



FIGURE 1: EDDIE WARMACK IN *PASSING THROUGH* (DIRECTED BY LARRY CLARK, 1977), FRAME GRAB.



# Three Lines for *Passing Through*: The Sound, Image, and Haptics of Radical Insight from the Undercommons

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## I. Matter, Memory, and Futurity in *Passing Through*: Larry Clark's Classic Film as Study of a Musical Undercommons

Watch closely as you listen: in the final moments of Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1976), Eddie Warmack (Nathaniel Taylor) improvises a saxophone solo backed by a wavering drone in lower sonic registers. As a medium shot holds on his profile, a wash of light delineates the planes of his gently moving face (Figure 1). The effect is to superimpose a glowing lightning bolt over his profile, before a close-up shows a single eye suddenly opening—Warmack “waking up,” at the center of a circle within the frame. After Warmack has this flash of insight, a prior scene from the film appears in the same circular frame. We see a flashback of Warmack's grandfather and mentor, Poppa,

teaching him a lesson, the meaning of which has been deferred until this sequence. Next, we see a montage of portraits of historical figures crucial to various moments of resistance and liberation politics (including Kwame Nkrumah and other leaders of Africa's de-colonization struggle). The musician's awakening here makes explicit what had only been an implicit argument of the film to this point: the soundtrack of *Passing Through* has provided the guiding frame for the film's comparison of the radical musician and the political radical to prove their common cause.<sup>1</sup> In other words, in *Passing Through*, the historical development of free jazz in the post-war U.S. is placed alongside the political transformations of Africa's liberation struggles. Attending to this blaze of insight and the memory work it illuminates means that we may remember the meanings of jazz in

different terms than those in which it has often been advertised: rather than simply as the musical output allotted to a select few individual geniuses, we see the historical struggle for a renewed music in a larger homology with the struggle for a renewed political identity, one not only national but global.

Warmack's struggle for both the memory and future of jazz as a site of radical political theory and practice traces, in the cinematic medium, the kinds of material transformations of consciousness and collectivity that Angela Davis sees at work in early twentieth century Blues women's song and performance. “Through the blues,” Davis argues, “Black women were autonomously able to work out—as audiences and performers—a working class model of womanhood.” This gendered consciousness, mediated in modern

cultural forms like the blues, Davis argues, “transformed collective memories of slavery as it worked with a new social construction of love and sexuality.”<sup>2</sup> In *Passing Through*, a gendered transformation of historical memory plays out in Warmack and Maya's relationship, he in search of a new sound to be made of historical memory, for the future of the music, she in search of a new image similarly historically grounded and similarly holding futural potential (Figure 2). Through each character, distinct strands of Africana and Afro-diasporic struggle intersect: while Warmack works through traumatic memories associated with largely national sites of struggle, Maya offers a historical and visual link to pan-African struggle.

Maya's role as both advertising artist and social photographer also suggests a qualification with

**“WE SEE THE HISTORICAL STRUGGLE FOR A RENEWED MUSIC IN A LARGER HOMOLOGY WITH THE STRUGGLE FOR A RENEWED POLITICAL IDENTITY, ONE NOT ONLY NATIONAL BUT GLOBAL.”**

regards to Davis’ observations about blues as memory. An important part of this film’s achievement is its audiovisual depiction of free jazz evoking a politics of de-colonization that is subnational, national, and transnational, and that thus counters the industrial politics of the Hollywood sensorium’s global reach. So *Passing Through*’s visual style, its remarkable narrative and the affective powers of its soundtrack all re-frame the way the cinema synchronizes jazz sound

with moving images. More than re-performing and renovating historical memory is at stake here; also at stake is the *mediatization* of Black music’s capacities for transforming memory. Beyond the political import of how Black music has helped to transform and renovate historical memory, *Passing Through* also asks us to consider the inscription of memory in a cinematic form (that is, as media memory) which also requires radicalization. The film’s double achievement in its depiction

of musical insight is this: not only does it set a feature-length film to a groundbreaking jazz soundtrack but more importantly it aligns the musical metamorphoses with larger political transformations, all while breaking with the stereotypical conventions of jazz depiction in audiovisual media. *Passing Through* subjects audiovisual composition and reception to the imperatives of Black memory and futurity in ways similar to those Davis argues animate Blues songwriting and listening.



Davis’ discussion of blues memory, then, informs my understanding of *Passing Through*, as a study of the ways in which the indexicalities, virtualities, and haptics of audiovisual media may be instrumentalized in the interest of elucidating the classical problem of putting intellection, affect, and memory—here specifically related as “insight”—on screen and speaker. The film mediates historical memories of both bondage and autonomy, as Davis observes of Blues songs, but it also studies and radicalizes the *mediatization* of such memories as they have been expropriated by industrial cinemas.

(LEFT) FIGURE 2:  
Maya (Pamela Jones) unknowingly photographs the killing of one of the band members in *Passing Through* (Directed by Larry Clark, 1977), frame grab.

## “AT STAKE IS THE MEDIATIZATION OF BLACK MUSIC’S CAPACITIES FOR TRANSFORMING MEMORY.”

Perhaps the film’s multi-perspectival, antiphonic, back-and-forth exchanges—between ensemble and soloist, between Warmack and Maya, between Poppa’s memory or Oshun’s vision, between autonomous musical ensemble and Hollywood media bondage—can be located

on the West African cultural continuum Davis argues is the appropriate cultural, historical site at which to situate Blues lyric. Yet when oracle Oshun tells Warmack that he is to “slay the dragon,” Warmack’s quest also reinscribes the Black searcher into cinema history’s spectacular dragon-slaying adventurisms, defiantly breaking those conventions.<sup>3</sup> The “dragon” Warmack must slay is media industry control of cultural expression and memory, rather than a visual symbol of the individual’s sublimation to a dominating social order.

*Passing Through*’s counter-mediatization of historical and media memory plays out significantly in the character Maya, the rebelling visual artist who prompts Warmack’s closing insight. For Black music to become autonomous, vital, creative, and properly historical, it must

stand with, struggle for, even act as an audiovisual synecdoche of the communicability of radical Black politics in both locally situated and transnational modalities. As a study of critical insight joining radical intellection with radical affection so as to renew memory, *Passing Through* worries through an additional register of history: that of media memory in addition to personal or cultural memory.

As a study of insight, *Passing Through* anticipates major problems in contemporary thought. For example, the film’s relation of insight to liberatory experience arguably supersedes the determination of thought as requiring differentiation from action in Jean-Luc Nancy’s probing of the nature of liberatory experience.<sup>4</sup> Depicting critical insight as necessary for historicizing and memorializing musical labor, on one

## “THE ‘DRAGON’ WARMACK MUST SLAY IS MEDIA INDUSTRY CONTROL OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION AND MEMORY.”

hand, and for cultural innovation and political transformation, on the other, the film also demonstrates how a Black *instrumental* voice, as well as the Black *singing* voice, can, as Lindon Barrett has shown, interrupt the value regimes that diminish, marginalize, or destroy Black thought and action.<sup>5</sup> Insight here crosses aesthetic sense and political materiality; sonic disruption and historical memory are convoked in stylistic transformation as thought and action proceed in some shared, indeterminate ratio before finally fading to black.

As a musical study of the cinematic exposition of a mode of insight whose critical power enfolds historical memory with political futurity, *Passing Through* is a signal instance of freeing liberation histories from industrial or academic sites of containment and reduction. Even now, its play of ensemble-belonging and solo-innovation devote audiovisual resources towards articulating a complex politics of memory often refused representational relevance. In that, it models how a “refusal of what has been refused,” as Fred Moten

and Stefano Harney propose, may give rise to “an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question.”<sup>6</sup>

### II. Warmack’s Sound

The auditory, visual, and haptic insight that opens Warmack’s eyes to the larger meanings of his music follows from the film’s opening dedication: to “Herbert Baker” and Black musicians everywhere. That dedication memorializes unknown “local” figures as part of projecting Black music and Black cinema as properly historical and

## “PASSING THROUGH WORRIES THROUGH AN ADDITIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORY: THAT OF MEDIA MEMORY IN ADDITION TO PERSONAL OR CULTURAL MEMORY.”

global projects, recasting the radical, local musical ensemble as capable of registering world historical transformation. At the same time, precarious local musical production, by virtue of the primacy of the film's soundtrack, is recorded so that it won't soon be forgotten. The film's dedication to Herbert Baker and to other “Black musicians known and unknown,” and the film's central concern with Warmack's nomadic mentor Poppa, make clear that the film's larger concern in positing musical

innovation in terms homologous to political revolution requires placing the tensions between the musical ensemble and the soloist within the specific context of the theory and practice of Black Arts movements.

Recent biographical research allows us to see the film's conceptual relation of contemporary to non-contemporary Afro-diasporic cultural production in terms of specific local actions, sites, and events. For instance, the film's initial homage to Herbert Baker, a pianist, composer,

and bandleader killed in 1970, continues with the use of a Baker composition on the soundtrack. In so doing, the film echoes a prior dedication: Horace Tapscott's 1972 course at the University of California, Riverside that celebrated the recently deceased Baker: “[O]ur emphasis is on the unknowns, and we'd like for them to become known at least to the people that are close to them. And Herbert Baker was definitely one of the greatest unknowns ever known.”<sup>7</sup> Known or unknown, local or globally celebrated, the musical

ensemble as site of memory and futurity means that it is also a fugitive site, a kind of “undercommons” for political work in the guise of musical work. In this way, *Passing Through* presents a close study of the musical instrumentalization of insight so that its narrative may operate through thought and feeling through both local and global material cultures.

As Moten and Harney's discussion of the “undercommons” makes clear, the question of memory and futurity is not simply one of making audible or visible; the communicability of the undercommons may be haptic.<sup>8</sup> Here, too, the film conceptualizes the haptic in ways that recalls specific, local practices. Michael Wilcots, remembering a 1971 Riverside Community College performance with Tapscott and members of the UGMAA (Union of God's Musicians and Artists of Ascension), describes

Roland Rahsaan Kirk's working in terms of haptic communicability: “Rahsaan would walk around and throughout the band touching the bell of his horn to each player, and as he did the players would begin to shake and tremble from the vibration of his playing.”<sup>9</sup> In *Passing Through*, this haptic dimension of musical communicability throws Warmack out of balance as he tries to regain a place in the ensemble that he is not quite ready for yet. Repeatedly, as Warmack tries to find his musical voice, we hear something like a droning vibration that throws him off from the work of the ensemble, a kind of haptic disturbance that doesn't so much place him within the present tense of the ensemble but pushes him out of it. This vibrating wave of sound overcomes him and carries Warmack away from his immediate environs in musical fugue states that break with linear time, prompting Warmack

## “THE COMMUNICABILITY OF THE UNDERCOMMONS MAY BE HAPTIC.”

to recall forgotten memories or to bring him an asubjective, futural knowledge of events happening elsewhere, including, most crucially, Poppa's death. During scenes of these fugue states, while we revisit the Attica prison uprising, or see Poppa's funeral attended by bickering relatives concerned more with material inheritance than cultural legacy or renewal, Warmack begins



to understand what the music of the ensemble must do. (And not only Warmack; in another, similar narrative flight, a musician shares his own near-death experience from drug addiction, and of being reborn to the sound of Poppa's horn.) In the film's musical flights, then, sonic disruption traces and materializes, by turns, traumatic memory and prophetic anagogy, which coincide and commingle in the final sequence in which an undercommons renovating and re-inscribing musical memory also becomes a site for reproducing the meanings of political transformation.

### III. Maya's Vision

In modeling critical insight in the way that it does, *Passing Through* is very much of its time, and the historical materials it deploys are key to understanding its lessons. For example, the closing images picturing Warmack or Poppa at the center of a record label also occupied by political revolutionaries specifically recalls *DIG*, the Eldridge Cleaver recording that similarly placed Cleaver's image at the center of the label, an image that was used in advertisements of the record as "revolutionary literature" (Figure 3). But these images in the film are the result of the insight Warmack has gained in woodshedding not simply his music but also his life and memory. Since Poppa has in fact gone missing, the crucial visual material that will support Warmack's musical insight must come from someone else.

Enter Maya (Pamela Jones), Warmack's romantic interest and his counterpart as cultural worker, but in the visual rather than the sonic domain. While Warmack attempts to regroup with his ensemble and renew his musical virtuosity, Maya takes photographs, designs album art and advertising. In her virtuosity with visual materials, Maya artfully renders visual aspects of the musical undercommons, helping to piece together its histories, practices, and theoretical and affective implications. Maya's role emphasizes, too, that a social-cultural memory and visuality adequate to radical sound and listening are as important in transforming jazz aesthetics and production as a political project as is the sound of the ensemble itself. To understand that radical music can be made radically political, sound and image must be viewed as historical projects in their own right that

can be aligned with larger political projects. Through Maya's artistic or documentary vision, *Passing Through* insists on local, national, and transnational dimensions of its study of critical Black insight, while the film's Los Angeles setting specifically invokes the Watts Rebellion of 1965, its repetitions, and its aftershocks and afterlives.

Maya's observations, photographs, and drawings not only provide the images that will help Warmack instrumentalize his musical voice, but also orient the narrative towards a specific set of historical materials and media intertexts that broaden the film's materials and resources from those limited to Southern California cultural activism or Black Panther demands. Maya's biography evokes, in some ways, the historical biography of Maya Angelou. In the film, Maya's deceased husband is

(LEFT) FIGURE 3: Eldridge Cleaver's *DIG* vinyl release: detail from a page of advertisements of "revolutionary literature," *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, July 7, 1970, 22



(LEFT) FIGURE 4:  
Warmack and Maya discuss their  
different outlooks in *Passing  
Through* (Directed by Larry  
Clark, 1977), frame grab.

described as a documentarian of African decolonization struggles. A musician, dancer, writer, poet, Angelou also worked as an editor of the radical *African Review* in Egypt from 1961-62, and lived with exiled Pan-African Congress member Vusumzi Make of South Africa before moving to Ghana to take a university teaching position. Just as Maya quits her advertising job, Angelou had worked in Watts doing door-to-door "Random Research" tasked to ask southern L.A. housewives about "dishwashing Dove and Bold and Crisco" but finding instead "hardworking women and hard-thinking men."<sup>10</sup> A few weeks into this market research position, in August 1965, Watts rebelled; Angelou drove down to witness this historic event, narrowly escaping arrest on the first occasion, more calmly and critically observing on the second. Having quit her temp job in market

research, she would later revisit Watts, demystifying the rebellion, countering its stereotypical reporting in the news media, and holding forth on the lessons she felt the upheavals in Watts, Newark and Detroit in 1965 continued to hold for the future in her 1968 KQED television series *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, even as she was recovering from, and reflected on, the April 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

If Maya introduces to *Passing Through* the larger political dimension of the decolonization struggle contemporaneous with the rise of free jazz music to the otherwise largely sub- and counter-national Black history traced by Warmack in his quest to recover his sound, then the power of her challenge to Warmack mirrors the achievements of Black feminists like Angelou.<sup>11</sup> That is, if Warmack's

search is for a transformed style of belonging and of individuation apposite to new political demands for autonomy being made subnationally, nationally, and transnationally, Maya's reflects feminist concerns with the ethical capacities to be engaged through mass-mediation of those demands. When we see the photos of figures like Ghana's Nkrumah in the closing montage, we can understand that this montage sequence relays, in part, feminist insight crucial to the transformed character of Black aesthetics and politics otherwise heard through Warmack's recovered sound.

While *Passing Through* thus relates in an important way to the revised interest in post-Civil Rights era narrative "sites of slavery"—and its music, thematics, and materials suggest a depiction of the musical ensemble as a potential site for

re-conceptualizing the *demos*—its concern with subnational, national, and transnational registers really asks us to think about modes of radical belonging across these registers.<sup>12</sup> As Kevin Gaines observes, what was, in retrospect, at stake in the African-American ex-patriot community's residency in Ghana was the emergence, under the influence of both Civil Rights struggles and Ghanaian Pan-Africanism, of new conceptions of African American belonging whereby demands for national citizenship would be re-cast in terms like "transnational" notions of citizenship.<sup>13</sup> These are modalities

of belonging founded in (and transforming) alternatives to national and nationalist citizenship formation, and specifically countering the U.S. liberal notions of citizenship that co-opt the radical insights and political projects associated with the broader concepts and critiques of historical and futural belonging traced in *Passing Through*. Today the tensions of such potentially radical modes of belonging and individuation, along with the power of historicization adequate to its articulation, seem largely to have been occupied by the pseudo-democratization of the Internet, web, and social media.

Perhaps that is why *Passing Through* seems at once so fresh and yet so familiar today. If we fail to see the way the *Passing Through* makes a study not only of transformations of historical memory but also of modes in which we mediatize historical memory, perhaps that is because the work this film did in its own moment is exactly the kind of work we are pressed into doing—and yet may become distracted from achieving—in re-thinking and re-enacting the work of radical belonging at the global interface of the local digital screen. ■

<sup>12</sup> Going back to Fritz Lang's 1924 blockbuster, *Die Nibelungen*, in which Siegfried must slay a dragon to reap its metamorphic powers—and also, of course, to Lang's operatic predecessors, Wagnerian and otherwise.

<sup>13</sup> Consider Jean-Luc Nancy on "the experience of freedom," in which he draws back from just such a gesture of thinking feeling: "I would have liked, and it would have been necessary, for this work to have been able to go further—I do not mean only in analysis or problematization, but actually to the point of withdrawing and putting under erasure all its discourse into material freedom. I could have been tempted to make you hear music now, or laughter, or cannon shots taken here and there in the world, or moans of famine, shrieks of revolt—or even to present you with a painting, as we find in Hegel when the young girl presents the outstanding products of ancient art and the divine places that the gods have left. Quite clearly, this would be temptation itself, the cunning abdication of thought into the immediate, into the "lived," into the ineffable, or into the praxis and art designated as the others of thought. On the contrary, it is a question of returning praxis to thinking." See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press [1988] 1993), 156-157. *Passing Through* arguably proceeds precisely where Nancy retreats.

<sup>14</sup> Lindon Barrett, *Seeing Double: Blackness and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), 96.

<sup>16</sup> Steven L. Isoardi, and Michael Dett Wilcotts, "Black Experience in the Fine Arts: An African American Community Arts Movement in a University Setting," in *Current Research in Jazz* 6, (2014). Available at: <http://www.crj-online.org/v6/CRJ-BlackExperience.php> [downloaded June 15 2015]. Unpaginated.

<sup>17</sup> Moten and Harney, 98.

<sup>18</sup> See Isoardi and Wellcotts as cited above; unpaginated.

<sup>19</sup> Maya Angelou, *A Song Flung Up To Heaven* (Random House: New York, 2002), 60.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, in important ways, the closing "liberation montage" of *Passing Through* revises and extends a similar, more nationally oriented "liberation montage" which Angelou narrates in song in the historical episode of *Black's, Blues, Black!* I will explore this comparison in more detail in future work.

<sup>21</sup> Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Gaines, *African Americans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2012), 7.

<sup>1</sup> James Tobias, *Music, Image, Gesture: The Graphical Score and the Visual Representation of Music in Cinema and Digital Media* (Ph.D. Thesis), University of Southern California, 2001; David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 322-325; James Tobias, *Sync: Stylistics of Hieroglyphic Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010). I have read this image as evocatively suggesting a record label: Warmack's sound not simply as newly found, but newly inscribed in material, musical history. In conversation with Alessandra Raengo, Larry Clark has said that his intent was not to portray a vinyl recording in this scene: still, reflexively, Warmack's sound here is recorded: the soundtrack recording so important to the film itself. In making the claim that the film's narrative speaks as much to history as to cinema's mediation of history, I am interested in reading the film for its considerable critical and conceptual affordances to generate critical readings of the political valences of Black music.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1998), 47.