

DRAWING THROUGH



FIGURE 1. *Drawing Through* album cover. Limited pressing LP. Workshop/collaboration between filmmaker Larry Clark and emerging Atlanta-based artists and musicians. A project led by Craig Dongoski, with Alessandra Raengo and Kristin Juarez acting as liaisons. Album cover art by Timothy Short, courtesy of the artist.

Black Study @ GSU

The Album

ALESSANDRA RAENGO

Track 1—Gathering 'Round (the Chatter)

If I were to say, as I have been asked many times, when/where/how the *liquid blackness* journal began, I'd have to answer, around a kitchen table. That was Kristin Juarez's kitchen, in the Kirkwood home she was renting at the time. She was working on the layout of the first-ever issue of our experimental online journal, together with Chris Hunt and Joey Molina, a remarkable team of young scholars and creatives. Kristin was a first-year PhD student in the Moving Image Studies doctoral program at Georgia State University, with a background in curatorial studies from the University of Southern California. Chris was a recent graduate from our bachelor of arts program in film and video production and a musician and filmmaker who had already recorded drumming for Wale's "LoveHate Thing" (President Obama selected Wale's song for his summer playlist the following year). Joey had been in my undergraduate classroom the previous spring and summer. Soon after he began exhibiting original work on gender fluidity in fashion photography in response to the concept of "liquid blackness."¹ Together with my former advisee Dr. Michele Prettyman—my intellectual partner in crime for many years (when we were dreaming big and nobody was listening)—all three had been among my first interlocutors as I was initially tossing around the idea of a research group focused on blackness and aesthetics. They were also some of the early readers of my first book, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*.² It was a Sunday afternoon in December

2013, as I recall, and I delivered a bottle of red wine to show support and gratitude for their work and perhaps to make it a bit less grueling, since I expected it to continue well into the evening.

The first issue, as I have discussed at length elsewhere, was prompted by what I considered the moral obligation to write about the collective experience that had just concluded: our cohosting of the film series “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black American Cinema,” in partnership with the Department of Film and Media Studies at Emory University. (See poster image, fig. 2.) Prompted especially by the department’s chair, Matthew Bernstein, who had approached me about it the previous summer, it unfolded over five weekends and involved teach-ins, a variety of artist talks, and community conversations.³ The call for writing I launched to members of the *liquid blackness* working group expressed our commitment to an emerging archive: a way of giving back and giving thanks to the UCLA archival project from which we had just benefited, by accounting for our experience of watching materials previously difficult to see; and also as a way to begin to reflect on, and therefore assemble, a record of our own collective processes and emerging praxis. The first editorial board formed around this issue. Kristin had organized several community conversations during the L.A. Rebellion Tour. Lauren McLeod Cramer—my advisee at the time and now the coeditor in chief of the journal—had been taking comps, so she had missed many of the events, but not the screening of *Passing Through* (Larry Clark, 1977) or *Emma Mae* (Jamaa

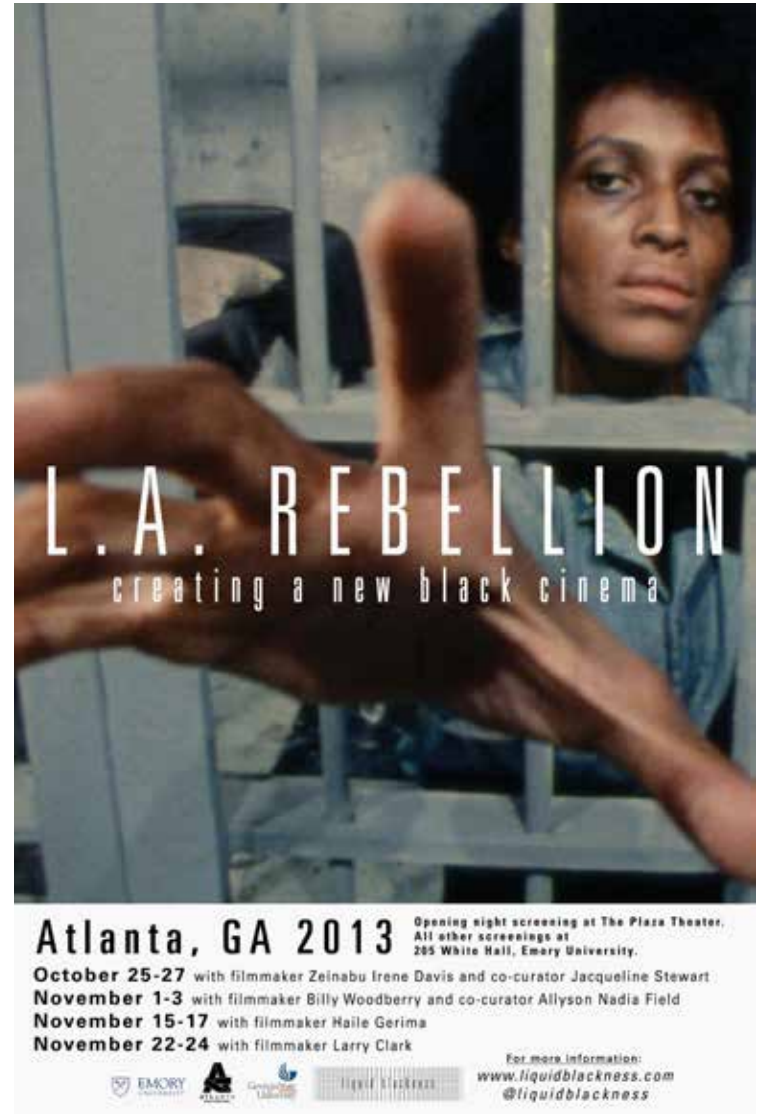


FIGURE 2. “L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema” tour poster, designed by Chris Hunt. Courtesy of the artist. Frame grab from *Child of Resistance* (Haile Gerima, 1972), provided by UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Fanaka, 1976), which she ended up writing about.⁴ Cameron Kunzelman, also my advisee, wrote about Charles Burnett's *My Brother's Wedding* (1983), which played on opening night at the Plaza, courtesy of the Atlanta Film Festival.⁵

Track 2—Flight 17

There is a complex of image, project, praxis, and product—what I will later argue is also importantly a *thing*—that both inspires and guides this introduction: the album that Horace Tapscott and the L.A. Central Avenue musicians, who inspired and are featured in *Passing Through*, endeavor in the film to record independent of the exploitative conditions in the music industry. The musicians gather around the possibility of recording in a manner that will maintain the political and aesthetic vitality of their ensemble. The album, however, will never take shape in the film's diegesis, but its germinal sound comes to the leading musician, Warmack (played by the late Nathaniel Taylor), from both the future and the past in the film's final scene, when Warmack blows on his saxophone and suddenly hears a response to his call.⁶ (See fig. 3.)

The film's story line begins with Warmack coming out of prison. He is trying to find the band's older mentor, his grandfather Poppa Harris (Clarence Muse), to figure out what to do with his current ensemble. At stake are the vital lineage of musical experimentation out of which he comes and the ability to pass it on. He is also trying to reclaim and reinhabit his sound, partly lost during his internment in the Attica Correctional Facility. To be sure, in the last third



FIGURE 3. Warmack hears a response to his sound. Larry Clark, *Passing Through* (1977). Frame grab courtesy of the artist.

of the film, the musicians take matters into their own hands and avenge the death of a band member by killing the music executives responsible for the musician's murder. But Poppa Harris has died, leaving behind only a shaving kit and a riddle that reaffirms the diasporic breadth of black music but that is also, in itself, a living archive.

Miles away the journey is taken by Trane
and the Falcon flies to the land of the Sphinx
guarded by Pharaoh
and the black musicians of Nubia
not yet born

Within the film's diegesis the musicians do not get to record their own album, but the record of their music is nevertheless both kept and magnified in the film itself. Because the film is inspired by and features Horace Tapscott, who at the time was committed to

only playing live music for his community, the film itself becomes the recording of the album not taking shape. *Passing Through* opens with Tapscott and his Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra's performance of "Flight 17" by Herbert Baker, a young musician who had died in a car accident a few years prior to the film's completion, thus offering what at the time was the only recording of Baker's piece of music—except that it is not presented as an album but rather in film form.⁷ Additionally, by design, in its historical existence *Passing Through* mirrors the ephemerality of its music: Clark never sought theatrical, video, or DVD release of his film and always demanded that it be encountered strictly through collective viewings. By enacting, portraying, and requiring ensembles, the film assured its continued formal and political work.⁸ Formally, politically, and throughout its exhibition history, the film 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.

In its attempt to recreate the free-form aesthetics of improvisational music, *Passing Through* fully embraces what during a 2004 talk for Columbia University's Jazz Studies Conference on Romare Bearden, Toni Morrison called the liquidity of the black arts.⁹ She offers the entanglement of the arts in Bearden's work, and particularly jazz, as an example of the black arts' wider organic thinking and practice: black liquidity is the outcome of a constant intermingling between black art forms—that is, understanding or practicing one in terms of the other or thinking of them as al-

"MILES AWAY THE JOURNEY IS TAKEN BY TRANE"

ways already together—as they imagine and enact modes of improvisatory and fugitive freedom.

Track 3—Keeping Record / Record Keeping

Once again, I am trying to learn from *Passing Through*. The film was the focus of an eighteen-month-long experimental collective study that the *liquid blackness* working group undertook between 2014 and 2015 and that has been the inspiration and conceptual model for our immanent and object-oriented methodology ever since.¹⁰ I come back to Clark's film now because I am haunted by the impossible mandate received by the editorial board for this introduction: to "set the record straight" about the beginning of the *liquid blackness* project and the journal as well as to explicate the theoretical and conceptual parameters of the idea of black liquidity. Not only does this mandate brush up against increasingly complicated issues of intellectual property versus collective study, but it also demands distinctions I am unable to make between record keeping, keeping record, keeping receipts.

There is an irreducible tension between the institutional demands of individual accountability and accreditation, on one hand, and the records of com-

WE CAN ONLY ASPIRE TO MAINTAIN A LIVING RECORD, AN UNRULY ARCHIVE

munities whose moral ethos and etiquette require the gathering of a communal archive on the other. I refer to the former as the Books of Empire, to evoke Ian Baucom's discussion of double-entry bookkeeping that haunts and informs his assessment of the entanglement between the rise of finance capital and black liquidation.¹¹ In my case, they are grant applications and budget sheets, annual reports and reviews, promotion files and institutional surveys. The latter, by contrast, are the improvisational, fugitive sounds of ensembles stretching and contracting, forming and dissipating, sometimes at great personal cost. These are sounds that can only be accounted for in continued praxis. Of these, we can only aspire to maintain a living record, an unruly archive.

At the same time, the two are perversely intertwined. While *liquid blackness* began without an institutional mandate, it constantly fought off challenges to its sustainability as well as institutional skepticism about its value and legibility.¹² Thus the Books of Empire might offer a helpful record insofar as they bear the traces of the relevant transactions that have, over time, provided *liquid blackness* with an institutional

"home" and have made it possible for the current version of its journal to come into being.¹³ On the other hand, the archives of communities are much more precarious, because communities are made of relationships and of sometimes intense, and at other times only casual, investments. At times members of the ensemble are pulled in many different directions that are difficult to reconcile: sometimes the institutional setting mistranslates one's commitment to carry out extra-institutional work; at other times collective work can stumble into personal issues and personal attachments to those issues; and other times, some members might not know what instrument they are playing or might never even have heard the music. At all times I have found, for better or worse, that the work of *liquid blackness* is attached to the person who is doing the work and to that person's relationship to blackness. Additionally, my recounting will forever be imprecise because the project grew very rapidly out of necessity: to keep up with institutional processes of valuation—the need to affirm one's existence by pursuing increasingly more ambitious, consequential, and legible projects—meant that rarely did we have the time to fully document what we were doing.¹⁴

Here again, *Passing Through* teaches me a lesson; in its very first frame (see fig. 4), one that dedicates the film to "musicians known and unknown," the film makes clear for us its archival and practical commitment toward what we call "the lineages to come."¹⁵ Thus that the film's diegesis does not show the musicians' album being recorded is ultimately entirely secondary, because the record is already there, at the

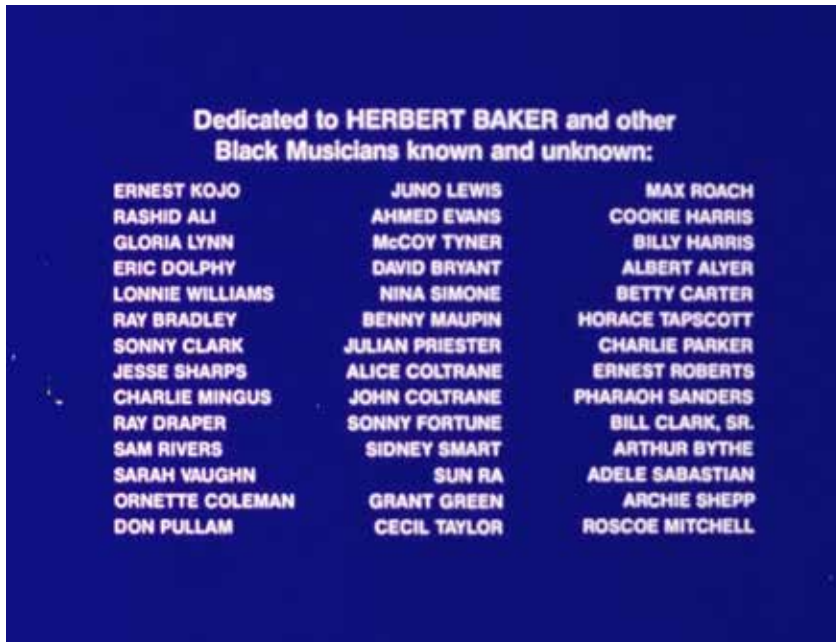


FIGURE 4. Opening image, Larry Clark, *Passing Through* (1977). The film is dedicated to musicians “known and unknown.” Frame grab courtesy of the artist.

film’s opening, as we hear the chatter of the musicians, tuning their instruments and getting ready to play (sound clip 1). Fred Moten singles out a similar moment at the beginning of Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” as the signal of an informality coming into form.¹⁶ But it is a liquid record: both a sound that has passed through film and the passage from informality to form, which does not guarantee the stability or reliability of its outcome. With free-form aesthetics, as Kunzelman put it when we were studying both *Passing Through* and the Black Audio Film Collective, “there is always the chance that this alternative mode of sociality will implode into chaos.” Yet “that

the ensemble works,” I insist, “is proof of its visionary elements.”¹⁷

The ensemble brings together political, aesthetic, and formal questions about the relationship between part and whole, soloist and group, structure and improvisation, cooperation and disruption, but it also poses historiographical and archival problems. Primarily this is because it is a quintessentially jurisgenerative anaoriginary practice.¹⁸ As Moten explains in Arthur Jafa’s 2013 film *Dreams are Colder than Death*, jurisgenerativity does not only refer to the constant invention and renewal of forms, the forging and breaking of rules that, let us say, Miles Davis and



FIGURE 5. Lauren McLeod Cramer performs a longitudinal analysis of *Passing Through's* Attica sequence at the Collaborative University Research and Visualization Environment (CURVE), Georgia State Library, February 2015.

John Coltrane were engaged in night after night, but also to the lawbreaking connected to the prohibition against black assembly—against black gathering.¹⁹

Track 4—Given in Giving (a Withdrawing Object)

Passing Through is formally so audacious that it defies summary; the film's free-form structure moves in multiple directions, sometimes following what Clark has described as accent marks, sometimes enjoying the possibility to rest on a "note" or to develop, in cinematic form, unexpected musical phrasing.²⁰ From an analytic standpoint, *Passing Through* is hard to seize and always in motion (see fig. 5). As much as the film seduces its viewers to reach for it, it also labors to withdraw from their grasp.²¹

As an artifact that existed solely as a 16mm print until the digital transfer performed by the UCLA Film & Television Archive in the spring of 2015, partly prompted by the *liquid blackness* research project, *Passing Through* is even more elusive. A hard-to-see "cult" film, it is a purposefully withdrawing object; yet it maintains an objecthood that is at the same time vulnerable and matter-of-fact. The first reel of the print that Haile Gerima purchased for Howard University was "worn out" in a couple of years, allegedly by two of Gerima's students, possibly Ernest Dickerson and Jafa, who had watched the opening sequence over and over again.²²

As Clark traveled with the film, which circulated nationally and internationally as both an art and a

political work, he met important political figures and intellectuals (Aimé Césaire and Thomas Sankara, among many others).²³ I am always struck by the way a news item I found in Clark's papers brings together the artistic and political life of the film and the filmmaker at that specific time while foregrounding the relationship between "at-hand-ness" and praxis: in Ouagadougou for the FESPACO festival, following President Sankara's request, Clark and other Black American filmmakers "were part of a team that early one morning traveled to a desolate site eight miles from Ouaga . . . to manually lay 200 yards of [railroad] track. Led by Senegalese director [Ousmane] Sembène, they toiled for an hour under the fierce but hazy sun, using iron pincers to lift heavy metal tracks onto a gravel bed" (fig. 6).²⁴ If the filmmaker is an artist, a warrior, a worker, then the film is a call to action, to objection, and to uncompromising creativity. If *Passing Through* is a withdrawing object, it is because, ultimately, it is a thing "given in giving itself."²⁵

Track 5—Black Study (the Offer)

It would be an understatement to say that the very fact that the self-defined, *self-authorized*—as Jafa would say—*liquid blackness* journal became *liquid blackness: journal of aesthetics and black studies* is a rather unexpected outcome.²⁶ The story of this transformation would require an account that cannot be given, because it is the story of an offering that was not for me to give but that I nevertheless could not keep for myself.

Black Studies is not mine to have. I am a for-



FIGURE 6. Filmmakers gathered for the 1985 FESPACO film festival in Ouagadougou lay out railroad tracks at the urging of President Sankara.

eigner within it, but then again, I live a foreigner's life, regardless of my naturalization status. Yet as Michele Prettyman recently reminded me once again, I approached it as an offering that had to be passed on to my students, regardless of who they are. Thus whatever I said we were doing did not stick or matter because I said it—I am unavoidably a faulty communicator—but, rather, it mattered because the offering, which was not mine to give, was too good not to pass on. For "us," an "us" that was beginning to coalesce in the praxis itself—that is, a communal improvisational process of giving ourselves over to "the thing" as well as to the very process of giving ourselves over—what mattered were precisely both the process and the fact of gathering around some-thing.

Although when at least fifteen people came to-

THERE IS NO ENCOUNTER WITH BLACKNESS THAT IS NOT ALSO AN AESTHETIC ENCOUNTER

gether on the eleventh floor of 25 Park Place in late September 2013 to plan our hosting of the L.A. Rebellion film series, we were probably doing black study, the concept itself was not available to me, since I had not yet read Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, which came out the same year. As Moten and Harney explain, it is the praxis that makes study black. It is the investment in process over product, in sociality over credentials, in sharing rather than acquiring, collectives rather than collections.²⁷ Or, as Moten puts it even more sharply during the Q&A following *You are mine. I see now. I'm a have to let you go*, performed at the Hammer Museum in 2018 with Suné Woods and James Gordon Williams—which, thanks to the generosity of the artists, is given an afterlife in this issue—"blackness is an ethical comportment toward the fact that stuff has to go together, a way of existing in a world which is predicated on separating things, codifying things, categorizing things, in the interest of the elimination of most of those things or the accumulation of other of those things."²⁸

Moten explains that Woods's "images of water, black flesh and particularly women in water" foreground the problem of "how stuff goes together" as the consequence of the ecological catastrophe triggered by the transatlantic slave trade and how the goal of their own ensemblic practice is precisely to work out that problem. This, he concludes, is a "church problem."

In "the general balm"—the section of Moten's recent book of poetry, *all that beauty*, republished here—which is a version of the spoken words developed for that same performance, I find echoes of a powerful thread connecting many contributions to this issue: the salinity of black sound as a mode of congregation, or, in Moten's words, the "black study of the water music." At stake is the nearness both of difference and of togetherness ("We near as difference can be, / which is absolutely near. Nothing is all that comes between us"); the haunting call of the body and the "arpeggiation" of the flesh ("What if flesh is the anticipatory arpeggiation of the body. . . ?"; "Our music and our dancing trouble the body into inexistence. We worry lost body till they flesh again"); the intimacy of immersion ("Immersion ruptures solitude no matter what. Even when I'm by myself I'm not. I'm sinking"); and the joint circular breathing of musicians ("Our circular breathing is why the joint is jumping. And all you can do is kill us; you can't even get us on the phone"). Blackness, Moten writes (although in the live performance some of these words are actually Woods's),



FIGURES 7–9. The sound of Warmack’s saxophone reverberates under the piers. Larry Clark, *Passing Through* (1977).
Frame grabs courtesy of the artist.

is arpeggiation
and displacement.
Blackness is swimming,
can’t quite let the water go or be,
we harp on the water.²⁹

Track 6—Salinities of Black Sound

In *Passing Through*, the first place Warmack goes to practice his horn is by the ocean, under the piers. There, he hears a reverb that, however, appears *only on film*, since it occurred in postproduction as Clark was laying down the soundtracks to the scene (see figs. 7–9).³⁰ Retrospectively, this is a stunning moment of Afro-modernity that underlines, yet again, how the “*conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is [black] performance’s . . . ontology and its mode of production.*”³¹ It also implies, like the rest of the film, that black diasporic sound travels by water, or, as John Akomfrah puts it in the interview featured in this issue, the dispersion of the polyrhythmic can only be explained by a liquid movement.³² Similarly, as Ekwo

Eshun suggests with his concept of “liquid Africa,”³³ contemporary artists from the African diaspora (such as Samuel Bazawule, Mati Diop, Yannick Ilunga, Curtis Essel, Grace Wales Bonner, and Harley Weir), who are working across media and genres (photography, fashion, filmmaking, and music video), approach sonic and oceanic archives in a liquid manner whereby “Africa” acts as a sonic and aesthetic reverb. Echoing what Rinaldo Walcott in this issue describes as the “black aquatic,” they practice simultaneously recovery and reinvention in continuous tidalectic moves.³⁴

Sound is central to the imagination of liquidity that emerges in this issue, as it obviously has been for the way *Passing Through* has guided the *liquid blackness* praxis over the past seven years. Sound is perhaps an expression of black salinity, Walcott’s rendering of blackness’s birth (and death) in salt-water as the “foundation of capitalism and post-Enlightenment global life.”³⁵ As Woods, Moten, and Williams articulate: “I can’t breathe under water and I can’t breathe above water.”³⁶ Yet for Erin Christovale,

the curator who helped stage their performance, the “air pockets” they seek prove the otherworldliness of blackness: Black people’s survival, despite the impossibility to breathe.³⁷

Sound has always been the most fugitive, and yet enduring, black aesthetic expression, but when it is claimed specifically as liquid, the emphasis is on a demand for a tangible materiality, a concrete vessel, a mothership—water/salinity for deliverance into a different mode of being.³⁸ Thus when in his reflection “The Unfungible Flow of Liquid Blackness” R. A. Judy homes in on the flow of rap, the liquidity he discusses is counterpunctual to the way sound has been deployed as a tool of extraction and liquidation, in the imposition of noise on board the slave ships.³⁹ He regards the flow of rap as *poiēsis in black*, perhaps a vocal *dance*, if dance, as Thomas F. DeFrantz argues in this issue, is the application of intentionality over motion and modes of mastery over temporality, rhythm, and cadence—maybe what Woods, Moten, and Williams call “harping on the water.” Where they find “air pockets,” DeFrantz finds “watery folds,” bodily motions fully steeped in black liquidity, which he regards as a propensity for moving toward congregation: “We remake ourselves in the ensemble, queerly passing through variance, one, to the next, to the group, to the whole.”⁴⁰ With an essay that soundfully moves through embodied relationships to liquids—sweat, drink, moisten, melt, cry, float, swim—DeFrantz explores how this propensity comes with the anticipation of both pleasure and disaster: the knowledge of how black liquidity has been historically secreted.

Sweat, he writes, is the confirmation of change as possibility, but it is also an object of surveillance and monitoring for profit.

Track 7—Gathering Black Liquidity

Our gatherings were not as dissident and jurisgenerative as those of the musicians in *Passing Through*, but they were nevertheless unruly and unorthodox. Yet while the *actual* gathering was occurring around the L.A. Rebellion Tour, space for the *conceptual* gathering had to be created in order to justify the first one as well as the name I had so recklessly chosen for it.

I don’t have an exact date for the first *liquid blackness* “about” page, but I can tell from invoices that I purchased the *liquid blackness* website domain name in mid-September 2013.⁴¹ Its goal was to offer a rationale for the name of the group and explain in what way we were interested in the conjunction of blackness and aesthetics—that is, the meeting point of Black Studies and aesthetic theory this journal claims as its own focus and archival locus—and, more specifically, to begin to think about blackness as aesthetics. The liquidity of blackness demands it.

There is no encounter with blackness that is not also an aesthetic encounter. Blackness is coiled in an anaoriginary relation with “the” aesthetic, as conceptualized in Kantian aesthetic philosophy, which, as both Moten and David Lloyd show (without saying it), is also a liquid one. Aesthetic philosophy, argues Lloyd, is a regulative discourse of the Human responsible for the exclusion of the Black from the liberal, universal, and disinterested Subject. Its task

ALTHOUGH IT IS GENERATIVE—OR PERHAPS PRECISELY BECAUSE IT IS—BLACK LIQUIDITY IS NOT NECESSARILY A SAFE PLACE, SINCE IT UNAVOIDABLY TEETERS BETWEEN BLACKNESS AND ANTI-BLACKNESS

was to create a space for politics by forging a universal Subject that could be represented by the state.⁴² As it pits aesthetics against anthropology, this “regime of representation” produces a difference that is both utterly external and yet internally necessary for this Subject to come to be. Yet as the invaginated regulation of the lawless power of the Kantian imagination, blackness remains unregulated generativity, a jurisgenerative runaway principle, one that seeps in, infiltrates, and imbues Kant’s own formulation of the universality and disinterestedness of judgments of taste. Blackness, Moten writes, “is the sensible instantiation of the principle of the supersensible.”⁴³ In this capacity—that is, as the negated and discarded generative principle of the imagination that the regime of representation is supposed to regulate and suppress—blackness always engenders its own alternative aesthetic production.

Ultimately, liquid blackness comes out from “under representation” as that which sticks to its underside, no matter the process of abstraction that has engendered it.⁴⁴ This is what makes liquid blackness

more than a concept, or heuristic, but instead a mode of aesthetic gathering, for the way in which its undeniable stickiness and insistent materiality aggregate objects, ideas, methods, and processes around itself. Indeed, from the beginning, for us “liquidity” referred also to the blurring of distinctions between theory, practice, and praxis, a *blur* that has only increased since then, but that is also constantly under institutional threat.⁴⁵

Although it is generative—or perhaps precisely because it is—black liquidity is not necessarily a safe place, since it unavoidably teeters between blackness and anti-blackness.⁴⁶ Liquid blackness, writes De-Frantz, is a type of vigilance that hides and holds back its tears. The list of terms I included in the “about” page—sensuousness, affectivity, formlessness, penetration, fluctuation, modulation, absorption and assimilation, intensity, viscosity, density, slipperiness, elasticity, allure, vibration, unboundedness, virality, channeling, plasticity, organicity, glide—puts pressure on this teetering and homes in on the way liquid blackness inhabits this unreconcilable place.

IF BLACKNESS IS LIQUID IN THE MANY COMPLICATED WAYS DESCRIBED ABOVE, HOW DOES ONE PRACTICE UNATTACHMENT?

In its ambivalence, liquid blackness is abrasive, and unavoidably so. Liquids are expansive and offensive: they occupy space but also adhere, attach, cling. Liquids, like odor and sound, are both fugitive and distributive, and they presuppose micromovements that unfold in unpredictable configurations. Liquids know unboundedness: they fill bodies and the spaces in between. Liquids are shape-shifting and haptic: they collapse distinctions between foreground and background, since any vibrant particle can theoretically touch any other particle, and none of them can be effectively held in place. Liquids are never still, although they might display a perfectly pristine surface.

My list was designed to provoke readers to clarify their position in relation to each term and reflect on their modes of attachment or their desire to float free. And although it has been generative, especially for emerging artists, at times its strategic ambiguity has been read as an expression of my own attachments and unattachments. In this inaugural issue, and specifically in Marina Peterson's engagement with the betweenness of helium, I find a more fully articulated

version of my list's implied critique of modes of proprietary investments to the expected coherence of the subject.⁴⁷

Similarly, to think that liquidity would function as a facile escape for the subject to access a modern fluidity of self-invention or modes of becoming is to misinterpret our aim. Although Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" hovers over this issue,⁴⁸ Walcott makes clear that the "black aquatic" engenders modernity as much as the other way around. "There is no Negro except that there is the liquefaction of modernity," writes Judy; "and there is no liquefaction of modernity without the Negro."⁴⁹ Liquefaction here stands for the extraction of value and cash flow out of the smelting of African bodies aboard the Guinea-men, the galleon ships employed in the transatlantic slave trade, which were among the most advanced technologies of space-time collapse responsible for the production of the "fluid modernity" Bauman describes, albeit without mentioning them. Bauman's liquid modernity can indeed be seen as the birth of a new subject, except that it is more dynamic and plural than the one he imagines. Rather than a subject, this is a self that is not attached to subjectivity and always moving toward the commons.⁵⁰

"Take It to the Bridge"

Walcott is right in tying aesthetics to tidalectics in the sense that even repetition of liquidation might leave a material/aesthetic residue. In this respect, liquid movement is generative because that is where invention lives. In this issue, meditations on this mat-

ter span a range: DeFrantz's watery folds; Judy's rap flows; helium's "betweenness"; the diasporic imagination that sustains Eshun's liquid Africa; the possibilities of the sociogenic principle Christovale finds in the shape-shifting qualities of blackness evoked by the Woods, Moten, and Williams collaboration; the plasticity required to "traverse so-called color lines and social lines,"⁵¹ which Akomfrah explores in *Precarity* (2017), his three-screen installation on Charles "Buddy" Bolden; and, ultimately, what Christovale describes as the "black impulse[s] . . . rooted in collage, assemblage, improvisation, and the slippages and the fluidity of making" in Woods's practice.⁵²

What emerges, for me, are at least three ways in which black liquidity both is harnessed as primitive accumulation and becomes a matrix for aesthetic processes whose modes of abstraction continue to mutate, modulate as they acquire increased sophistication—abstraction broadly understood here as a mode of production of value that is perversely self-sustaining. They are abstraction (in the sense just described), extraction, and secretion.

Liquidity, argues Grant Farred, in an essay that walks us through the "speculative" possibilities of the captive body—regardless of its race or political affiliation—is abstraction that "keeps on giving" because it *passes over* money: in liquidity, "every abstraction begets its own abstraction." Although "there can be, as such, no definitive theory of liquidity," Farred writes, it invites the *thinking* of abstraction, and eventually, unbound mobility; and at times "the force of liquidity is such that it resists movement—in order to collect it-

self."⁵³ The processes of extraction taking place in the Guineamen Judy discusses produce a liquidity that does not require, and in fact discards, any preexisting cultural or aesthetic forms—although it will profit from them, much later, as he discusses, in the contemporary art market, whereby black artwork is a good investment, whether the artist is actually active or not. Secretion is even more perversely ambivalent, because it points to both the eschewing of subjectivity and the cooptation of black affectability by a subject constantly reasserting itself as its beneficiary.⁵⁴ On one hand, by emphasizing moments of willed stillness, Farred focuses on a black liquidity that shuns abstraction in favor of self-secretion into a "'pure' political body": Colin Kaepernick. On the other hand, Peterson's contribution is provocatively haunted by the impulse to cohere around a perceiving subject who thinks of themselves as whole. That is because Peterson establishes a mimetic relationship between the difficulty of thinking the betweenness of helium and the betweenness of the self who attempts to think it. The breach created by the scandalous presence of Christoph Büchel's *Barca Nostra*—the remains of a vessel used for smuggling North African migrants—at the Venice 2019 Biennale discussed by Walcott can be seen in a similar light: the artwork refuses relationality, although it cannot disentangle itself from the liquidity that sustains the art world (i.e., the monetary cost of bringing it to the exhibition) and how this liquidity is produced—that is, the racial roots of its primitive accumulation.

Yet black liquidity continues to gush in the flow of rap, in the animateriality of black sounds and per-

THIS JOURNAL SHOULD BE LIQUIDLY UNDERSTOOD AS A GATHERING; NOT AN OBJECT BUT A THING; NOT A RECORD BUT AN ALBUM AND A LIVING ARCHIVE

formances, in the congregational proclivities of black dance, in the reverbs of a liquid Africa, and in the artistic and curatorial practices that continue to bring forth a black radical imagination.⁵⁵ As Judy puts it, it is a *poiēsis in black*, a performative contradiction instigated by modernity's liquefaction.

Track 8—The Thing (Always Gathered, Never Owned)

Thinking back to the initial “about” page, I now realize that the question I was trying to ask, by perhaps all too explicitly naming the problem, was this: if blackness is liquid in the many complicated ways described above, how does one practice unattachment?⁵⁶ Another way of asking the same question, which I owe to Daren Fowler, managing editor of the *liquid blackness* journal for some of its most important issues, is this: what is “the praxis for the ethics of black liquidity”?⁵⁷

“What if we put blackness in the middle”; “what if we held blackness in balance,” I asked in the 2013 “about” page, “not necessarily to sever it from its lived experience, but in order to confront and come to terms with the many *other* ways in which it exists?” Putting blackness “in the middle” was intended to

offer a concrete visualization of our commitment to clarify our relationship to it.⁵⁸ And although blackness “must be understood in its ontological difference from black people, who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it,” working out modes of nonproprietary relations to blackness, especially when some still have to work through their un-attachment to the project of whiteness, is perhaps the greatest challenge of the *liquid blackness* praxis.⁵⁹

Now I am becoming increasingly convinced that what I was trying to carve out with the first “about” page was a distinction between an attachment to the ethics of the process and an attachment to the “it” of blackness. I also believe that this ethical wedge can only be maintained through collective praxis. This is why the record / the album is so central to this narrative, as much as it is central to *Passing Through's* own reflection on the ethics and politics of “being sent.”⁶⁰

So here I begin to think that maybe our gathering was the *thing*—that is, in Moten's spin on the Heideggerian “thing,” “gathering as contested matter”⁶¹—and how, as a theoretical concept, a commitment to black aesthetics, a practice of black study,

and a praxis community of building, *liquid blackness* partakes of this same thingness. Thus this journal too should be liquidly understood as a gathering; not an object but a thing; not a record in the way the Books of Empire would count it as such, but an album and a living archive—one that, although it might never quite come together, was always just about coming together. Or perhaps, like *Passing Through's* list of musicians known and unknown, was already there the entire time.⁶² ■

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Notes

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- 1 The work I have specifically in mind was called *genderFLOW* (Joey Molina, 2014), exhibited in the month leading up to the *liquid blackness* Symposium “blackness, aesthetics, liquidity,” April 2014, at the Digital Arts and Entertainment Lab’s “Window Project” on Georgia State University’s (GSU) campus. See Romo, “*liquid blackness* Meets the Window Project.”
- 2 Raengo, *On the Sleeve*.
- 3 Raengo, “Encountering the Rebellion.”
- 4 Cramer, “Black Sister’s Reality.”
- 5 Kunzelman, “Playfighting in South Central.”
- 6 See Tobias, *Sync*, 170.
- 7 As James S. Tobias argues, this is an important memorializing act toward a young composer killed in a car crash in 1970 at age seventeen. See Tobias, “Three Lines for *Passing Through*.”
- 8 On Tapscott’s reticence to record, see Widener, *Black Arts West*, 137–38. See also Barbara McCullough, *Horace Tapscott: Musical Griot* (2017).
- 9 Morrison, “Abrupt Stops.”
- 10 For an account of the research project and its methodology, see Cramer and Raengo, “Freeing Black Codes”; and “Events: The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble.”
- 11 Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*.
- 12 *Liquid blackness* began simply under the invitation of my (very enlightened) chair at the time, David Cheshier, who, once I received tenure, encouraged me to imagine the scholarly community of which I wanted to be part. I found this community not among my colleagues but in the classroom and with my current (at the time) and former advisees as well as undergraduate students and community members.
- 13 Funding for this version of the journal comes from GSU’s School of Film, Media & Theatre and the College of the Arts as well as from the generous contributions of early unwavering supporters, such as Professor Louis Ruprecht, William Suttles Chair of Religious Studies and Director of Hellenic Studies at GSU, who is contributing funds from his personal research account.
- 14 Overall, we tried to keep track of the work of the various ensembles in the acknowledgments section that appears at the end of each journal issue, which we affectionately called the “end credits.” Ultimately, although we were terrible at keeping receipts (I am really the main culprit here), this does not mean that we didn’t keep receiving.
- 15 We develop this idea in Raengo and Cramer, “The Unruly Archives of Black Music Video,” the introduction to the In Focus Dossier “Modes of Black Liquidity: Music Video as Black Art,” which I coauthored and coedited with Cramer, who became my primary

interlocutor and sounding board within the *liquid blackness* group beginning in 2016 and is now the coeditor in chief of this journal.

16 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 129.

17 Kunzelman, while researching for our Black Audio Film Collective Film and Speakers Series (pers. comm., summer 2014). For more on this exchange, see Raengo, "Passing Through Film," 13–14.

18 See also Raengo, "Jurisgenerativity of a Liquid Praxis."

19 "We have been placed in a position that requires us to break the law, to disobey," Moten explains in Jafa's film, and thus blackness displays an irreducible relation between lawmaking and law-breaking, legality and criminality. I discuss this more extensively in Raengo, "Dreams are Colder than Death."

20 The title of one of the sections for this journal is precisely inspired by the function that "accent marks" play in Clark's film. See Clark, "Interview."

21 Because of its formal properties and its demand for "live," collective viewing, traditional close analysis of the film is neither possible nor desirable. Thus prompted by the circumstances of a public presentation of the film in February 2015, which took place in GSU library's Collaborative University Research and Visualization Environment (CURVE), which is equipped with a long screen, Cramer developed a longitudinal analysis of the Attica sequence. See Cramer, "Passing Through: A Methodology." I thank Louis Ruprecht for suggesting the difference between *grasp* and *reach*.

22 *Passing Through's* influence is particularly visible in Dickerson's cinematography for Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), and the film's approach to the liquidity of the black arts has been pivotal in Jafa's early conceptualization of his idea of "Black Visual Intonation." See Clark, "Interview"; and Jafa, "Black Visual Intonation."

23 Thanks to Kristin Juarez for the initial insight about *Passing Through's* circulation as an art and political film. See the exhibition map prepared by Nedda Ahmed with the *liquid blackness* research group, tracing all known exhibitions of the film up to 2018 ("Passing Through: Exhibition History").

24 Borsten, "Lights, Camera, Africa," 26.

25 On the thingness of blackness, see Moten, "Case of Blackness." See also my discussion of "curat[ing] for form [when the] object is missing" in the introduction to Raengo, "Jurisgenerativity of a Liquid Praxis," 132–36.

26 Jafa and Bell, "Work of Kahlil Joseph."

27 Furthermore, as Jared Sexton reminds us, "1) all thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might be best conceived of as black thought and, consequently, 2) all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies" ("Ante-Anti-Blackness").

28 These statements are made in the context of framing the transatlantic slave trade as an "ecological disaster, which is much deeper than any framework we use to valorize individual achievement as the measure of valor or freedom," so much so that "if there is a liberatory force to black social life [it] is not whether we have become president or professors, but whether the capacity of the earth to sustain human life would be maintained." For Moten, "images of water, black flesh and particularly women in water" foreground that ecological problem "of how stuff goes together which assumes the irreducible fact of stuff going together" (*You are mine*).

29 Moten, "the general balm," 104–5.

30 Raengo, "Passing Through Film."

31 Moten, *In the Break*, 5. On the Afro-modernity of reproduced sound, see Weheliye, *Phonographies*.

32 Raengo, "Jurisgenerativity of a Liquid Praxis," 136.

33 Eshun, "Liquid Africa."

34 Walcott, "Black Aquatic." On tidalectics, see Brathwaite, *Arivants*. See also an engagement with tidalectics already published in the *liquid blackness* journal: McDougall, "'Water Is Waiting.'"

35 Walcott, "Black Aquatic," 66.

36 Woods, Moten, and Williams, *You are mine*.

37 Christovale, "Conversation."

- 38 Christovale discusses black shape-shifting otherworldliness as an example of what Sylvia Wynter, after Frantz Fanon, called the “sociogenic principle” (quoted in Christovale, “Conversation,” 93).
- 39 Judy, “Unfungible Flow.”
- 40 DeFrantz, “dancing among the watery folds,” 113.
- 41 Internally, this became known as the first “manifesto,” a term I now repudiate, even though a colleague recently mentioned that all I write are manifestos. If that’s what it is, I count two: the first is the “about” page published on the *liquid blackness* website in early fall 2013 and reprinted two years later in a volume about Mark Bradford’s 2015 exhibition *Scorched Earth* (see Raengo, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity”; and Raengo, “*liquid blackness—A Research Project*”). The list of terms was supposed to function evocatively, particularly for artists who might have been exploring in their work modes of unmooring blackness from the body and the subject so that they (blackness, the body, and the subject) could be momentarily addressed in their own terms. The second “manifesto” is the call for papers for the journal issue “Aesthetics of Suspension,” meant to put the first one in a broader context of ethics and praxis. See “Call for Papers”; and Raengo, “Holding Blackness.”
- 42 Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 3.
- 43 Moten, *Stolen Life*, 13
- 44 Lloyd, *Under Representation*.
- 45 Moten, *Black and Blur*.
- 46 *Liquidity*, for me, performs a similar function as *fungibility* does in Tiffany Lethabo King’s recent book, *The Black Shoals*: sometimes the same (abstractive, extractive, and secretive) word—*fungibility* in her case, *liquidity* in mine—can also harbor the possibility of fugitivity. The work that I think has to be done, then, is to recognize (1) the dangerous ambiguity of this fact; and (2) the complicated entanglements between one possibility and the other.
- 47 Peterson, “Moving Between.”
- 48 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
- 49 Judy, “Unfungible Flow,” 30–31.
- 50 See DeFrantz, “dancing among the watery folds.”
- 51 Raengo, “Jurisgenerativity of a Liquid Praxis,” 136.
- 52 Christovale, “Conversation,” 95.
- 53 Farred, “*Daseinstufe*,” 41–42.
- 54 See Raengo, “Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity.”
- 55 For “animateriality” see Moten, *In the Break*, 18.
- 56 I thank D Jones for reminding me that sometimes the answer is in the question—a reflection he made after Moten’s response to his question at Moten and Harney, “University.”
- 57 Fowler, “To Erotically Know,” 45. Fowler was the managing editor for *liquid blackness* 3, no. 6, “Black Ontology and the Love of Blackness,” inspired by Jafa’s 2013 film *Dreams are Colder than death*, and for *liquid blackness* 4, no. 7, “Aesthetics of Suspension,” inspired by Kahlil Joseph’s work.
- 58 Eventually, we called this “holding blackness in suspension,” which we explored as practice, praxis, and aesthetics through a research project on Kahlil Joseph’s work. Within *liquid blackness* issue 4, no. 7, see esp. the engagement with Joseph’s up-ending of the architecture of anti-blackness in Cramer, “Icons of Catastrophe.”
- 59 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*.
- 60 I develop the idea of “being sent” more fully in a recent essay on Bradford Young’s *Black America Again* (Raengo, “*Black America Again*”). Also see Moten, *Stolen Life*, particularly the chapter “Erotics of Fugitivity,” where he discusses Betty’s case as a “non-performance,” an improvisation against the very terms of contract law, “fugitivity’s irreducible futurity,” “the promise that we never promised.” As he notes, the Latin *promittere* mobilizes the idea of sending forth: “to have been sent forth: to have been sent . . . by history. We are sent in history, pour out of its confinements. We send history. History comes for us, to send us to history and to ourselves” (259–60).

61 Moten, "Case of Blackness," 182.

62 Truth be said, in 2016, an album was produced: a limited-press LP in a spin-off project to our research project "The Arts and Politics of the Jazz Ensemble" led by Craig Dongoski, professor of art and design at GSU (see fig. 1). The album's tracks feature the sounds of a workshop/collaboration between Larry Clark and emerging Atlanta-based artists and musicians who in turn had made work inspired by *Passing Through*. The cover art is by one of the students, Timothy Short. See "Events: The Arts and Politics."

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