself—within a barren desert setting. Face-down and thus unrecognizable, De Maria does not divulge the identity of the seemingly lifeless body. With no more visual information other than the mountains in the distance, dirt, and the cracked earth of a dried lakebed, we have no sense of the sequence of events that have resulted in the present tableau. De Maria's work provides us with photo documentation of an aftermath with no evident cause. Was violence done to the body? Is the person sleeping? Who are they? The work emphasizes an irresolution about the state of the body. De Maria's medium choice is an ephemeral physical performance made archival or more permanently recorded as a black and white photograph. In his work, Arceneaux further exaggerates this spirit of irresolution by converting De Maria's composition into one with a more mutable sensibility regarding its materiality (mixed media drawing). Arceneaux transforms De Maria's photo-document into a mixed-media drawing and increases its scale. As he does this, the landscape shifts from a "contained" visual rendering or document into an experiential and phenomenological scene, replete with new narrative possibilities.

De Maria is part of a generation of White male artists who, in taking art out of the gallery, challenged strictly formalist readings of art and instead highlighted the symbiotic relationship between art and life. By appropriating De Maria's well-known composition and adding the word "DETROIT" to it, Arceneaux connects his work to an important moment in time in which *Mile Long Drawing* was rendered: The Civil Rights Movement. This political struggle is not represented in De Maria's original composition or, more broadly, in the canon of conceptual art

history. Yet Arceneaux suggests there is more to both the sociocultural and art-historical dynamics of the time in which *Mile Long Drawing* was made.

Perhaps we can in part attribute Arceneaux's move to insert a sign of Black urban presence into De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing* as a process of inserting what has been erased of aspects of his sense of collective, U.S. Black identity. Arceneaux was born and raised in Los Angeles, which is located about a 90-minute drive away from the El Mirage location in the Mojave Desert where De Maria performed and photo-documented *Mile Long Drawing*. Arceneaux's upbringing is not unique with regard to the U.S. Black experience. Like many Black Los Angelenos, he moved through a city of racial and spatial practices of institutionalized displacement.¹ Arceneaux's early experience of moving motivated his interest with institutional insider and outsider structures. Moreover, his experience living in districts in LA where communities of color were in the majority largely influenced his interest in (art) historical and local marginalization. These experiences, as well as his artistic development in undergraduate and graduate arts programs in the Los Angeles-area likely influenced his worldview and critical concerns.²

In *Detroit*, Arceneaux critiques the way art institutions create both central archival and discursive contexts for White conceptual artists while simultaneously marginalizing U.S. Black conceptual artists within or excluding them altogether from the genealogies of art history.

¹ The urban studies research of sociologist George Lipsitz informs my overview of the spatial environment in Arceneaux's work. Lipsitz's essay "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race" cites "housing discrimination, environmental racism, urban renewal, and police harassment" that people of color in the US have historically faced. In George Lipsitz's essay, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 10.

² Arceneaux earned a B.F.A from the Art Center of College of Design in Pasadena 1996 and an M.F.A. from the California Institute of Arts in Valencia in 2001.

Arceneaux confronts the biases, blind-spots and/or intentional erasures of art historical institutions, archives and discourses. By using signifiers and tactics like the appropriation and redrawing of De Maria's "fixed" documentary photograph juxtaposed with the Detroit headline, Arceneaux inserts Black sociocultural experiences within institutional frameworks. Specifically, I suggest that Arceneaux creates artworks that register dynamics of social neglect in Black urban spaces like Detroit. His works are formally and conceptually rife with contradictions. While protesting the violence of hegemonic archiving processes, they visually and experientially convey some of these very hegemonies. This contradictory nature turns hegemonic violence into Black insurrectionist signs of agency and freedom to varying degrees.

While I do take into consideration Arceneaux's statements about his work, my thesis is developed from my careful study of the formal qualities of Arceneaux's work. In this thesis, I show how his conceptual materialist art practice intersects with an amalgamation of Derrida's aporia for the purpose of critiquing art historical discourses and their institutions that together perform: 1) a marginalization of U.S. Black conceptual artists and their ideas within the genealogies of art history, and 2) an exclusion of narratives sensitive to dynamics of social neglect and the insurrectionist responses these dynamics actuate in American Black communities.

I support my argument by drawing upon art historical methodologies where there is an interplay among formalism, Black social history, and Black conceptual art praxis. While I work with a variety of primary sources including my personal exchanges with Arceneaux and information gathered from his galleries, as well as Arceneaux's artist statements, lectures, and

interviews, I also draw upon a range of secondary sources.³ Key among these are texts by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Jennifer González, Reagan P. Mitchell, and Christina Sharpe. With these sources in mind, I perform close formal analysis of three key Arceneaux works that demonstrate how he gives material form to this conceptual materialist and Derrida-informed sense of aporia. I analyze the drawing *Detroit* (2009) discussed above, the interactive installation *Library of Black Lies* (2013-2018) which will be discussed in Chapter 1, and the sculpture *Orpheum Returns—Fire's Creation* (2010) which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

In these works, to varying extents, Arceneaux creates a critical constellation where he juxtaposes material cultural elements from the past, ranging from vernacular artifacts and architecture to Black popular culture and iconic conceptual art historical works that signify the contemporary urban experience. This juxtaposition provides a means of reflecting upon the ongoing tactics of assault, exclusion, and silencing waged by hegemonic art institutional and discursive systems (and the greater social dynamics that inform them) upon Black life today. Arceneaux's works reflect the impasse of Derrida's aporia, but he redeploys and materializes it to evoke a sense of freedom and possibility through which we might imagine the Black experience differently.

The Theoretical Constellation of Arceneaux's Conceptual Materialism

³ Hannah Waiters, Instagram message exchange with Edgar Arceneaux (September 20, 2020).

What does it mean, as Jennifer González has posited, for Black artists and historians to “brush history against the grain?”⁴ González has argued that new forms of museum and archival studies surfaced during the postmodern era of the 1980s that challenged modern art history’s racial and cultural biases. My definition of conceptual materialism is informed by González’s. Specifically, her reading of Fred Wilson’s art practice as one of conceptual materialism is the lens through which I view Arceneaux. González writes of Wilson’s conceptual materialist practice:

Turning away from the creation of new objects to focus on the reinterpretation of sign systems already in place, Wilson offers a new critical perspective on the history of museums, artifacts, and evidence as they represent cultural difference, colonialism, and race.⁵

Thus, according to González, conceptual materialist practice is a radical intervention that inserts racial and cultural differences into the canonical museum archive. As a conceptual materialist, Wilson appropriates the research methodologies of scholars and art historians as part of his practice. Black conceptual materialist artists appropriate long-standing museological practices (modes of archiving, research and display) from the modern era (defined by González as the eighteenth century to the onset of postmodernism in the 1980s) to critique the ideologies and methods that inform them.⁶

⁴ Jennifer González, “Against the Grain: The Artist as Conceptual Materialist,” in *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979–2000*, ed. Maurice Berger (Baltimore and New York: Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland-Baltimore County and Distributed Arts Publishers, 2001), 31.

⁵ González, 24.

⁶ González, 24

González illuminates Wilson’s conceptual materialist approach through a discussion of his site-specific gallery-sized installation *Speaking in Tongues: A Look at the Language of Display* (1998), mounted at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Wilson assembles the work out of rarely seen African and European objects housed in the museum’s permanent collections, arranging the gallery space with white plinths topped with glass display cases that gallery-goers may circumambulate. While Wilson places artworks within many of the display cases, others are empty, thereby creating the appearance that they have been robbed of their artifacts. Gallery spotlights shine onto each vitrine, highlighting this absence: one views each glass case through the reflection of another. In this way, Wilson’s conceptual materialist gesture “discover[s] and display[s] that which has been lost in the limbo of the archive or repressed in discourses about race in public institutions.”⁷ Wilson reveals museums’ incomplete art-historical archives and “institutional silences,” and in so doing, draws our attention to the power of museums to decide what is worthy of historical preservation and display.⁸

González notes that Wilson, in keeping with Black conceptual materialist modes, connects his critique of museum practices and their biases to wider social dynamics:

Wilson reminds the public that the history of art and artifacts not only is a history of aesthetics and material culture, but also includes a history of human lives and the epistemological networks within which those lives are understood and represented.⁹

⁷ González, 29.

⁸ González, 29.

⁹ González, 31.

Thus, Black conceptual materialist artists extend the critique of the economies and culture of the museum to those of greater society. As part of their critique, they rip museological processes, narratives, artifacts, and artworks from linear and racially exclusionary histories and instead materialize their critical concerns into new structures to open the possibility of new narratives and historical contexts where the Black experience figures prominently. I use the very active and destructive term “rip” to suggest that conceptual-materialist modes have a phenomenological verve: they activate the art forms to evoke a visceral, experiential feeling for the beholder.

My analysis explores how Arceneaux particularizes Black conceptual materialism into his own provocative contemporary visual formats. Using *Detroit* as a jumping off point, I demonstrate through formal analysis how Arceneaux embeds his works *Library of Black Lies* (2013-2018) and *Orpheum Returns—Fire’s Creation* (2010) with conceptual materialism’s phenomenological impulses for friction and instability. These works’ resulting multi-sensorial and liminal sensibilities reflect González’s call for challenging hegemonic discourses that treat history as “seamless” and “progressive,” and instead emphasize history as an accumulation of “critical constellations.”¹⁰ González’s reference to Walter Benjamin underscores the contingent, mutable, and thus irresolute qualities of “critical constellation” building that informs Black conceptual materialist praxis. As I transition from this introduction into Chapters 1 and 2, I will present another theoretical framework through which I view Arceneaux’s brand of conceptual materialism: the injection of a Derrida-informed sense of aporia into Black conceptual materialism praxis.

¹⁰ González, 31.

Derrida submits that aporia's essence is contradiction: he asserts that texts constructed in alignment with aporia are writings that contradict themselves.¹¹ Reagan P. Mitchell extends this Derrida perspective on aporia, proposing that Black artworks or texts in any media can be understood as having multiple formal dynamics, interpretive possibilities, perspectives or viewpoints at once.¹² Mitchell illuminates this idea with a story about improvisational responsibility in jazz: he defines "improvisation as occurring for the jazz musician in engagement with pre-existing musical composition, situating improvisation as the metamorphosis that occurs through the dialogic relationship a musician has with the pre-existing musical composition."¹³ Later, he expands on other ways that improvisation engages new historical perspectives informed by aporia; this engagement permits "newness" as formal and connotative possibility when engaging with "historical artifacts and past events."¹⁴

Following Mitchell's riffing on Derrida in building a new frame through which we might contemplate Arceneaux's work, I amalgamate Derrida's three forms of aporia as he describes them in his essay "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'" In short, the three senses of aporia he offers work to establish social or institution rules that foster one's freedom, and empowerment, and the agency of one's institution or community. While Derrida uses aporia to show how oppressive systems like formal judiciaries organize law and society, following theorists like Mitchell, I see aporia as a mode by which Black conceptual artists can reclaim

¹¹ "Aporia," "Shmoop Literary Glossary," accessed December 1, 2020. : <https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/aporia.html#:~:text=Aporia%20plays%20a%20big%20part,now%20it%27s%20at%20an%20impasse>.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, translated by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 17.

¹³ Reagan P. Mitchell, "Derrida, Coleman, and Improvisation," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 32, no. 3 (2018): 1.

¹⁴ Mitchell, 11.

Black histories and the right to tell them, in and outside of the arts institution. The hoped for outcome is freedom and new possibility in relation to history-telling in archives, art institutions, or artist practice. Derrida's three forms of aporia are: 1) interpretation is necessary in the reframing of law or narrative; 2) there will be an inability to assure 'fairness' for all; 3) it is necessary to accept the impossibility of resolution.

I will now describe each of the three senses of aporia in more detail. The first aporia is the "epoch of rule," which is political thought that considers what freedom is.¹⁵ Derrida offers us a model with which to reflect upon the power dynamics of a free and democratic society. He suggests that freedom is achieved through the simultaneous upholding and reframing of the law: the judiciary must follow the rule of law, but may simultaneously reframe it for specific contexts. Derrida submits that this is an interpretive process that requires destruction or suspension of political rule, yet at the same time, there must remain an adherence to the very nature of the rule of law in a new, expanded manner. This process can cause friction since political rule, as reframed, may not fit as cleanly into society as it originally functioned before its interpretive expansion. This friction can be violence.¹⁶

Derrida's second aporia is the "ghost of the undecidable," which is the factoring in or "acceptance" of that which ultimately cannot be known with certainty—that is, that which cannot be resolutely decided upon—yet an interpretation is offered nonetheless. The "ghost of

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Corbell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-23.

¹⁶ According to philosopher Leonard Lawlor, Derrida believed that the law is "founded in violence" and that "the violent re-institution of the law means that justice is impossible." In Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida," accessed, December 1, 2020 in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>.

the undecidable” is a constant specter of injustice within the judicial interpretive process that refuses to be left in the past.¹⁷

The third aporia is “the urgency that obstructs the horizons of knowledge,” which implies that the process of interpretation necessitates a level of immediacy that precludes the weighing of all elements, dynamics, and contingencies. Derrida explains:

As its Greek name suggests, a horizon is both the opening and the limit that defines an infinite progress or period of waiting. But justice, however unrepresentable it may be, doesn’t wait. It is that which must not wait. To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required immediately, “right away.” It cannot furnish itself with infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it... The moment of decision, as such, always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation. . . This is particularly true of the instant of the just decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. The instant of decision is a madness. . .¹⁸

Extending Mitchell’s analysis of Derrida, I view what he calls Derrida’s “improvisational responsibility” as an advisory to stay engaged with the “madness” of seeking “freedom and justice,” a madness that requires an attempt at “just decision making” in the face of the evershifting and irresolvable. This madness involves feeling at home in the impasse inherent to the impossibility of fully reconciling contradictory dynamics. In Black conceptual art terms, Arceneaux materializes this impasse in his artworks: his formats become material registers of the tension surrounding art institutional efforts to erase Black artist-presence and narratives of Black oppressed communities. This tension of this institutional effort at erasure of Black presence comes into collision with marginalized Black art agents’ efforts to resist the erasure and its concomitant trauma-inducing violence.

¹⁷ Derrida, 24-25

¹⁸ Derrida, 26.

Chapter 1. Destabilizing the Archive: Formal Madness in the *Library of Black Lies*

[An archive is] not only the history and the memory of singular events, of exemplary proper names, languages and filiations, but the deposition in an arkheion (which can be an ark or a temple), the consignment in a place of relative exteriority, whether it has to do with writings, documents, or ritualized marks on the body proper.

- Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever"¹⁹

The Archive as a Form of Impasse

Arceneaux's installation *Library of Black Lies* (2013-2018) on view in the exhibition *Wasteland* at the Mona Bismarck Cultural Center in Paris (2016), is a four-sided, wooden architectural structure, scaled (at 16' x 16' x 9') to invite phenomenological and physical audience interaction. Yet, at the same time, the audience interaction is one of tension due the work's destabilizing and perhaps "triggering" (from the perspective of Black traumatic histories) formal qualities. The installation is evocative of cargo ship of some kind. The rough-hewn appearance of the architecture's exterior created by the weathered planks of wood forming the walls evokes the feeling of a difficult and perhaps disastrous past. Given Arceneaux's title and the subject matter of the piece, we cannot help but think of the ark-like shape of the installation in relation to slave ships. The composition of the *Library of Black Lies* has the appearance of a slave ship: in creating the structure, he built a bow (an angled "V pattern" at the front of a ship that minimizes the wake at the front of a ship), "windowless wooden walls," and tiered bunkbeds.²⁰ This

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Dialectics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 33.

²⁰ Christine Sharpe, *In the Wake on Blackness and Being* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 2016, 40, 75.

description of the slave ship is borrowed from Christina Sharpe and is useful in identifying “the everyday life in the form: prison, the school” and, I would add, the library.²¹ Arceneaux built *Library of Black Lies* from hundreds of dampened and warped walnut beams shingled together, and in so doing adds texture to the slave vessel allusion. With a further consideration of the formal structure of the installation, we can also broaden the installation’s interpretive possibility to include not only slaving narratives but others similarly excised from mainstream art historical institutional archives, display modes, and discourses.

In this chapter, I propose that we can discern Arceneaux’s Derrida-informed sense of aporia through careful consideration of how he constructs and situates *Library of Black Lies* in its installation context in the gallery. Arceneaux brings together these qualities with his conceptual materialist art-making process, materializing them to strike aporia’s dynamic of impasse. In the introduction, I suggested that Arceneaux’s work reflects critical aspects of Derrida’s aporia, as elucidated by Reagan P. Mitchell. Arceneaux’s work is imbued with the dynamic of improvisational freedom integral to Black conceptual materialist art practice. Arceneaux materializes this dynamic in *Library of Black Lies*, emphasizing two critical objectives: first, critiquing the *lies* that have been circulated in art historical genealogies through the exclusion of Black conceptual materialist art practices from the late 1960s to the present and, second, critiquing the lies pervasive to cultural discourses that perpetuate myths and misconceptions of the post-industrial U.S. Black experience.

²¹ Sharpe, 21.

With its labyrinth-like arrangement, *Library of Black Lies* is evocative of an archive at an impasse. In this chapter, I give prominence to Christina Sharpe whose theory of “wake work” is particularly germane to my framing of Arceneaux’s practice. I explore Black conceptual materialist practice (and Black contemporary art theory more generally) to investigate metaphors of weathering and “disaster [resulting in] Black subjection in the archives.”²² I discuss Arceneaux’s radical archival intervention in *Library of Black Lies* as a conceptually material experience of concealed histories; the archive is weathered away by deconstructive historical materials—sugar, water, light and text—that metaphorically contradict discourses of “cultural difference, colonialism and race.”²³

Each aspect of the *Library of Black Lies* can be read as what I am suggesting is Arceneaux’s embrace of aporia’s sense of impasse and associative sentiments like madness, violence and irresolution. *Library of Black Lies* is a colossal and disarrayed installation; I have therefore selected three focal points from the presentation to elucidate my argument. These are: 1) an exterior view of the *Library of Black Lies* installation where it variously resembles a hold, archive, or ark seemingly assembled of abandoned found wood beams; 2) *Library of Black Lies (Inverted)*: a chalk, pastel, and gesso work on paper depicting an inverted image and birds-eye view of *Library of Black Lies*; 3) an interior view of the installation replete with bookshelves pasted over with reflective Mylar surfaces and haphazardly topped with roughly treated books, many of them encrusted with sugar.

²² Sharpe, 5.

²³ González, 24.

A visitor to *Library of Black Lies* (fig. 1) would be able to enter the large-scale sculpture and are invited touch elements of it. From the exterior, one notices that one corner resembles the hull of a ship, where the lowest third juts abruptly inward at a 45-degree angle. To the left of the angled bottom is a passageway. A beholder of the work's exterior would be struck by how the light from the interior of the installation transgresses its walls, shining out through the library's cracks into the gallery space. Arceneaux creates this effect by lining the freestanding bookshelves situated within the library with warped Mylar that acts like the reflective surface of a mirror. The light of the library's interior is thus reflected out through the irregular crevices of its wooden walls, destabilizing the audience's experience of the installation in the gallery space. To those who encounter it, *Library of Black Lies* is an embodied, phenomenological, and historical experience.

Placed next to the entrance of *Library of Black Lies* is a framed chalk pastel and gesso drawing titled *Library of Black Lies (Invisible Inner Light Beneath the Floorboards)* (2013) (fig. 1.2). This drawing can be described as a gateway label or museological "tombstone" that prefaces and grounds, to some extent, the experience of the installation.²⁴ With this drawing, Arceneaux offers a "totalizing" view of the *Library of Black Lies* by miniaturizing it. He creates a birds-eye view of the work with the angular roof, thereby allowing viewers to see that the foundation of the architectural form is reflective. This miniaturized vantage point of the wooden structure creates a perspective of the architecture we would not otherwise be able to perceive.

²⁴ A tombstone is a simply designed ad for newspapers and magazines, called such because they resemble grave markers.

Arceneaux arranges the installation so that we move from a consideration of the totalizing *Library of Black Lies* sketch to an “on the ground” physical and multi-sensorial phenomenological entanglement with the installation’s interior. Once inside Arceneaux’s ark of found timber, we encounter warm light and those shelves papered over in Mylar that reflect the

damaged walls of the library, creating a labyrinth out of Arceneaux's curation of selected archival records. The shelves along the wall hold haphazardly arranged stacks of iconic vintage Black popular culture literature like, the 1991 book *Childhood*, which was penned by Bill Cosby during simpler times, when he was still viewed as "America's Dad."²⁵ The aporia-injected sensibility of conceptual materialism that Arceneaux deploys is observable in his treatment of Cosby's *Childhood* within the *Library of Black Lies* installation. It's my view that Arceneaux "materializes" the hegemonies of mainstream archival practices where organization becomes violent. We see it as a squeezing or strangling of books that Arceneaux further assaults by also drenching them in what was at one time, molten sugar. The evidence is in the sugar-encrusted surface of the *Childhood* book and other volumes—some with discernible titles, others with their identifying labels erased by burnt sugar crystals.

My thinking about Arceneaux's palpable registration of violence within the *Library of Black Lies* archive, in the form of his ossified literary sculptures eaten away by sugar was in part, informed by Anthony Ryan Hatch's study on sugar. Hatch writes about the history of degradation from the planting, refining, and consumption of sugar that has historically created fragility in Black American life. With Hatch's idea in mind, I argue that Arceneaux creates an environment that allows for sensorial engagement with the history of vulnerability and disintegration of Black life in America.

The slanted roof creates a sense of compression inside of the library and adds to the intensity of the labyrinthine interior. In figure 1.3 the *appearance* of non-finality, takes place in

²⁵ Ben Kessler, "Bill Cosby Says He Is Still 'America's Dad' in Father Day's Tweet," *New York Times*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/bill-cosby-says-he-still-america-s-dad-father-day-n1018151>.

the *Library of Black Lies* where bookshelves were placed against mirrors that reflect other forms. One must negotiate the free-standing shelves standing in the center of the floor which create crooked spaces and nooks. This is how, within the interior of the ark's labyrinthian archive, the notion of aporia is materialized. It thwarts any sort of sense of the psychic and physical calm we might usually associate with the silence of the archive or library.

Performing a sort of “high and low” critique, in addition to books from Black popular culture, Arceneaux also included stacks of canonical conceptual art books, including texts such as *Arte Povera* (1967) by Germano Celant, the art historian credited with “defining” the Italian conceptual art movement. As was the case in Arceneaux's appropriation of Walter De Maria's *Mile Line Drawing in Detroit*, he again wages an aporia-informed Black conceptual materialist critique on the archival hegemonies of art history, particularly regarding conceptual art and its erasure of Black creative presence and broader social histories.

Arceneaux slows down time through his conceptual materialist approach which includes the manipulation of sugar crystals, mirror openings, and overlapping, irresolvable views reflecting the spirit of his Derrida-informed use of aporia as a formal and narrative strategy. Aporia as contradiction and impasse is evoked by Arceneaux's attempts to stabilize, as if trying to tie down something in a ship hold or deck to prevent them from being damaged or lost at sea, by bundling the books together with twine and sugar crystals. While on the one hand, he tries to preserve them, he renders them compromised if not totally unreadable, thus voiding them of their function and use-value. While the tension of the library interior is indeed fraught due to the raw accumulation of books and the way they are violently treated, one may still feel

the meditative aura caused by the way light infuses the space. The sugar crystals refract the warm light suspended from above, obscuring the cover and contents of these Black popular culture books, not with a straight-forward, brute visual aggression, but instead with layers of glistening textures. The aporia as impasse is not rendered visually as a closed-off space of exclusion, but rather, it can be sensed as a space replete with reflection, refraction, and crystals. In this visual kaleidoscope of destabilization, one can potentially sense a violence, but also freedom and possibility. I view Arceneaux's slowed and crystallized installation effect as a means for beholders to stay engaged with the incomplete accounts of Black art histories and popular culture.

Wake Work: The Ongoingness of the Slave Ship as a Black Signifier of Trauma and Freedom

And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans*local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event? Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory... how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?

- Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*²⁶

Sharpe explains wake work as a kind of Black consciousness for those who have passed through the heavy waters of the Middle Passage via trauma in one's collective memory or in one's

²⁶ Sharpe, 19-20.

contemporary lived experience.²⁷ She views the slave ship as a political and economic form that has been continually shifting, or as she writes in the epigraph, “unfolding still” from the onset of the transatlantic slave trade in the fifteenth century to the present. Its semiotics include: “the forced movements of the enslaved to... [those] of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods... to the brutal re-imaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of prison, the camp, and the school.”²⁸ Paul Gilroy’s views on the “interminability” of the slave ship resonate with Sharpe’s perspective here. He concurs that the slave ship is a form of early Black modernity capable of continued mutability and ongoing socio-political relevance to the Black experience.²⁹ In this section, I muse on Arceneaux’s particular approach to conceptual materialism and aporia, which I juxtapose with Sharpe’s wake work. In so doing, I argue that he reimagines and gives material form to the slave ship as *Library of Black Lies* in a contradictory manner reflecting the hegemonies, subjugations, and violence waged against Black people transported during the transatlantic slave trade. At the same time, he proposes a vision of new possibility and freedom.

With this extended reading in mind, we may view *Library of Black Lies* as a conceptual materialist form standing as a paradoxical memorial of shelved disparate narratives that “exist

²⁷ Sharpe, 20.

²⁸ Sharpe, 21.

²⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity & Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17.

outside the museum framework.”³⁰ Arceneaux achieves this sense of paradox—an aporia form of impasse—through his use of ephemeral materials such as sugar in his construction of the work. Although made from ephemeral materials, the ark has a feeling of endurance: it has a striking presence created in part due to its large size and ability to hold a labyrinthian accumulation of books and the beholders who enter it. Arceneaux amalgamates contradictions in his conceptual materialist approach, bringing together the senses of ephemerality, endurance, and formidable presence, and in so doing, strikes an over-arching tone of aporia’s irresolution, suspended presence, and impasse.

Sharpe proposes that living in the wake of history means re-experiencing or sensing past individual and collective historical traumas and fears in the present; Sharpe relates this to the experience of Black people in the U.S. and around the Afro-Atlantic Diaspora. With this in mind, I suggest that we can think about wake work as a research praxis to confront these individual and collective traumas generated in the past but still painfully palpable in the present. As Sharpe notes, the praxis draws upon and translates archival modes used by hegemonic arts institutions and libraries, such as the “violent annotations and redactions” that take the breath out of Black bodies.³¹ Wake work praxis reconfigures these strategies as a “new kind of writing and making sense of” the asphyxiating legacies of these hegemonic histories, by using some of its strategies—Black annotation and redaction for instance.³²

³⁰ Edgar Arceneaux, Julian Myers-Szupinska, and Zanna Gilbert, “Imaginaries of LA: Edgar Arceneaux and Julian Myers-Szupinska,” Dec. 10, 2020, 26:46, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=sRXpPm>

³¹ Sharpe, 114.

³² Sharpe, 113.

We can observe how Arceneaux engages principles of wake work in the way he materially revises and displays texts like Germano Celant's *Art Povera* on the reflective shelves of the *Library of Black Lies* installation. He annotates and redacts Celant's canonical book and in so doing, critiques the centrist discourses of Conceptual Art that Celant is a part of. Firstly, Arceneaux produced multiple copies of Celant's cover (which includes a reproduction of De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing*). *He alters it.* He alters these covers by creating new title texts for each of them: *Mr. Bart Penniless*, *Tart Problimo*, and *Fart Poverty*. He pastes this revised language on several copies of the book that are included in the installation. They are presented as closed volumes and organized haphazardly on the bookshelves. Arceneaux's refiguring of the Celant book cover, reminds us of his earlier work, *Detroit*. There, he annotates De Maria's *Mile Long Drawing* by redrawing the image as a gouache and enlarging its dimensions. Second, Arceneaux reenacts the displacement of Black narratives that canonical approaches to archiving and display executes by placing canonical conceptual art accounts and textbooks on centrally located shelves within the installation. He in turn, decenters sugar-casted Black histories. The Black cultural texts are displayed in an open manner on the surrounding shelves. For my purpose of looking at Arceneaux's process through this lens, we might think of wake work as a kind of "bringing back to life" that which may visually reflect the violent processes of the hegemonic annotation and redaction of Black presence, as a means of creating a new vision of possibility and a new mode of freedom.

Arceneaux reconfigures the hegemonic archival processes of art institutions, including the annotation and redaction of Black creative and historical presence. This tension materializes as the visceral sense of instability, violence, and impasse one might feel when interacting with

Library of Black Lies in the gallery. Arceneaux creates forms in this way not to gain resolution. Instead, he is marking a sense of freedom in the uncertainty of the here and now that is simultaneously open to the possibility of a continued, albeit unknown, sense of freedom in the future. This is the *ongoingness* of the improvisational spirit of what I view as the dynamic of a Derrida-influenced aporia in his work. As I discussed in the introduction, the highlighting of the improvisational spirit of aporia as a critical feature of Black conceptual art practice is one I share with Reagan P. Mitchell, who wrote about the phenomenon in relation to Black artistic and political freedom in the work of jazz improvisation master Ornette Coleman, among others.

Library of Black Lies includes molten-sugar covered books that refract warm light through sugar crystals and paint covered newspapers collected and arranged in bundles in a room-sized labyrinth that deceives the eye with winding mirrored passages and bookshelves. The polish of the brown wood as it picks up the light of the gallery gives *Library of Black Lies* an attractive surface glow. However, at the same time, a closer inspection may trigger Black trauma. One sees that the work is actually built from aged wooden beams that we might imagine as being culled from abandoned slave ships or humble plantation dwellings for the enslaved or otherwise marginalized. In the present we might think of neglected public housing in some Black and Brown communities marked by urban blight. The slave ship, the enslaved person's cabin, and the public housing complex are examples of dehumanizing, institutionalizing architectures that *Library of Black Lies* seems to reference.

Sharpe asks: “What does it mean to return?”³³ In Sharpe’s wake work logic, she argues that the slave ship changes form over time. We might view Arceneaux’s monumental installation as an experience of history that went through the door of no return, a term used to describe the last portals on the African continent that enslaved people walked through as they boarded the slave ships. However, the spirit of contradiction is part of Arceneaux’s approach and also of Sharpe’s wake work premise. She argues that the traumatic “door of no return” may at the same time be referred to as the “ark of return.”³⁴ In this case, she is referencing architect Rodney Leon’s *Ark of Return* (2015), a memorial site at an African burial ground in lower Manhattan that commemorates the fifteen to twenty-thousand slaves that were trafficked. Sharpe views Leon’s work of undoing as a counter narrative that aspires to suspend some visceral experiences of slavery. In short, in *Library of Black Lies*, Arceneaux gives material

³³ Sharpe, 61. For Arceneaux in his *Library of Black Lies* installation at the Mona Bismarck gallery in Paris, it meant inverting the flows of Black Atlantic crossing from the “New to Old Worlds,” as well as creating an alternative “free” disembarkment site. The slave ship, mused through Sharpe’s wake, is transformed: Arceneaux brings back to life and registers the Black presences evoked by the monumental ark whose interior passages are lined with texts whose genres can be described as Black popular media next to publications on contemporary art history literatures. He, in turn, mirrors the hull and its contents to heighten the violent disorientation integral to this imaging of a new space of freedom where hegemonic modes used for Black erasure are redeployed to push back against them while restoring Black presence. It should not be lost on us that Benjamin referred to 19th entry Paris as “the city of mirrors.” Sharpe’s idea of the ark of return was critical to consider when drawing connections to Paris’ 19th century arcades, also known as the “labyrinth of Paris.” Arceneaux built what I view as a loose “Black miniature” of the Parisian arcades, which was a structure made up of inner-city networks and luxe boulevards covered with glass in the city of Paris designed for the bourgeois “utopian impulse.” All passages led to what seemed like an endless maze of stores, galleries, cafes, museums, and railroads and were therefore networks referred to by Benjamin as constellations. The Paris arcades, according to Benjamin, were like little worlds or inner cities that included opera halls, railroad systems, temples, and market halls. Benjamin’s archeological study of the aboveground arcades also included an extensive study of the catacomb subterranean graveyard and galleries that artfully preserved seven million Parisians below ground. Benjamin understood these networks of urban spaces as constellations or small cities within cities. Arceneaux’s inclusion of disarrayed accumulations of books, print ephemeral, reflective surfaces, and piles of detritus in *Library of Black Lies*, mirrors both Benjamin’s “Arcades” which are new and old catacombs, ghettos, mirrors, old signs, labyrinths, underground streets where newspapers are printed, architectures of chance, *bookshops of mezzanine*, and panoramic corridors and Sharpe’s “ark of return.” I propose that Arceneaux created his own conceptual materialist version of the Arcades Project in intersection with wake work through his labyrinthine and destabilizing arrangement of “masses of books... stacked [and dipped in highly concentrated crystallizing sugar revealing slave ship economies] in dusty tied-up bundles.

³⁴ Sharpe, 61.

form to the Black lies woven by hegemonic archival processes of arts institutions and libraries: he turns these lies into challenges of these very systems that offer not resolution, but the freedom of now and promised in the future by the impasse, the irresolute, and the yet to be wholly defined. *Library of Black Lies* is, in this way, a visual memorial of narratives that, to use Sharpe's framework, "infinitely depict aesthetic impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity."³⁵

³⁵ Sharpe, 14.

Chapter 2. After the Fire: Black Freedom in *Orpheum Returns-Fire's Creation*

FIRE DOUBLES IN SIZE EVERY
MINUTE...
FIRE IS THE
SELF SUSTAINING
PROCESS OF RAPID
OXIDATION (CHEMICAL
REACTION) PRODUCING HEAT
LIGHT + SMOKE.
INCOMPLETE COMBUSTION.

—Edgar Arceneaux, “Sketchbook Excerpts”³⁶

Fire Under Museum Glass

In 2009 Arceneaux built a sculptural “still life” in the shape of a wooden museum display case capped with a glass vitrine titled *Orpheum Returns-Fire's Creation* (4.5' x 5' x 2') (fig. 2.1).³⁷

The base of the vitrine is covered in cracked clay. On this support, Arceneaux placed a single book that is partially coated in sugar and stands off center in the vitrine. This book about fire

³⁶ Edgar Arceneaux, “Sketchbook Excerpts,” in *Hopelessness Freezes Time: 1967 Detroit Riots, Detroit Techno and Michael Heizer's Dragged Mess; Edgar Arceneaux in an Ongoing Collaboration with Julian Myers*, ed. Nikola Dietrich (Basel: Museum für Gegenwartskunst, 2012), 37.

³⁷ Lyra Kilston, “Edgar Arceneaux,” *Art in America*, January 28, 2011, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/edgar-arceneaux-60812/>.

chemistry is entitled *Fire* (1985). It was written by John W. Lyons and published by Scientific American. The book stands spine-up and is partially open, permitting a partial view of its pages. Looking through the glass, we see it in its precarious display context. Arceneaux has crystallized sugar on over half of the book, creating a sense of partial concealment. He has “assaulted” the book by treating it with heated, liquefied sugar that he in turn, splashed over its spine to perform certain partial erasures that give it its identity. Melted sugar has singed its title *Fire*, its site of origin *Scientific American*, and spirit (the book’s inner lining). If we look closely, we notice that Arceneaux does not fully coat these identifying signs in sugar; he impedes our recognition of them. Rather than frustrating us by completely covering the book and the information on its pages, he demands our focused engagement with the installation. What is still legible in the aftermath of the book’s exposure to such violence? How, through my framing of Arceneaux’s Black conceptual materialism and aporia-inflected praxis, can we see this aftermath as Black freedom, agency, and possibility?

In this chapter I propose that in *Orpheum Returns-Fire's Creation*, Arceneaux deploys the metaphor of fire using his conceptual materialist praxis. He does so to show the violence of institutional erasure of Black presence (in art histories, and broader social narratives) within art institution’s archives and modes of display. I argue that Arceneaux’s sculpture has a symbolic relationship to fires in vulnerable Black communities of U.S. cities. I submit that he points to the fact that the violence of Black artists’ erasure from the mainstream, art industry are not very different from the socially proscribed Black erasures in U.S. history that continue into the present. He crystalizes this fact with a material burning of sugar.

Before continuing on to a deeper discussion of the way I see Arceneaux structuring *Orpheum Returns-Fire's Creation* in relation to his conceptual materialist process, I'd like to provide a summary of *Fire*, Lyons' study on the social implications of fire in urban settings. With this summary, I foreground what will be my extension of the fire allusions Arceneaux makes to Black urban contexts and installs in artworks destined to infiltrate the museum. As this chapter's epigraph—taken from Arceneaux's notebooks—demonstrates, Arceneaux acquainted himself with *Fire's* pages before he transformed them.

Fire is an interdisciplinary historical account based on data from around 1985—the time of the study's publication—of how fire is used as mechanical energy in the United States, and he writes, by "... people of industrial countries of the world" more broadly.³⁸ I was struck by Lyons' finding that America loses property and life at twice the rate of other countries and that within the U.S., these losses correspond to socio-economic and racial community factors.³⁹ He writes: "in historical perspective the fire problem of the Americans can be regarded as the residual of a much larger and more universally besetting problem of urban civilization."⁴⁰ In Lyons' view, there has been a lack of governmental efforts to eliminate fire hazards in disenfranchised communities, despite the advanced chemical and physical developments of steel, stone, and concrete technologies. Lyons argues that progress was supposed to arrive with such technological advancements. Instead, like the speed of a growing flame, the danger of fire for marginalized communities remained one of increasing urgency.

³⁸ Lyons, 1.

³⁹ Lyons, 2.

⁴⁰ Lyons, 3.

In *Orpheum Returns-Fire's Creation*, Arceneaux slightly opens the pages of *Fire* to a section where Lyons analyzes the challenges of preventing and containing public fires in spaces of significant urban development. In these urban contexts, Lyons notes that devastating fires are often caused by a minor spark like a “cigarette dropping into upholstery... [that] steadily smolders into bursting flames.”⁴¹ Lyons underscores this finding with the inclusion of a diagram of the three phases fires go through when setting a room ablaze: a simple initial drop of a flame turns into wisps of smoke that move upward and end with “everything in the room goes simultaneously into flaming combustion.”⁴²

Lyons also considers the shared civic space of public transportation. He offers chemical data and physical diagrams referencing fire-tested materials in subway cars. Lyons champions industrial progress in the form of fire-prevention initiatives like the National Bureau of Standards’ production of full-size fire tests.⁴³ In his study, he includes a black and white photograph of a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) car largely serving Black and Brown neighborhoods: it illustrates the aftermath of a catastrophic fire. In the photo, the BART car hull is ravaged. The monochromatic image of the BART car was taken in 1979 at the Fruitvale stop in Oakland, best known as the site where BART police shot Oscar Grant in 2009. The photo depicts the destruction after a high voltage electrical circuit sparked and

⁴¹ Lyons, 3.

⁴² Lyons, 3.

⁴³ Arceneaux may have noticed Lyons’ offhand characterizations and celebrations of scientific advancements. Writing about the efficiency of modern combustion in the US power grid, Lyons states that “controlled fires serve each American yearly with the electrical and mechanical energy of nearly 100 slaves.” Lyons’s comparison dispassionately references enslaved labor; the remark offers no critique of human exploitation nor of its place in nation building. Lyons, 57.

caused a massive fire that started on a seat cushion and spread up the walls causing several casualties and one fatality. The fire destroyed the ceiling of the car, leaving cables hanging haphazardly and several rows of seats nearly obliterated. It stands as a register of Black urban vulnerability, one for whom governmental fire initiatives came too late.

For Arceneaux, these histories of Black vulnerability and “imminent” erasure are seemingly without end.⁴⁴ Art critic Lyra Kilston identifies Arceneaux’s historical references to disastrous events that also speak to the present. As Kilston puts it, “We expect ruins to remain historical, hinting at disasters that occurred centuries ago. But the risk of the present becoming a ruin is perpetual. . .entropy lurks.”⁴⁵ Fire’s violence can cause partial erasure. In Arceneaux’s sculpture, the artist’s use of fire obscures and transforms objects but does not block our ability to imagine some in their original forms. It is my view that Arceneaux materializes this characteristic of fire through his conceptual materialist process in *Orpheum Returns-Fire’s Creation*. Arceneaux, by treating the book with molten sugar, carries out a metaphorical act that points to the violence of Black urban life in a highly tactile and emotive way. We see the way fire ravages: while it is dramatically violent, perhaps it never completely

⁴⁴ For a discussion on developers and government protocols that turn a blind eye to “imminent” danger and catastrophes in industries of sugar in the South, see Lois Norder’s article “A Decade of after deadly Imperial Sugar explosion still no new worker safety standards,” in *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, <https://www.ajc.com/blog/investigations/decade-after-deadly-imperial-sugar-explosion-still-new-worker-safety-standards/qpKHscUPUZ77EKETclCCMN/>. The horrific explosion caused by a build-up of sugar dust particles at Imperial Sugar Company in Georgia in 2008 also may have inspired Arceneaux to make *Orpheum Return—Fire’s Creation*. The accident killed fourteen people and injured 40 more; many were Black workers. See Shaila Dewan, “Lives and a Georgia Community’s Anchor Art Lost,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/09/us/09sugar.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1214147101-FDxU4jyloY6rejeUzZaMJg&oref=slogin. A fire followed the explosion, devastating surrounding communities. Since the catastrophe, it is hard to say if there has been progress made in the advancement of protective clothing for industrial-scale sugar factory workers. See Lois Norder, “A Decade after Deadly Imperial Sugar Explosion, Still No New Worker Safety Standards.”

⁴⁵ Lyra Kilston, “Edgar Arceneaux,” *Art in America*, January 28, 2011, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aiareviews/edgar-arceneaux-60812/>.

destroys everything in its path. In the same way, the ravage of hegemonic forces on Black people and histories is never very title, *Orpheum Returns—Fire’s Creation*, signals the act of coming back or that there is a “part 2”; the title achieves this in two parts. Firstly, *Orpheum Returns—Fire’s Creation* references the coming back of the mythic drama archetype figure around which narrative is constructed. And *Fire’s Creation*, that which remains and emerges in fire’s aftermath, is optimistic about the ability to endure and emerge from the embers of catastrophe. Through the subjection of the book to the violence of fire, Arceneaux distills out and crystallizes a sense of new possibility for Black presence. This is the contradictory nature of Arceneaux’s conceptual materialist praxis: it’s one that includes aporia’s impasse and wake work’s paradox as the notion of historical return without completeness or resolution.

Black Sugar Combustion as Insurgency

I submit that Arceneaux is performing a metaphorical combustion by glazing Lyons’ publication—including the book’s cover that features an image of a light that symbolizes faith—with molten, then crystallized sugar. Looking at the book’s cover, we see a cropped detail of French Baroque genre painter Georges de La Tour’s oil painting *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* (1640). The interior scene presents a seated female figure who holds a skull on her lap and gazes at the objects on the table beside her: a burning candle, a cross that references Christ’s sacrifice, a shepherd’s coiled rope for tethering animals, and two books including the Bible. Her contemplative gesture communicates a proximity to written knowledge (including the word of God), an awareness of death, devotion to Christ, membership in his flock, and reliance upon divine energy evident (*fig.2.2*).

In this highly emotional and spiritually charged scene, La Tour (1593-1652) depicts Magdalene with a sense of theater: the dramatically dark palette is an aspect of Baroque painting. Darkness illuminates. La Tour often worked within the spectrum of browns and blacks, a move that threatened to erase his figures altogether. Still, one can see the tip of Magdalene's sleekly coiffed head leaning into her hand. French literature scholar Dalia Judovitz argues that "the most notable feature of La Tour's work was his devotion to light and its effects"; she adds that by painting under conditions of artificial light, he learned to make darkness a theme. Darkness, Judovitz concludes, "threatens to dissolve and estrange the apparitions of reality...and modes of consciousness."⁴⁶ La Tour's Magdalene—a sinner, a figure representative of disenfranchised people and associated with marginalization, and an outcast devoted to her kindred spirit Jesus Christ—dominates the picture plane, despite the fact that her body is partly in darkness and partly in the light.

Arceneaux hyperbolizes *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame in Orpheum Returns—Fire's Creation*. In it, the aftereffects of fire that no longer burns are visible.⁴⁷ Sugar covers up the most important detail of the painting as reproduced on the book jacket: the single candle that softly lights the scene and that generates mirroring effects.⁴⁸ In La Tour's painting, the reflection of the two books on the table can be seen in the candle's glass vessel: the artist emphasizes the importance of reading and intellectualism. Arceneaux conveys a similar message with the open,

⁴⁶ Judovitz, *Georges de La Tour and the Enigma of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) Kindle, 371.

⁴⁷ Judovitz, 26.

⁴⁸ Judovitz writes about the "nature . . . of the visible" and I link this idea to art historical archives. Judovitz, 108-109.

propped up copy of Lyons' *Fire*, but he also embraces the paradoxical and creates an impasse to fully accessing its contents.⁴⁹ The book's cover image shows us the flame guides Magdalene's view, but Arceneaux's sugar crystal accumulations has made it difficult to locate the precise object of her gaze. Instead, Arceneaux encourages the viewer to focus on the body of Magdalene, who Judovitz describes as a figure in monocular profile and without distinctive facial features.⁵⁰ La Tour was known for staging and dressing down noble Parisian actors in tattered and worm linens and silks, indirectly referring to "peasants" and urban folk in Lorraine, and Brittany. Thus Arceneaux's aporetic sculpture, in part, gives material form to the visibility of everyday people and neglected communities rendered in art historical genealogies by obscuring this seventeenth-century emblem in art history.

In the aftermath of making his sugar combustions, Arceneaux unburies the paradoxical remains and futures, forms of aporia's impasse. Like Kara Walker, Arceneaux is a Black conceptual artist who engages with art history and its conventions. Art historian Krista A. Thompson has written that Walker destabilizes Italian Renaissance and European Enlightenment art historical traditions, disrupting the "linear narrative history" of the European art conventions of landscape and genre paintings.⁵¹ I argue that Arceneaux works in this way in *Orpheum Return – Fire's Creation*. The carefully placed book sits atop a layer of

⁴⁹ Judovitz writes "When books are represented as opened. . . the pictorial verisimilitude of these books is so convincing that the beholder is invited—even compelled to read these painted texts on display." Judovitz, 47.

⁵⁰ Judovitz, 26.

⁵¹ Krista Thompson, "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States," *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 25.

clay. Inside, the interior of the vitrine is a liminal wasteland that resembles the look of a fire's aftermath. Arceneaux has created the paradox of fire in *Orpheum Returns--Fire's Creation*; the installation simultaneously points to demolition and renewal. Furthermore, I view Arceneaux's firing liquid sugar across *Fire* as an irresolute map of the imagined histories edited out or a narrative that looks frozen—even suspended in time.

Are these erasures recoverable with any certainty? As Jean-Luc Nancy notes of historical accounts more generally, “the open and closed books are precarious with a dazzling truth held between stitched pages ultimately held together by a thread.”⁵² He continues:

A book is a meteor that breaks up into thousands of meteorites whose random course provokes collisions, strokes of genius, sudden crystallization of new books, unpublished tracings of characters, enlarged revised and corrected editions, an immense interstellar circulation.⁵³

From my perspective, I imagine Arceneaux's hand as one belonging to a fire-starter that propels a book into its orbit, catalyzing the process of collision with other books, perspectives and histories. Turning to the artwork *Detroit*, which I began this thesis with, the gouache splatters and pools in that painting become the fissured and fractured fault lines of the ground in *Orpheum Returns–Fire's Creation*.

The combustive spirit of *Orpheum Returns–Fire's Creation* operates within the discursive matrix of wake work that Christina Sharpe describes. *Orpheum Returns–Fire's Creation* catalyzes into material form, what Sharpe calls the “unfolding still” that is the interconnection between trauma and the U.S. Black experience in the wake of slavery's aftermath.⁵⁴ Sharpe, as I stated in Chapter 1, views this aftermath paradoxically, as an

⁵² Jean-Luc Nancy, *On the Commerce of Thinking* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 31.

⁵³ Nancy, 44.

⁵⁴ Sharpe, 21.

ongoingness.⁵⁵ In closing, I use the improvisational spirit of aporia to offer an imaginative account of the unfolding action of Arceneaux's *Orpheum Returns–Fire's Creation* conceptual materialist process of redressing Black erasure. It goes like this: *Set the book on fire. Ossify its biases as the aftermath of a shower of molten sugar so as not to erase them, but to leave the entrails of their fading position of supremacy.*

⁵⁵ Sharpe, 21.

Conclusion: Black Erasure Out of the Shadows

In this thesis, I have argued that Edgar Arceneaux advances a Black conceptual material practice, evident in Fred Wilson’s institutional critique. Arceneaux also builds on Jacques Derrida’s aporia—a theoretical viewpoint in which the powerful establish “social freedom” as an ongoing, situational, and contingent circumstance—an entanglement—that is forever irresolute and characterized by impasse. Arceneaux’s works reflect aporia’s impasse as a sense of freedom and possibility through which we might imagine the Black experience differently.

Detroit was part of an ongoing project that demonstrates Arceneaux’s perpetual engagement with Walter de Maria’s canonical artwork.⁵⁶ Reconceptualized by Arceneaux, De Maria’s land art project seems filled with absences and silences about the Civil Rights era in which it was made. The word Detroit spray-painted with a stencil in all capital letters rendering a photo-document of a lifeless body accentuates the notion that there is more to both the sociocultural and art-historical dynamics of the time in which *Mile Long Drawing* was made. SFMOMA acquired *Detroit*—a symbol of Black urban presence into a “fixed” emblem of conceptual art; in this context, the life-size experiential drawing continues existing in central archives as two views at once, revealing blind spots in art historical institutions.

Different from *Detroit*, Arceneaux’s experiential installation *Library of Black Lies*—arguably like a labyrinthine, Biblical ark, and archive—holds Black histories and narratives of racist exploitation. In Chapter 1, I assert that Arceneaux built an interactive archive of rotting

⁵⁶ Edgar Arceneaux, Julian Myers and Cornelius Harris “Mirror Travel in the Motor City: Edgar Arceneaux, Julian Myers and Cornelius Harris,” filmed February 3, 2011 at Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), Detroit, Michigan, video, 22:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zXUxEEw_s0.

publications weathered away by the violence, irresolution, “cultural difference, colonialism and race” for museum viewers to experience history conceptually.⁵⁷ Its passageways hold concealed histories and are conceptually shaped by books half dipped in liquefied sugar; warm, refracted light, mirrored shelves; newspapers drenched in black paint. In creating such winding paths that lead to an impasse, he returns audiences to the slave ship whose form transforms over time, signifying Black trauma and the pursuit of freedom.

Orpheum Returns—Fire’s Creation evokes a confrontation with the fire destroyed landscape, especially those spaces and places where Black and Brown people historically lived and worked. I argue that Arceneaux’s version of Black American history is focused upon fire’s force to erase; *Orpheum Returns—Fire’s Creation*, in its title, evokes regenerative power. Displayed in museums, the installation is a material critique of institutions. There is a theatricality to this project; the book assaulted by boiling sugar is the evidence of a staged action that disrupts the purpose of a text that was produced for a reader. Arceneaux also positions a natural substance of sugar, transformed by a refining process, as a physical and conceptual material.

Contemporary artist Diamond Stingily (b. 1990) takes up conceptual materialist practices that are not unlike Arceneaux’s: her work seeks to make Black lives, experiences, histories and culture visible. Her solo exhibition *Doing the Best I Can* was mounted at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in early 2019.⁵⁸ Before entering the Wattis, visitors noticed that black and white and colored sheets of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, taken from copies of the paper, had

⁵⁷ González, 24.

⁵⁸ *Diamond Stingily: Doing the Best I Can* was on view from January 15 to April 9, 2019.

been pasted against the street-facing windows. Inside the gallery, more newspaper covered the skylights (*fig. 3.1*). Very little natural light entered the space, and the glow of the gallery's overhead artificial lights was washed out because there was a large, vertical light tower in the installation. *Tower Light* (2017) is a high voltage, outdoor light machine, the kind that is falsely believed to deter crime in Black and Brown neighborhoods and that is used in prison yards.⁵⁹For the exhibition, Stingily repurposed equipment used in the surveillance of Black and Brown people; this light machine also resembled the flood lights of the prison industrial complex. With this appropriated prop, Stingily staged a confrontation with white and Eurocentric authority, a move that could be compared to Arceneaux's in *Library of Black Lies* and *Orpheum Returns— Fire Creation*.

Stingily, like Arceneaux, is attentive to illumination and its effects. *Tower Light's* rays were directed toward *In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place* (2019), a large, grid-shaped, shelving system that spanned two walls of the gallery and met in a corner to form an L-shape. Hundreds of golden, silvery, and polychromatic sports trophies were arranged on the top of the chestnut colored shelves and in the open cubby hole compartments. Visitors walked between the just wide-enough space between *In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place* and the gallery walls behind it, constructing a dynamic shadow dance with this sculptural object. Humans, the display shelf, and trophies cast silhouettes in the space, creating black presences in it. Stingily harnessed the aporetic qualities of light—*overshadowing*—to conceptually

⁵⁹ Since the 1990s, police departments in the US have installed vertical flood lights in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, especially those with housing projects. There is no evidence that these lights reduce crime, and studies suggest that they might negatively affect the residents' health. See Ethan Chiel, "Police Floodlights are Unlikely to Reduce Crime, But Could Harm Your Health," *Vice*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z48j83/police-floodlights-are-unlikely-to-reduce-crime-but-could-harm-your-health>.

materialize Black bodies historically erased from mainstream cultural institutions. These readymade trophies were recognizable symbols of achievement and victory. One reviewer remarked that *In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place* appeared to allude to a contest or struggle.⁶⁰ Stingily critiqued the American obsession with winning and inability to handle defeat: she moved beyond the impasse of the perceived loop of experience between success and failure, and she embraced the incomplete or unresolved in her artwork.

Throughout *Doing the Best I Can*, text played a central role. The title *In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place* references the artwork's place in the Wattis Institute and a location in Country Club Hills, the predominantly Black mixed income Chicago suburb where Stingily grew up. Stingily inscribed the trophies' bases with bittersweet and humorous phrases of resignation. One such label is "THROUGH ALL THE MADNESS THIS ALL YOU GONE GET."⁶¹ Written with capital letters and without punctuation, this sentence is a shouted one-liner that is reminiscent of those in Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (1978-1987). Stingily scripted the voice according to Black vernacular speech: even without the representation of human-scale figures, *In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place* adds to the sense of Black bodies being present

⁶⁰ A large blue, gym mat also is the third part of *Doing the Best I Can*. Positioned on the inside of the "L" of *In the Middle but in the Corner of 176th Place* it adds to the notion of physical exercise such as aerobic dance, gymnastics, or wrestling.

⁶¹ The invocation of madness offers the opportunity for it to be read through Derrida's third aporia: he asserted that madness is always urgent and that justice, while not guaranteed, could follow and be in the realm of the possibility. See Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida."

everywhere in *Doing the Best I Can*.⁶² The trophies bring to mind the rewards of Black athletes, and the exhibition and exploitation of their skills in professional leagues such as the National Basketball Association and the National Football League. These experiences are meaningful to Stingily because she wrote on one of the Wattis' gallery walls "that two of her brothers both played professional football, and that, like them, she is doing the best she can." Stingily's insight is that life is a negotiation of challenges and disappointments. The artist accepted that she has been "doing the best" that she can, and implicitly suggested that all of us do the same in assessing our efforts.

⁶² *Hergott Shadows* (2019) was the fourth installation in *Doing the Best that I Can*. This work's title is informed by the German *Herrgott*: the English translation is "Lord God." See "Herrgott," *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/german-english/herrgott>. For *Hergott Shadows*, Stingily sewed thirteen stuffed dolls, lining them up just a few inches from one of the gallery walls; each doll was propped up with two metal rods. Their diminutive heads were constructed with dark, sable colored fabric; white fabric covered their arms, trunks, and legs. Stingily called the figures "Amish": they resemble handmade children's dolls in that community. Stingily also wanted to prompt viewers' thinking about an intentional, Utopian space, safe from outsiders' intrusion and violence. In an interview, she wondered would have happened "if, after slavery in America, Black people had decided to or been given the opportunity to go somewhere else." Quoted in "Artist Talk: Diamond Stingily," "Home School," June 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0ZlHTKWY>.

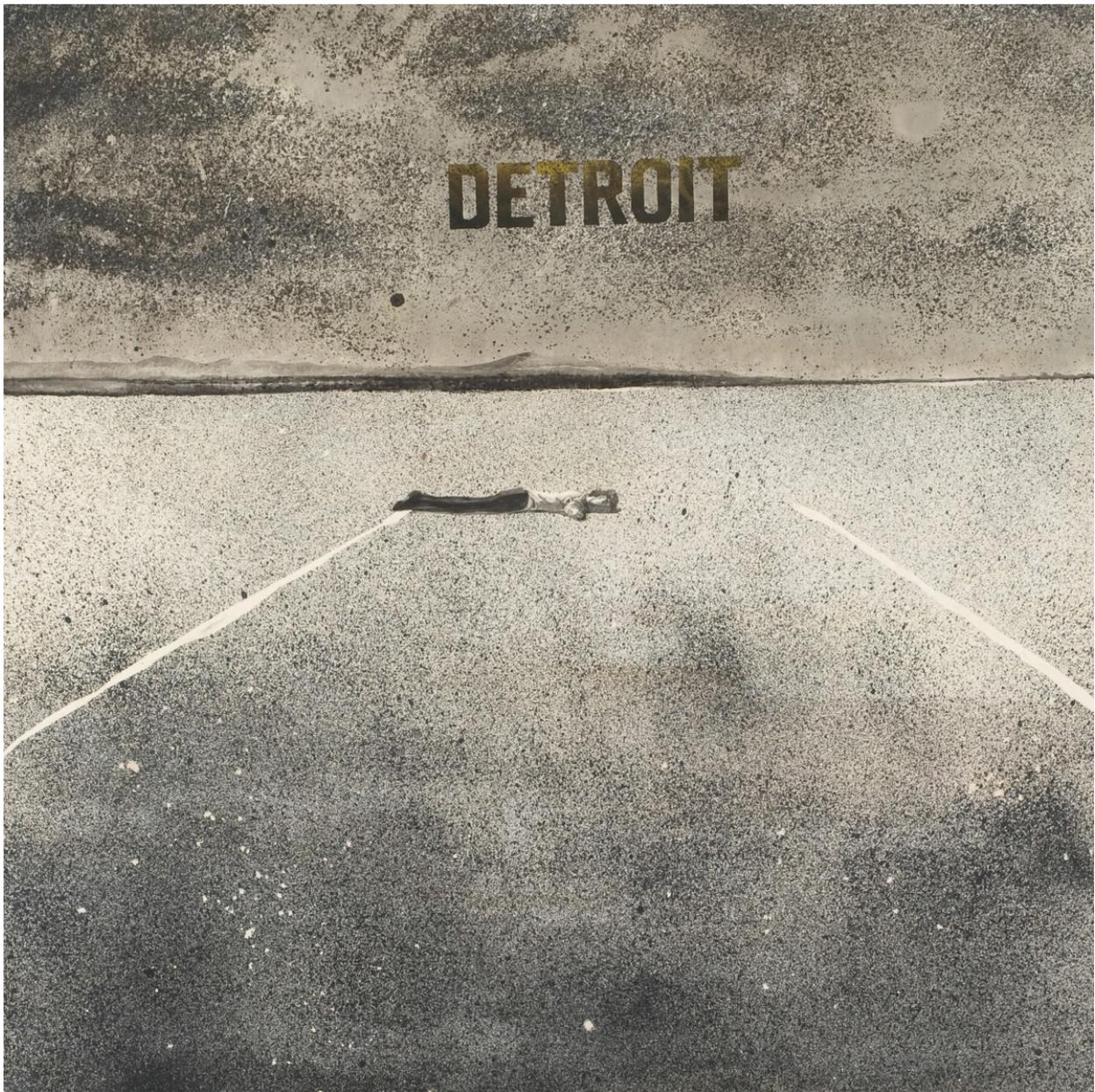


Figure I.1. Edgar Arceneaux, *Detroit*, 2009. Synthetic polymer paint, graphite, and pencil on paper, 73 x 61 in. Image courtesy of Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles.



Figure I.2. Fred Wilson, *Speaking in Tongues: A Look at the Languages of Display*, 1998. De Young Museum, San Francisco.



Figure 1.1. Edgar Arceneaux, *Library of Black Lies*, 2013-2018. Installation exterior view. Wood, mirrored glass, Mylar, newspaper, hard-bound books, sugar crystals, lighting fixtures, audio component, 16 x 16 x 9 ft. Image courtesy of Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles.



Figure 1.2. Edgar Arceneaux, *Library of Black Lies (detail), (Invisible Inner Light Beneath the Floorboards)*, 2017. Chalk pastel and acrylic paint on paper, 80" x 66" x 2". Image courtesy of Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Robert Wedemeyer.



Figure 1.3. Edgar Arceneaux, *Library of Black Lies*, 2013–2018. Installation interior view. Wood, mirrored glass, Mylar, newspaper, hard-bound books, sugar crystals, lighting fixtures, audio component. Image courtesy of Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles.



Figure 2.1. Edgar Arceneaux, *Orpheum Returns-Fire's Creation*, 2010. Installation interior view. Image courtesy of Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles.



Figure 2.2. Edgar Arceneaux, *Orpheum Returns—Fire's Creation* 2010. Detail showing the cover for John W. Lyons' *Fire* (1985) featuring a reproduction of Georges de La Tour's *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1640. Image courtesy of Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles.



Figure 3.1. Diamond Stingily, *Tower Light*, 2017. Installation view at California College of the Arts, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Modified light tower, 152" x 110" x 50".

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