



OPENING CREDITS, *PASSING THROUGH* (DIRECTED BY LARRY CLARK, 1977), FRAME GRAB.



# Introduction: *Passing Through Film/ Passing Through Jazz*

ALESSANDRA RAENGO

This publication is part of an experimental project of collective research inspired by the encounter with Larry Clark's film *Passing Through* (1977), a cult film that by many accounts has successfully transposed the compositional principles of jazz improvisation into filmmaking and thus reached a powerful synergy between free jazz and film form.

The encounter with both the film and the filmmaker occurred during the "L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema Tour" that *Liquid blackness* and the Department of Communication at Georgia State University co-sponsored with Emory's Department of Film and Media Studies in the Fall 2013.<sup>1</sup> My first reaction, as I walked to the stage at the end of the screening to lead a Q&A with the filmmaker, in awe of what I had just seen, was to describe

the film as *sublime*; partly because of the jarringly complex movement engendered by the propulsive force of its musical score and partly for its rejection of narrative and formal closure.<sup>2</sup> The film's free form, an expression of its 'passage through' jazz, is utilized in order to usher in elements of the radical political imagination elaborated by black artistic avant-gardes of its time.

The plot of *Passing Through* follows a jazz musician's struggle against the recording industry while in search of a sound that would reconcile his personal artistic vision with the sensibility of his community and the political urgencies of his highly repressive historical moment. The protagonist's attempt to record independently from the white-controlled record industry is profoundly imbricated with his search for the meaning

(and the (political) possibilities) of artistic experimentation, the desire to share it with one's community, as well as the attempt to heal a masculinity wounded by the experience of confinement, brutality, and the constant reminder of the worthlessness of black lives.

Through its "liquid" aesthetics the film displays the ability to *pass through* a variety of seemingly incongruous or remote spaces. It connects spaces of artistic improvisation, such as jam sessions, to spaces of systemic oppression—a reconstruction of the 1971 Attica prison revolt interwoven with archival newsreel footage of the revolt's repression (a sequence Lauren Cramer discusses in this issue), for instance—in the U.S. national scene—including the now iconic footage of the fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, AL, the police

shooting of a black family driving through a riot zone in Cleveland, among others—to images of African revolutionary leaders; spaces of addiction—a flashback that shows a band member overdosing—to spaces of healing—the sudden appearance of the musicians' mentor who blows an African horn and brings the band member back to life.<sup>3</sup>

These transitions—these "passages"—constitute the ways in which the film is both deeply rooted in its locality, while it also participates in and engenders transnational streams of radical politics. The film was made by leveraging existing artists communities, in particular the Central Avenue musicians—a vital portion of "all the musicians known and unknown," to whom the film is dedicated—and the community of actors and film crew from UCLA, PASLA, the Performance Art Society

of Los Angeles (some of whom Clark directly trained), who worked on the film. *Passing Through* features Horace Tapscott and the Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra, jazz musicians who were already deliberately experimenting with alternative forms of collective political action through their community presence and through their musical practice. For example, they had decided not to abide by the demands of the record industry and instead bring their music, live, to their community.<sup>4</sup> Both *Passing Through's* main character Warmack, played by Nathaniel Taylor, and his mentor Poppa Harris, played by veteran actor Clarence Muse, are modeled after Tapscott.

(RIGHT) FIGURE 1:  
Clarence Muse with Dorian Gibb (who plays the young Warmack) at Brockman Art Gallery preparing for the scene. Courtesy of Brockman Gallery.



## “THE FILM EXPLORES IN THE SAME BREATH BOTH THE CONFINEMENT AND THE EXPANSIVENESS OF BLACK ARTISTIC AND POLITICAL RADICALISM.”

Rooted in a vibrant post-Watts artistic community, comprising also assemblage and “junk” art, poetry, and the very experimental cinema created by the filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion, the film is part of what Daniel Widener has identified as a concerted effort to develop non-representational and free-form modes of art practice, and ultimately improvisations of subjectivity articulated through a strong Third Worldist perspective.<sup>5</sup>

*Passing Through* premiered at FILMEX, the Los Angeles International Film Festival alongside David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, and then circulated in international film festivals—Locarno, Edinburgh, Milan, Amiens, Douarnenez, Berlin, London, Amsterdam, Moscow, and was shown also in Martinique, Mozambique, Senegal, Algeria, Ghana, among others—as both an *art* and a *political* film.<sup>6</sup> The absolute conviction that one is not separable

from the other is one of the film's most powerful and enduring traits. Even though more contemporary descriptions of the film have often used a rhetoric of immersion, seduction, and “emotional spasm”—thus posing, at least for me, the question of what might be the proper affect of radical politics—the film's political vision, as many international audiences of the time recognized, is biting and defiantly affirmative.<sup>7</sup>

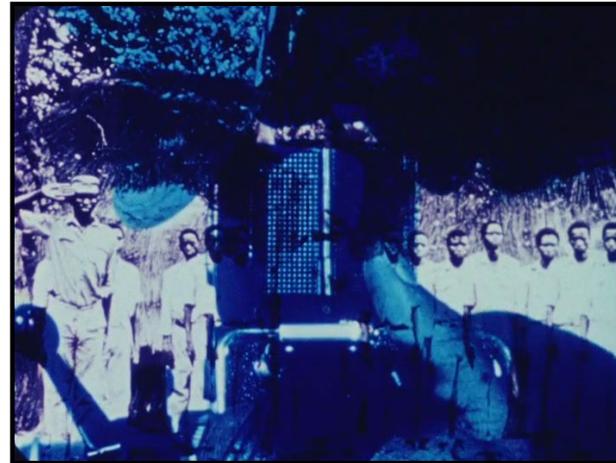
**“THAT THE  
ENSEMBLE  
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ELEMENTS.”**

*liquid blackness* was immediately drawn to the aesthetic fluidity of *Passing Through* for how it renders the multiple ways in which blackness exists in space and time, simultaneously indexing rootedness and displacement, originarity and alienation. By presenting as adjacent incongruous aspects of human life—the seemingly unbound creativity of the musicians on the one hand, and the worthlessness of their lives within oppressive labor conditions, on the other; the conditions of Los Angeles black artists’ communities and the pervasive domestic and international anti-black violence—the film explores in the same breath both the confinement and the expansiveness of black artistic and political radicalism.

More specifically, *Passing Through* reflects on forms of sociality and political action that coalesce

around the jazz ensemble. In this respect, the film is about “black study” in the sense elaborated by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.<sup>8</sup> And it is around this idea of “study” that our guiding research questions finally emerged: what does it mean to take the jazz ensemble as a model for the relationship between artistic experimentation and radical politics, the individual and the

(RIGHT) FIGURE 2:  
The film’s concern with mediatization extends to the visual recording of revolutionary struggles. Here we see the act of photographing superimposed to archival footage from Guinea Bissau. *Passing Through* (Directed by Larry Clark, 1977), frame grab.



collective, theory and praxis? Is the potential of the 1970s exhausted and inaccessible? Or does the notion of “passing through” present us with a concept of space that links to contemporary struggles in everyday life, especially at this moment of continued endangerment of black youths in public spaces? What kind of artistic vision does politics “pass through” in the digital age to produce spaces of communal vision and praxis? These are some of the questions that prompted the object-oriented mode of inquiry *liquid blackness* has been pursuing, an approach that lets the object dictate the terms of engagement.

The jazz ensemble is a space of political praxis because it offers an immediate “translation of vision into act,” especially when free-form aesthetics do not guarantee a predictable outcome and there

is always a chance that this alternative mode of sociality will implode into chaos.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in the jazz ensemble, praxis is the vehicle for conceptualization: that the ensemble works is the proof of the viability of its visionary elements. I want to claim the same for Clark's film: in *Passing Through*, as James Tobias argues, jazz is not "an industrial product or musical genre" but "a complex streaming of heterogeneous, historical modalities of action," one that keeps the history of jazz recording in tension with the history of improvised historical struggle.<sup>10</sup> And in fact, in his additional reflections on the film contained in this issue, Tobias continues to explore ways in which *Passing Through* pursues its multiple commitments to local, national and international struggles by approaching "the historical struggle for a renewed music in a larger homology with

the struggle for a renewed political identity," and concerning itself with "the mediatization of Black music's capacities for transforming memory."<sup>11</sup>

*Passing Through* renders the inextricability of artistic experimentation and radical political praxis unambiguously. It does so by enshrining the jazz ensemble as the aesthetic and political unit of the black radical tradition where more expansive forms of potentially contagious collectivity could be both imagined and practiced.<sup>12</sup> Central to this expansion is the practice of improvisation. As a site of experimentation with intellectual and spatial mobility and invention, improvisation, argues Kimberly Benston, thrives on the tension between "deformation and reformation," assemblage, bricolage, taking off and taking leave. Indeed the "process requires that the 'topic

of improvisation initiates, as if within the logic of its own cellular structure, a movement which necessarily bears the piece further and further away from that theme."<sup>13</sup> Improvisation, Moten further claims, is a kind of "foreshadowing, if not prophetic, description" because, "[t]hat which is without foresight is *nothing other than foresight*."<sup>14</sup> This is an important reason why, as Benston further argues "the artist-hero in modern African-American writing is, typically, a musician ... for it is only in music that renovated aesthetic conventions can touch upon both the pure energy and improvisational wit deemed necessary for survival in the black diaspora."<sup>15</sup>

Clark never sought a theatrical release for his film and claims that this choice was inspired by Sekou Toure's views about art: the idea that "art has to be demanded," that

## "FOR IT IS ONLY IN MUSIC THAT RENOVATED AESTHETIC CONVENTIONS CAN TOUCH UPON BOTH THE PURE ENERGY AND IMPROVISATIONAL WIT DEEMED NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL IN THE BLACK DIASPORA."

"the people have to ask for it."<sup>16</sup> The important point here is that this restricted circulation —*Passing Through* has only been available exclusively on film until its recent digital transfer curated by the UCLA Film and Television Archive—has historically demanded a collective audience. Furthermore, the fact that the film only exists in 16mm in a handful of archives around the world (with the exception of a few

jealously guarded DVD transfers) reproduces some of the same collective conditions of production and fruition of the jazz ensemble. That is, *Passing Through* demands a collectivity both at the point of production and of reception. And for this reason *liquid blackness* only screened the film collectively so as to honor the way that the film has historically performed its critical and political work.

Several research questions and challenges quickly emerge from the very fact of studying a deliberately withdrawing object, which sides with the ephemeral over the permanent, and the performative and contingent over the institutional or the scripted: a fugitive film, with fugitive sounds, and a fugitive imagination.<sup>17</sup> How to reconcile the demands of close analysis—i.e. repeated viewing, segmentation, stillness... (captivity?)—

with the film's understanding of itself as an unbound flow? If the "passages" are the most powerful sites of the film's political work, what are the implications of stilling *this* film for analysis?

From its opening sequence, the most celebrated in the film, *Passing Through* reflects on the stakes of fixing and recording (both the visual and the sonic) and attempts to confer to the image the malleability of sound, the intensity of a live performance and the complex dynamics of group creation and interaction. The opening sequence is the first existing recording of a



(RIGHT) FIGURE 3:  
Opening sequence, *Passing Through* (Directed by Larry Clark, 1977), frame grab.

## “HOW TO RECONCILE THE DEMANDS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS I.E. REPEATED VIEWING, SEGMENTATION, STILLNESS... (CAPTIVITY?) WITH THE FILM'S UNDERSTANDING OF ITSELF AS AN UNBOUND FLOW?”

performance of Herbert Baker's "Flight 71" arranged by Tapscott.<sup>18</sup> Emerging from a deep black background, Tapscott's hands on the piano move like brush strokes across the frame. After a solo prelude, one by one, images of the ensemble's various musical instruments are overlaid onto one another according to an aesthetics inspired by jazz album covers, that are in themselves a form of *passage*, as Tobias argues, a way of "holding" music, and the

asynchronous meeting point of musicians and audiences' gestures.<sup>19</sup>

This sequence speaks also directly to the film's intervention against the limitations of sensitometry that had limited the visibility of the black body on film. Before beginning to shoot, Clark had conducted secret screen tests to identify the type of film that would best record black skin against a deep black background. He was eventually satisfied with

the malleability of reverse FUJI film, at a time when it was not yet imported in the U.S., and had it shipped directly from Japan.<sup>20</sup> The film's commitment to the moving and yet lingering image is reminiscent of jazz photography—such as the uncannily resonant Hart Leroy Bibbs' *Manifesto Optksorption*, which strives to capture a sense of the living gesture of performing musicians—but it is also an expression of Clark's understanding of filmmaking

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as a form of painterly layering according to an aesthetics he has described as “soft cubism.”<sup>21</sup>

It is the porosity and fugitive nature of its transitions that ultimately allow the film to mobilize the idea of “*passing through*.” Sequences where the music itself propels and sustains a desire to surrender to its energizing and adventurous improvisatory logic follow this same logic *through* to

some of its most radical conclusions. And this is precisely the point: how far can the ensemble’s practical imagination go? And how dangerous might that territory be? A jam session (beginning with Horace Tapscott at the piano) transitions into historical footage of a KKK march in Washington, to the dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham, but also to creative forms of resistance

such as a line of women advancing and retreating in a dance-like manner while snapping their fingers. This choreography of resistance is reminiscent of the moving line of women featured at the end of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which dramatizes the formation of the avant-garde as individual women alternate taking leave from the group to push ahead

and then retreating to be absorbed and to back up the group itself. Then, in the same breath, the sequence transitions back again into diegetic time where it initiates a flashback to a band member’s overdose and near death, until the musicians’ mentor, Poppa Harris, who visits him in the hospital room, blows an African horn, in yet another place and time not clearly identified within this heterogeneous filmic stream, and brings the musician back to life. Through this layering the film creates a number of virtual spaces—spaces nested within the irreducible tensions between creation and oppression—that can be seized for action.

And it is Moten that connects sound more directly to the question of political action, especially as he claims the ability for the black avant-garde to linger *in the break*, “as a necessary preface to

action.”<sup>22</sup> Lingering in the break also requires a type of temporality that moves in two directions: forward, since foreshadowing is what improvisation does, and backwards, as jazz phrasing only becomes comprehensible to the listener through a different analytics that retroactively perceives it as indeed possessing its own type of dangerous, daring, and sometimes barely perceptible form.<sup>23</sup> It also introduces the importance of reverberation, as connected to the way in which technologies of sound reproduction both recalibrate localities but also reconfigure temporality insofar as the ripple-like, partially folding/partially accumulating repetition of the recording of improvised music might claim some stake on the future.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly after *Passing Through*’s opening sequence, Warmack, just

released from prison, practices his saxophone under a pier in the attempt to re-synchronize himself and his sound not only with the specific locality of his band but also with the transnational reverberations of his everyday struggle with larger decolonization struggles across the world. Clark combined different shots taken at different piers in the Los Angeles area so that he could create the effect of an indefinite space. When Clark mixed the sound in postproduction, the various soundtracks began to reverberate with one another as if they had occurred in actual space, as if the locality—in this case, the specific spatial/architectonical configuration of the (composite) pier itself—was reasserting itself by producing the echoing sounds. In this new virtual space created by sound reverberation, the spatial property of the particular location comes

to join the indefinite quality of the “whatever” space the filmmaker was trying to produce, offering an unplanned but effective way to convey the multiplicity of spaces in which the jazz artist as a potential political agent finds himself.<sup>25</sup> But it also crystalizes what can be accessed through the generative practice of free-jazz: the possibility to multiply one’s time and space, to expand across them, simultaneously inhabit the here and the elsewhere, and to synchronize oneself, for example, with the praxis outlined in the preacher’s sermon that opens Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*; to think, as Benston summarizes it, about blackness not as “an inevitable object, but rather a motivated, constructed, corrosive, and productive process;” blackness itself as *practice*.<sup>26</sup> And by extension, to think about jazz as a praxis of sociality, foreshadowing sonic resistance, and ultimately

improvisation of a transnational subjectivity at work in liberation struggles across the world.

This reverberation is both a powerful formal matrix in the film and also a way in which we can see our own collective processes—the way our own academic research builds on each other’s work, for example—somewhat mirrored in the film.<sup>27</sup> Moving from the observations just outlined, we have conceived of this fifth issue of *liquid blackness* as an opportunity to pursue a larger reflection on some of the questions posed by the film as well as to continue to “improvise” the configuration within which the film’s *study* might occur.

One exciting spinoff of our research has been *Drawing Through*, a project designed by painting, drawing and printmaking professor Craig Dongoski, with Georgia State

University students and alumni in occasion of Larry Clark’s campus visit and the screening of *Passing Through* in Atlanta in April 2015.<sup>28</sup> Bringing together painters and musicians, *Drawing Through* unfolded as a study in group meditation, sound visualization, and improvised creation. The LP record produced from this event captures the uniquely layered experience of the creative interaction between media practices—visual arts, music, and film—and will be released during an event at the Mammal Gallery that will conclude the September 18-19 symposium on “The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble,” that *liquid blackness* has organized as part of this study. The event will also feature artwork from a range of media including live meditations and musical performances inspired by the film.

This issue features a variety of

compelling essays that are further testimony to the collective and experimental modes that have inspired this research project. James Tobias’s return to *Passing Through*, a film he has already written about, is testimony to its continued relevance and in fact, to the way its transnational breadth as well as its commitment to the mediatization of cultural memory and its haptic communicability continue to be relevant in the present moment. Angelo Restivo has discovered the film through the *liquid blackness* research and his formal approach is sensitive to

(RIGHT) FIGURE 4:  
Pursuing forms of liquidity in the sound/  
image relation. *Passing Through* (Directed  
by Larry Clark, 1977), frame grab.



**“WHAT CAN BE ACCESSED THROUGH THE GENERATIVE PRACTICE OF FREE-JAZZ: THE POSSIBILITY TO MULTIPLY ONE’S TIME AND SPACE, TO EXPAND ACROSS THEM, SIMULTANEOUSLY INHABIT THE HERE AND THE ELSEWHERE.”**

the way the use of color in the film connects, in a utopian way, to Walter Benjamin’s idea of the outmoded. As Restivo argues, the film’s pursuit of the “mathematical sublime”—particularly the musical potentiality of color—acts as a form of “profane illumination” that, among other things, functions as a way to explore the possibility of the production and emergence of “the new.”

Essays by Ayanna Dozier and

Nicholas Forster pursue, likewise, some of this sensibility in the reading of other objects. Dozier focuses on Barbara McCullough’s *Water Ritual #1: A Urban Rite of Purification* and a Zeinabu irene Davis’s *Cycles*. Both filmmakers from the L.A. Rebellion pursued the radical gesture of framing women’s bodily fluids (urine in the former and menstruation in the latter) as acts of bodily expansion and as forms of assertion of *living*

bodies *existing in time*. They thus rescued these same bodies from the default association with filth and abjection and, at the same time, upset the way the cinematic image wraps itself too tightly around the black female body. Forster’s essay on Curtis Mayfield’s powerful cinematic presence in 1970s films advances the idea that Mayfield was instrumental in creating a soul counterpublic, which articulated political and economic

aspirations even though it had to unavoidably rely on the existing structure of the record industry. Appearing in some of the films for which he provided the soundtrack, Mayfield’s presence commanded a shift from compliance to resistance that was understandable to the soul community.<sup>29</sup> Forster’s close analysis of a pivotal scene in Robert M. Young’s 1977 prison film, *Short Eyes* bears this out and effectively contributes to the understanding of the radical power of fabulation in 1970s music. ■

(LEFT) FIGURE 5:  
Sound reverberates under the pier. *Passing Through* (directed by Larry Clark, 1977), frame grab.



<sup>1</sup> For an account of how the organization of the L.A. Rebellion Tour coincided with the coming together of *liquid blackness* as a research group see Alessandra Raengo, "Encountering the Rebellion: *liquid blackness* reflects on the expansive possibilities of the L.A. Rebellion films," in *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Stewart (University of California Press, forthcoming, November 2015).

<sup>2</sup> At least this is my reaction at a first viewing—a sense that the film (paradoxically) loses cohesion as its narrative line takes hold. Upon closer study of the film, one becomes aware that a reason for this reaction is the very fact that the jazz ensemble and its music are by far the most powerful cohesive forces in the film.

<sup>3</sup> In thinking about the political commitment of the film, it is important to know that Clark purchased the Attica and the Cleveland footage with the very first funds he was able to raise for the film.

<sup>4</sup> See Steven Isoardi, *Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001) and Steven Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this observation to Kristin Juarez who first consulted Larry Clark's papers at UCLA in the Spring 2014 and noticed the double life of the film. See a map of the film's exhibition history here: <http://bit.ly/16upXPv>.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance, Gary Giddins, "Boiling Point," *Film Comment*, 44, no. 4 (2008): 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 116.

<sup>10</sup> James Tobias, *Sync: Stylistics of Hieroglyphic Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 154.

<sup>11</sup> James Tobias, "Three Lines for *Passing Through*: The Sound, Image, and Haptics of Radical Insight from the Undercommons," in this issue.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Moten advances the idea of the jazz ensemble as the aesthetic unit of the black radical tradition in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 126.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Larry Clark, interview for " Dossier on *Passing Through*" by Alessandra Raengo, San Francisco State University March 19, 2014, available at <https://vimeo.com/liquidblackness/videos/sort:alphabetical/format:thumbnail/>.

<sup>17</sup> My use of the term "fugitive" is inspired both by Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, but also by Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> As Tobias discusses in this issue, this is an important memorializing act toward a young composer killed in a car crash in 1970 at age seventeen.

<sup>19</sup> Tobias, *Sync*, 162. See the *liquid blackness* dossier for some of the album covers that have inspired Clark's aesthetics, <http://passingthroughdossier.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> Larry Clark, oral history interview by Jacqueline Stewart and Christopher Horak, June 2, 2010, and Julie Dash, oral history interview by Jacqueline Stewart, June 8, 2010, both unpublished L.A. Rebellion oral history Project, UCLA Film & Television Archive. See also the *liquid blackness* " Dossier on *Passing Through*," curated by Kristin Juarez, for production stills and contact sheets that suggest Clark's research on sensitometry. In particular, see the close up of Clarence Muse with the handwritten note, "match this contrast." <http://passingthroughdossier.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> Hart Leroy Bibbs, *Manifesto Optksorption* (Framingham, Mass: Wooley the New! Productions, Ltd., 1980). A painter before he became a filmmaker, Clark said his paintings were very layered and thick. Only after he started film school did he realize that he had been trying to make a film all along. Clark, oral history interview.

<sup>22</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> For the idea of sound recording as a form of recalibration of locality see Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2005), 20-30.

<sup>25</sup> The sequence concludes with a shot of magnificent waves that were actually outtakes from Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1956) that Clark acquired from a warehouse in L.A., another instance of proximity between experimental filmmaking and assemblage art.

<sup>26</sup> Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> The presentation of this work in progress at the CURVE (an interactive media facility at Georgia State University), for example, highlighted this type of collaboration. It featured presentations by Lauren Cramer, Kristin Juarez, myself and showcased, among other things, Nedda Ahmed's work on the film's exhibition map.

<sup>28</sup> With Kristin Juarez acting as liaison between the *liquid blackness* research and Professor Dongoski.

<sup>29</sup> For the idea of how soul constructs, demands, and constantly addresses its community, see Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012).