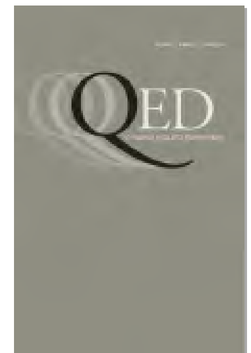
What Might Be Bullets, Fireworks, or Balloons: Repertoires of More than Survival in Cassils's *103 Shots* and Lyle Ashton Harris and Thomas Allen Harris's *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994*



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FORUM
Queer Trans Culture and Invention Beyond Visibility: Experiencing Cassils

What Might Be Bullets, Fireworks, or Balloons: Repertoires of More than Survival in Cassils's *103 Shots* and Lyle Ashton Harris and Thomas Allen Harris's *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994*

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Figure 1. Still from 103 Shots. Cassils, 103 Shots, 2016. Single channel video with sound, runtime 2:35 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

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In June 2016 Cassils wrote of their inspiration for their newest work, *103 Shots:* "Following the recent mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, I was struck by the testimony of one of the survivors, a man who said one of the reasons he did not react immediately to the gunshots was that he initially perceived them as the celebratory noises of 'fireworks or balloons popping.'"[1] In the context of 2016 San Francisco Pride, fewer than two weeks after the Pulse massacre, Cassils gathered over 200 volunteer performers to stage *103 Shots* in San Francisco's Dolores Park. In the short black and white film, over the accelerating pops of what might be bullets, fireworks, or balloons, we listen to and watch bodies come into contact over Cristy Michel's soundtrack of echoing cement, pulsing synthesizer, and whirling helicopter blades.

At first, in the camera's tightness, we can only apprehend sudden jerks of torso skin. As the brutal sound continues to intensify in its repetition, the camera moves outward to reveal the faces of its participants and the bulging surfaces of balloons jammed between their bodies. In brief flashing video clips, we witness these performers endeavor to stretch and slam each balloon to its obliviating breaking point. One couple harnesses the exploding energy of the pop to thrust their hips into forceful collision. Another holds their lips together tightly in staunch refusal of being torn away as the force of the bursting latex briefly expands the space between their chests. A couple giggles in embarrassment as they wait to embrace their balloon; an outstretched arm slaps what might be a satin sheet, or merely the photographer's backdrop; shirtless folks pose defiantly in the feathered capes, leather straps, and striped suspenders of Pride.

When members of this forum first gathered to discuss Cassils's work, I was most struck by the ways that Cassils demands alternatives to the representationalism of our most visible queer and trans political appeals. In the visual culture of these mainstream LGBTQ political deployments, images of queer and trans people function symbolically: visual codes of queerness are tasked to reveal something essential about queer interiorities with the attendant promise that public confession in the form of visibility will set us free. As others within this forum note, Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton unpack a cruel and fundamental irony of trans representation within their edited volume *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility:* given that the oft-lauded "transgender tipping point" simultaneously marks a rise in anti-trans violence, only those who are already primed to benefit from white, middle-class, and able-bodied normativities are positioned to thrive when visuality is configured as the "primary path" to political justice.[2]

In the context of a diverse set of public mournings of the Pulse tragedy—a public execution of mostly queer, mostly Latinx men—identity emerges not through the kinds of individual enunciations of internal truths that might be

acutely apprehended by a camera but through tactical repertoires of survival: embodied techniques of traversing risky terrains of visibility and belonging. If *103 Shots* reminds us to think about enactments of identity differently, it is precisely in the way Cassils captures ongoing and unsettled processes of emergence that are pervaded, but not fully determined, by the threat and consummation of violence. In this article, I attend to *103 Shots* as documentary footage of such processes of becoming as a strategic form of minoritarian performance. I move from my reading of *103 Shots* to *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994,* a triptych of photographs by Lyle Ashton Harris in collaboration with his brother Thomas Allen Harris.[3] Here, in a series of three still frames, the Harris brothers likewise enact partnered intimacy in the sight(s) of guns. Across both works, I attempt to reengage the embodied repertoire in the face of visual logics that might arrest these works as merely mimetic representations and their political possibilities as confined to the well-trod terrains of visibility politics.

Rather than simply abandoning identity, encounters with these works with an attentivity to embodied performance can engender a renewed focus on the techniques and practices through which minoritarian subjects-as-bodies endeavor to matter in the context of forces that seek to eradicate them. Cassils's filmic portraits in *103 Shots,* for instance, provide us momentary glimpses into patterned intimacies as tactics of mattering. Here, the Dolores Park performers display the ways they have learned to hold their bodies in rehearsed anticipation of pleasure and pain in relationship to each other. We witness the methods through which they accomplish something like community or ecstasy in the fractures of sexualized, racialized, and gendered terror and techniques of endurance. Each balloon pop occurs over the refrain of the irregular rat-a-tat of the gun shot, a soundscape for their practices of survival that provides both punctum and constancy to these dogged repertoires of staying alive. Mattering, in the double meaning intended by Judith Butler, will always be a process of both becoming material and socially legible, an emergence made performatively meaningful within the social frameworks we name as identity.[4] Mattering bodies, in relationship to other bodies, are not the inevitable material outcomes of something internal and ahistorical; rather, they are both accomplishments of practices of survival and deft navigations of socially enforced interpolations.

Diana Taylor calls such repertoires "acts of transfer," ways of preserving and transmitting culture in the face of state-sponsored and hegemonically reinforced programs of genocide.[5] For those minoritized by logics of racism, homophobia, sexism, and nationalism, such repertoires of survival are forged in the context of complex identifications and systems of cultural inheritance that don't map evenly onto normative familial, cultural, and national configurations. Repertoires, as embodied techniques of moving throughout the world, reflect not

only what a body has done but help to restructure its continued possibilities for being in the world. Within the context of minoritarian existence, they are also highly contingent, tactical, and inventive. Minoritarian repertoires are learned, rehearsed, and shared in the constrained space of what José Muñoz has called the "phobic majoritarian sphere," a site that "continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not confirm to the phantasm of normative citizenship."[6] Within the interstices of systemic and state-enforced precarity, hegemonic constructions of identity, and the still-unfolding, improvisational site of everyday performances, minoritarian subjects endeavor to do more than simply survive.

Extending Nina Simone's understanding of performance as a fugitive enactment of freedom, Joshua Chambers-Letson has reconceptualized Simone's word to describe all minoritarian performance as "improvisation within a fixed framework."[7] Such circumscribed frames include visual culture's logics of visibility, which provide paths for both continued hegemonic control as well as minoritarian resistance. While they outline the risks of representation, Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton nonetheless share the belief that "immense transformational and liberatory possibilities arise from what are otherwise sites of oppression or violent extraction . . . when individuals have agency in their representation."[8] Enacting constrained agencies in the tight spaces of mainstream representation, minoritarian subjects do not have the luxury to ignore the hail of visibility but instead are tasked with strategically and artfully making do with the detritus of sensationalisms, misrepresentations, misrecognitions, and absences that constitute the normative public sphere. José Muñoz has called such strategies "disidentifications": ways of working with, in spite of, in resistance to, and with ironic attachment to dominant ideologies and representations.[9]

I read the performances of *103 Shots* as particularly dramatic stagings of disidentificatory practice inasmuch as the performers are neither attempting to fully reject nor embrace the various discourses that position victimhood as an ontological fact of queerness. In comparison to those whose safety is tenuously secured through their proximity to whiteness and homonormative modes of living, disidentifying queers can neither fall prey to their interpolation as victims nor ignore the reality of their precarity. In *103 Shots,* the disidentificatory subversion of the sonic order of the gunshot is not a simple retreat from the reality of potential destruction; it proceeds in tacit recognition of the continuity of threat that constitutes everyday minoritarian life. Julia Steinmetz, in a critical essay that accompanied the premier of *103 Shots,* spoke of how the piece uses the disorienting effects of visual and aural noise to emphasize the always-present vulnerability of queer-of-color enclaves: "For many queer and trans people, the presence of trauma, violence, and loss in familiar sites is nothing new. For queer

and trans people of color, this inversion of the terms of safety and danger permeates the everyday: in quotidian homophobia and racism, in encounters with the police, in the far-reaching legacies of colonialism and slavery. Nightlife has always been precarious, whether from the threat of police raids or gay bashers or of HIV/AIDS. On top of that, add the ordinary scenes of violence that all of us are susceptible to: intimate partner violence, sexual assault."[10] The performers of *103 Shots* reveal that the piercing threat of the gunshot is not erased in the heady pulse and sweaty torsos of the nightclub; it is instead reconfigured as a disidentificatory site of struggle, tactical maneuvering, pedagogical transfer, and worldmaking.

My attentivity to processes of becoming and repertoires of survival, however, is especially heightened in response to the churn and flash of images and sounds that is *103 Shots.* To extend my discussion of embodied repertoires within the filmic frame to a series of still images, I pair my reading of *103 Shots* with a triptych of photographs: "*Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994,*" a collaboration between photographer Lyle Ashton Harris and his brother, Thomas Allen Harris.[11]

In *Brotherhood #1*, we witness the brothers in a soft embrace. His eyes closed in smoky eye shadow, Thomas softly bends away from the camera, resting his head on Lyle's shoulder. Lyle—eyebrows plucked and lips painted cherry red—cradles his brother tightly with his right hand spread solidly across Thomas's right breast. Their left arms reach off-camera.

Against a backdrop of vertical stripes of red, black, and green in *Brotherhood #2,* Ashton stretches his torso to meet his brother's lips while Thomas plants himself in solid perpendicularity to the floor. Thomas holds a gun tightly against Ashton's rib. In the shadowy and muted nakedness of their bodies, their simultaneous movement toward and away from each other is captured—but not arrested—in the play of flexed muscle. The camera documents the tightening of Lyle's throat, the ways that flex and relaxation stretch their skin, how Lyle's torso hollows in response to the gun's impression. Lyle's neck and lips soften in their exposure to the camera and the light, while both brother's faces recede from our gaze.

As we move to *Brotherhood #3*, the brothers continue their embrace; their bodies lightly touching and turned toward each other. In this mirrored stance, each brother hugs one arm around his brother's waist and wraps the other around his shoulder, where they each hold a dimly lit gun pointed toward our gaze. Paralleling their aimed guns, Lyle cocks his face and glares, his eyebrows raised, while Thomas exhibits a small smirk.

In *103 Shots,* our ability to instantly code each performer into clear racial, ethnic, and gender categories is made difficult in the disorienting pulse of cropped

Figure 2. Lyle Ashton Harris (in collaboration with Thomas Allen Harris), *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994 #1*. Dye-diffusion Polaroids, 20 by 24 in. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Figure 3. Lyle Ashton Harris (in collaboration with Thomas Allen Harris), Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994 *#2*. Dye-diffusion Polaroids, 20 by 24 in. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Figure 4. Lyle Ashton Harris (in collaboration with Thomas Allen Harris), *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994 #3*. Dye-diffusion Polaroids, 20 by 24 in. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York.

bodies, exploding balloons, and flashing images. In comparison to the queerly indeterminate multicultural gestures of *103 Shots, Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994* displays Lyle and Thomas as black men in direct relief, a representation underscored in its saturated exhibition of the Pan-African flag, its double-edged deployment of the titular word "brotherhood," and its disidentifying role within the larger historical frame of African American portraiture. The fungibility of blackness within the visual field might initially compel a relatively static identitarian reading of black masculine identity: one that demands something akin to confession of inner truth from two figural black bodies. Nicole Fleetwood has written about "the weight placed on black cultural production to produce results, to do something to alter a history and system of racial inequality that is in part constituted through visual discourse."[12] My effort here is not to fully resist this demand, but to perform it differently with an adjusted gaze.

Thinking of this piece in relationship to *103 Shots* moves me beyond the false stability of decontextualized spectacular photograph, reading *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994* as further evidence of surviving, emergent bodies in motion.

My own initial reading of the three images was overdetermined by the ubiquity of *Brotherhood #2* to the exclusion of the others in both critical and popular references to Harris's work. I've lingered on the triptych's often-decontextualized second photograph in order to read against the terms of static identity that deliver on tired tropes, as if the piece merely redelivers some frozen comment on the inherent violence of black queer masculinity and black familial intimacy.

Instead, as I've intended with my engagement with *103 Shots,* I'm interested in reading the photograph as evidence of repertoires of survival, practices that necessarily precede and outlast momentary enactments of identity. Here, the clenches of fists, evasions of camera, and simultaneous movements toward and away from the gaze of the viewer are more rightly located within a series of practiced intimacies that exceed their documentation in the photographic frame. We witness the fraught intimacy performed in *Brotherhood #2* alongside the languorous sensuality of *#1* and the defiant stares of *#3.* In disidentification to a history of multimodal anti-black, homophobic representations—visual logics that paint the black queer as a contradiction, that configure black men as only ever the victims or perpetrators of life-ending violence, and as always already socially dead—the Harris brothers endeavor to enact identity in their public performances and display of their creative work. Acts of creation—the beating of foundation and the plucking of hair, reiterated poses and rehearsed gestures, the editing of film and the developing of print—are repertoires for accomplishing joy, eroticism, intimacy, and identity within a larger majoritarian sphere that mundanely asserts that black lives do not matter, that these men both cannot and should not exist.

Muñoz reminds us that repertoires of survival are “not figured out alone, they are informed by the examples of others. [They are] mediated by a complicated network of incomplete, mediated, or crossed identifications. They are also forged by the pressures of everyday life, forces that shape a subject and call for different tactical responses.”[13] In *103 Shots* and *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994* we witness these tactics in action.

Hundreds of people performed in a public park weeks after a gunman murdered forty-nine people in a crowded nightclub’s Latino night.

In a small New York studio, two brothers posed and embraced in front of a flashing camera.

Between all of them was the understanding that the world was not good enough, and that their survival was not guaranteed. Together, from the space of this embodied knowledge, they rehearsed.

NOTES

1. Cassils, *103 Shots.* YouTube video, 2:36, June 27, 2016, http://cassils.net/portfolio/103-shots/
2. Tourmaline (formerly known as Reina Gossett), Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), xv–xvi.
3. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994,* (1994), dye-diffusion Polaroids, 20 by 24 in, http://www.lyleashtonharris.com/series/the-good-life-2/.
4. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
5. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2003).
6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.
7. Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2003), 19, quoted in Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 4.
8. Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door,* xvi.
9. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11.
10. Julia Steinmetz, “*103 Shots:* Listening to Orlando,” *Huffington Post,* June 27, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/103-shots-listening-to-orlando_us_57714cd9e4b0fa01a1405b42
11. Harris, *Brotherhood, Crossroads and Etcetera 1994*.
12. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.
13. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 37–38.

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