Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Lyle Ashton Harris, 2017 March 27-29

Funded by the Keith Haring Foundation.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lyle Ashton Harris on March 27 and 29, 2017. The interview took place at the studio of Lyle Ashton Harris in New York City, NY, and was conducted by Alex Fialho for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Lyle Ashton Harris and Alex Fialho have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Lyle Ashton Harris for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic Oral History Project, on March 27, 2017, at Lyle's artist studio in Chelsea, New York.

Lyle, thank you for this project.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Welcome.

ALEX FIALHO: So let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born, and tell me a little bit about your childhood.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, okay. I was born in the Bronx in 1965, and February 6, 1965. And what else?

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a little bit about your childhood.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay, my childhood. So basically, I was—my parents were still together when I was born. I think my father—my parents separated, I believe, in '71, '72. That would have made me seven, but clearly there was some, you know—like, I have very little memories of the time with him as a child. But I always say that I had a happy childhood. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents. My mother was a chemistry professor, and she—so it was—spent a lot of time with my grandparents, as well as family gatherings.

From a young age, I guess I had a certain sense that I might have been, you know, queer or different. Or just different. I was, I guess, up until—I would say I lived, up until, I would say, I was—up until I was, let's say, nine, I lived in the Bronx, and we had a—I would say it was probably a normal childhood. I have one brother, Thomas, filmmaker, and he's two and half years older than I am. I was—I wouldn't say I was quiet, but I also had a lot of friends. I was very—I guess I had friends. I definitely had friends, was close to my grandparents. And what else? When I was nine, I moved with my mother and my brother to Tanzania after my parents were divorced, and I lived there for a couple of years.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a little bit more about your grandparents and their histories in New York.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: My grandfather is from Albany [NY]. His father was—I should know this—his father was the personal messenger to the governor of New York, and he is from Albany. And my grandfather was the eldest of, let's say, five—I think—yeah, I think five siblings, and his father was a sergeant. And so it was basically a working, middle class, you know, family. Religious, very spiritual, AME—African Methodist Episcopal—very family-orientated, I guess—yeah, progressive educators. And my grandfather was a very brilliant man who, you know, as a child, he always told us the story of walking 10 miles to go to school and he—his mother did not work. His mother, well, basically she took care of the family, and so they lived in Albany, New York.

ALEX FIALHO: Maternal or paternal grandfather?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: This is my maternal grandfather. My maternal grandmother was from Charleston, South Carolina, and she came up to New York because her brother had—older brother—had come up several years, a few years before. And he—I think he was—he had fell down the elevator shaft, so she came up to help him recuperate from his accident. And so I think she came up when she was 13. And I think in the—in 1930—but she came when she was 13. I think she came out when she was 13, so maybe 10 years later, she met my grandfather at Bethel AME Church in Harlem, where they married in 19—in '32—in 1932 and—

ALEX FIALHO: What were their names?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Albert Johnson Senior, and my grandmother's name was Joella Johnson. And there have

been like four, yeah, three or four generations of, you know, Johnsons who attended this particular church, starting with them. My grandfather came to NYU; it was—through his father, he was offered—through the governor of New York was offered a full scholarship to go to Dartmouth, but he did not feel like going—being in an environment where he would be, you know, among very wealthy, you know, socially not being able, you know, just to—he made the option, the choice that it was more prudent to come to New York and work part-time and go to work, and then go to school part-time once you did NYU, where he earned a master's degree, you know, started with the bachelor then the master's degree—

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —and eventually went back and got his Ph.D.

ALEX FIALHO: In?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In religious studies, but this is as a retiree.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And, yeah, so he and my grandmother, obviously, were very, very close. They raised three daughters. All three, you know, got master's degrees. They're very connected to the family. It was very much around, you know, education. About, you know, service to the church, service to the community. My grandfather was a race man. He was a—meaning, he was a race man. He was clearly a student of [W. E. B] Du Bois and also, you know, just very much conscious around Africa, et cetera. He never traveled to Africa, and that was a dream that my mother fulfilled for him when she went there for the first time in '71 with her close friend, to pave the road to take us there two years later.

ALEX FIALHO: I was reading that they were photographed by James Van Der Zee.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, my grandparents were in photographs taken by Van Der Zee.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you know the story behind how that came to be?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I actually don't. But, I mean, what's brilliant about, you know, Van Der Zee—because I think—obviously, thank Deb Willis for the extraordinary scholarship she's done in Van Der Zee—but what I like about the photograph, it definitely speaks to the vernacular, because although now it's obviously considered, you know, has a certain aura in terms of being, a Van Der Zee, which is a Modernist, you know, photographer, exemplary photographer, and the chronicle of the Harlem Renaissance, et cetera, they were—and to the black bourgeoisie—but he also documented, you know, so many different extraordinary scenes, historical scenes from, you know, from Marcus Garvey to the beauty queens of Harlem, just, you know, black life.

And—but the photograph of me, when I think of the photograph, I mean, obviously, it has an aura of being a Van Der Zee, but it's also—it speaks to the fact that how he was—well, a couple things. My grandfather clearly was—he was super-savvy, you know, super-smart, and in a very subtle way. But he must have—I think he was aware that Van Der Zee or [Austin] Hansen, you know, who was another leading photographer, African-American photographer, like, in the '30s, '40s, and '50s, I believe. So he clearly was the studio to go to, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your paternal grandparents? Do you know much about them?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't know much about—I knew my paternal—my father, my biological father, is second—his grandparents are from St. Kitts, which I actually went to, I think about 10 years ago. I don't know the exact date I went. But they left around the turn of the century, and so my paternal father was a third-generation immigrant, and there was a—I met his mother, Nanna Harris. I did not meet—and I also met his grandma. I met his grandmother. I'm forgetting her name right now. But I did not meet their husbands.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your relationship to your mother? Tell me a little bit more about that, please.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: My mother and I—now, or then, or when?

ALEX FIALHO: Then.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: We had a very—I would say we had a very close relationship, at times symbiotic. My mother's a super-intelligent, beautiful woman who was very race conscious but also—was super beautiful, but also sort of a woman ahead of her time in terms of being progressive, and also following the footsteps of her father. He was very into education but also interested in black consciousness, and in a more broad sense in terms of interests in Africa, so there was definitely growing up in a family of carrying that tradition. So I, my mother and I, I guess we have been close all our lives. We have had our, you know, we have had our issues over the years, particularly, you know, when my father who—when my stepfather I should say, her late husband—but

she and I had been, you know, very close in a relationship that I think is very—again, I think the relationship should be worked on, but she has been highly, highly supportive of me from the inception.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your relationship to your brother, Thomas, growing up?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: My brother, I—we are very close now. It was complicated being as we were young. I mean, we were clearly—you know, he's my brother and I loved him; I love him. I think it was difficult, you know, particularly with our father leaving, and maybe competing for our mother's, you know, maybe energy or time, et cetera, and both of us, we're both queer. I mean, as a young child we definitely, you know, had a—we were quite close, and then we both engaged in, you know, well, the fantasy, had imaginary boyfriends, et cetera, but I think there's a moment where the both of us were dealing with our own level of trauma, you know, around sexual difference, or exploring sexuality, that we had different ways of somehow exploring that and then maybe different ways of repressing it. So we definitely had, you know, issues of competition, that kind of stuff, you know, as children.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you go to elementary school in the Bronx?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I did. I went to PS 87. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And then how about the move to Tanzania?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I went to Tanzania in the mid-'70s, '74 to '76. And I was from nine to 11.

ALEX FIALHO: And what inspired that move with your mother?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: After my parents' divorce, my mother, I think, asked him to, you know, finally leave. She—a couple things. It was a time where a lot of African Americans—it's post—civil rights—were getting more interested in that, or continued their interest in Africa, and at the time, a lot of post—civil rights was also—around the period of, well, soon after, let's say, there's been over the last, I don't know, 15, 20 years of, like, independence, starting with Ghana in '57, you know, being the first Sub-Saharan African [nation] we see, you know, getting colonial independence. And so there was definitely, in my sense, in the era that there was a keen desire to somehow be of service.

So that dovetailed with my mother's interest in Africa, and she—after my father, you know, after they—my parents had separated; she had met the man who would become my stepfather, that raised my brother and I, Pule Leinaeng, who was a South African. He was South African, who was in exile, and he was a student at—at that point he wasn't a student, I think. Was he a student? But he just graduated from—I think, is it—from Temple, yes.

But he was—yes, I think in a way there was a way of—he was very much involved in ANC, the African National Congress, and I think it was a way in which to take my, you know, my brother and I to be exposed to, let's say, living in an African country, also, you know, in terms of carrying on the tradition my grandfather—my grandfather's interest, I should say—in addition to, let's say, exposing us to an environment where, I guess, African family life as a way to maybe—I think my mother did say there's a way to somehow make it easier, the transition for my brother and I, in terms of having another man in the house, meaning her partner.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you end up in Tanzania and Dar es Salaam in particular?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, Tanzania was—that's a good question, why Tanzania as opposed to Kenya. I think there was—Nyerere, President [Julius] Nyerere, was part of the—this is my understanding—part of the—the post-colonial vision was based on—well, socialism was based on, let's say, Ujamaa, collective community. So I think my mother was probably interested in that. There's also a desire and a hunger, let's say, for educators to come. So I think my mother and her best friend, Ayo, had done reconnaissance, you know, a year before. I think it was '71, actually.

And so they—Ayo's then-boyfriend, her future husband, was working in Sudan. So they had done—these are women who were lot of, you know, African-American women who are very much interested in a more global sphere, a more cosmopolitan, you know, dating scene, and it was very much a part of that. So it was very much—it was of the particular period. So there was post—civil rights, but also it was post-, you know, post-colonialism, and [Kwame] Nkrumah, in terms of in Ghana, so that clearly was in the air, and as you know, Nkrumah, I think—I'm having a pre-senior moment—I think it was Temple that Nkrumah ran, and Nkrumah was in Temple. So it was an environment with—there was a lot of cross-fertilization, you know, between the African diaspora, post-colonialism, you know, civil rights, post—civil rights, et cetera, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: How did she end up in the Bronx?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Who?

ALEX FIALHO: How did your family—your father and your mother?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, my grandfather moved the Bronx, I think from Harlem, I believe, like, in the early '50s. So at that time we lived in the northeast Bronx, so basically on the border of Westchester. So that's the last stop on the number two train, 233rd. So, you know, Mount Vernon—right next to Mount Vernon. So at the time, it was sort of farmland. It was, you know, farm—or farmland—it was probably, like, maybe late '40s or early '50s, yeah. So it was basically, you know, moving out, moving on, I guess, somewhat to the suburbs of the time, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about Tanzania? How did you find it?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: How did I find it as a child?

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I loved it. And I think it was an idealistic situation. I mean, it has complications, but it was something that—it was a rich experience, I mean, in multiple, multiple levels.

I went to English-speaking—my brother and I, we were given the option from my mother to attend either an international school or go to a English-speaking Swahili school, Tanzania school, which you opted for taking away vacation. So my mother always—she was making a professional salary and she had a sabbatical from teaching in New York. She took an extra year of non-pay so that—you know, the sabbatical had to last for two years, and although she's making professional Tanzanian salary, that's probably one tenth of what she's making in the U.S., you know, if that. So we were given the option of—basically, we chose as, you know, as a family, that we go to a English-speaking Tanzanian school. And that was a great—it was a great experience, you know, as opposed to being sequestered, all—which Americans are often, you know, Americans and Europeans are often, or people, foreigners often are, you know, not just Americans or Europeans, but foreigners, that we were not sequestered among sort of like an elite, you know, NGO community. We were very much involved, let's say, in local communities that were there.

So that's that. Yeah, you know, I had a few friends. Definitely had some friends, and a lot of people. Yeah, I remember as a child, I was quite—it was sort of an expansive period for me because—I don't know what it was. Maybe the meeting people, being in a, you know, a black, you know, black African country, that was the first time, coming from a racialized U.S. culture, growing up in the Bronx, even at the young age where we're obviously clear of race, being in a very race-conscious, you know, household. So there was an awareness. So obviously, like, that got heightened by living [in] Tanzania or in terms of, like, there's just something that was different, you know, and so—and also different lifestyle.

For example, on a number of occasions walking, when a foreign dignitary, whether that's from, I don't know, foreign dignitary, wherever they were from, from China or from, you know, from, I don't know, South Africa or—it would not have been South Africa at that time because it was the height of apartheid—but wherever a foreign dignitary was coming from, that our school would march, you know, or schools would march—primarily those high schools would march to meet them. And that would be unheard of here. I mean, maybe people do that, but at least there that was not an experience that I had had before. So, walking 10 miles to meet a foreign dignitary.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you tell me—just describe life in Tanzania a little bit?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In what sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Maybe its differences from the Bronx.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, let's say I learned how to—I swam—I learned how to swim in the Indian Ocean. It was very warm. People were very kind. People walk miles out of their way to take, you know, they give you directions. There was a gentleness to the people of Tanzania that was quite, you know, quite beautiful people. I remember the markets, the beach, the fish market—also just, you know, produce. I remember, you know, the idea of buying chicken, buying the whole chicken, having it slaughtered. It's a very different relationship to, let's say, food, the preparation of food, seeing food grow. We had a—since it was Ujamaa, everyone was responsible for having a garden of some sort, so we actually grew a garden. My brother worked on a chicken farm one time. I had a couple of affairs while I was there. Like I had—some mature early relationships that I had were actually—were in Tanzania, actually. So it was interesting because—yeah, so they're—yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I was going to ask in some senses about when did sexuality become more explicitly on your radar? And it sounds like in Tanzania?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, I think it was before. I mean, I think at a young age I was—yeah, so that was nine.

So I was—I was sexualized, I'm not sure how. I mean, I was almost raped in Tanzania by this guy at this hotel, the Skyview Hotel. But prior to that, I was aware, you know—for me, early age, that [I] was aware of a certain sexuality about me. I'm not quite sure what it was, I mean, if I could actually name it. But I think it was sort of sexuality and seduction. I was aware [of] that. And it was always hard to read, and it was always—I was aware; I was aware of a certain difference. I was aware of seduction; I was aware that my attraction towards, you know, towards men or, you know, the boys, I was definitely aware of that at an earlier age. And also just aware of, you know, tropes, seduction, ways of being, et cetera.

ALEX FIALHO: How did that register in Tanzania with these—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I had a short affair with, you know, the son of the Zambian ambassador to Tanzania, and that's why we were at the Skyview Hotel, and that's probably—we were supposed to—the Tanzania minister of education could not imagine that a—that Rudean Harris [Leinaeng] was a woman. They had never imagined a woman traveling with two sons alone, and, you know, so they assumed it was a man. So we went in the back to—we did not get housing, by the way, so we, actually, wound up living in a hotel for nine, maybe seven, seven to nine months, out of the two-year stay we were there.

And so we had a lot of adventures in the hotel, you know. I remember—in fact, I think it was that same Zambian ambassador that—he and my mother had, you know, made a party for, like—[laughs]—30 people, you know, cooking, you know, goat, like, on a one-burner, hot-burner, you know—[laughs]—in the hotel room. Because it was, we're living with kids and living in a hotel room, you know, two hotel rooms. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a bit more about this idea of your mother's independence, or just as a strong female presence bringing you to Africa, how that played out.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In what sense?

ALEX FIALHO: You had just mentioned, you know, they assumed that she was a man because she had two children and was traveling alone. Was that a part of the narrative more than just the housing situation?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think in a way, yeah, I think just in terms of traveling with my mother and my brother across the border into town—which we would do often when we traveled to Kenya when we go on vacation. So going through the border and passing through and being, you know, stopped and asked, you know, "Does your mother have any money?" I mean, those are the kind of situations, so being able to negotiate that, you know, being able to negotiate, like, with racism that might exist in Tanzania. Let's say, for example, my mother dealing with—there was an Indian family that lived below when we were renting out a house, and the father was, you know, tyrannical in relationship to the mother—you know, younger mother and then two kids. My mother is a super-fierce, super-independent woman who—feminist, you know—womanist, I should say—

ALEX FIALHO: Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —and so just—and all that comes with it in terms of, you know, her own issues around sexual freedom or identity and, you know, but also very private, as well. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Is there anything else particularly noteworthy about your time in Tanzania, before we move back to the time in the United States?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, I guess—yeah, it was a period of where there was a certain amount of freedom from, let's say, you know, freedom from the being over-conscious on, let's say, race or racism in the U.S. There was a certain sense of that type of, like, you were being African or being an American—African American in a black African country, or African country where that's—I mean, what that did to my brother and I, you know, it just opened up so many different worlds that weren't—unimaginable before. I mean, just it cracked through certain paradigms that, up to that point, that were very much spoken about in the context of our family without question or that the church or the traditions which we come through in terms of, like, black consciousness; it's a radical thing to do to be—to have that emanated or reflected, you know, in every sphere of society from the president on down.

ALEX FIALHO: And the two-year sabbatical, and then the year sabbatical—the year of extended sabbatical—ended, and then the decision was to move back to New York?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a bit more about that transition back.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It was—it was rough—bless you—because I—during while I was away, there was clearly—clearly, puberty had sprung with a lot of my classmates, you know. And so I came back in almost a violent flurry

of, let's say, sprung puberty, where I was still in a situation where, in Ghana at least, where there wasn't—the sexualization was something that just felt like a little more pure in a way, not to romanticize that; I mean in Tanzania, that is. It felt pure, and where there was a certain type of physicality among men—boys—that—and sometimes sexual—that came to a complete rupture when I came back to the U.S., where I went from being, you know, an American, African American, living in abroad in Tanzania and the privileges that might come with that in terms of being different, at the same time being respected in a different kind of way.

Here I came back and there was—clearly, I was different, you know, in terms of the way I spoke, my experiences. I was marked by, clearly, a sexual difference, and, like, definitely that's something that sort of began what would be a very difficult period for me for the next several years, in terms of adjusting to not only the violence around, let's say, certain myopic notions of what blackness is, et cetera, but also what, you know, sexuality. So I sort of went back into the—if there was a closet, I went back into it, you know. But I would—that said, I was still—it began a period of terror for me, in terms of, you know, being a faggot, being called a faggot and negotiating all that, violence around that, the terrorizing of the body, all that kind of stuff, so.

ALEX FIALHO: Anything in particular?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I mean, I came back in sixth grade. Nine to 11, so I think I came back, sixth grade. Seventh grade, I went to, I think, parochial school, Our Savior Lutheran, and that was a really traumatic, you know. I was never beat up, but I did, on a daily basis, yeah, you know, I was called names, you know, repeatedly throughout the day. And it was—yeah, it was basically, I was the class—I was the designated class fag, being among a couple of others, you know.

So it was complicated because also I was negotiating with a couple of—I was also not—like a good friend of mine, Adrian Stephenson, who passed away several years ago and who was from, like, a working-class background. Super-beautiful Jamaican guy. He was one of my first lovers. He would fight. I was not—I was sort of above that. That wasn't in my constitution to fight. I did fight maybe until sixth grade, but after that, you know, I knew that the stakes were dangerous and—as far as, you know, the type of violence that could be enacted upon the body, so I found other ways in which to negotiate that.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your brother's queerness in relationship to your own?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In what sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Him being two and a half years older, how that was manifesting and how him, as an older brother —

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, we, early on, we had, I think, both, you know, explored unspoken, let's say, fantasy about imaginary boyfriends, and I think that was the subject of one of his films, or at least we reenact some of that, his film *Vintage Family Values*. But at a certain point there was a rupture in that, and his way, or at least from my perspective, he was—he wasn't a—he was an intellectual and he, I think, hid behind being [an] overachiever, et cetera. And also that sort of became a point of contention, where he would call me names, as well. I think he was acting out what was acting upon him, you know, so—which is common.

ALEX FIALHO: How about creativity and artistic interest? When did that develop for you? And how?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, my grandfather was—he worked at the Port Authority, and as an accountant economist, but he also shot over 10,000 slides documenting the friends and family. So I was very much aware of, like, photography's, you know, very much aware of photography and the act of taking photographs, the act of being photographed, but also the act of archiving—if I can use the term now; I'm not sure if I would use the term then, obviously. But I was very much aware of, let's say, the presence of photography in the day-to-day social life of, let's say, documenting or, you know, being with family and having that being photographed. I was very much aware of the family album in that sense.

In addition to that, what we will take into a lot of cultural events as children—maybe not so much museums; we didn't necessarily go to, let's say—we did a lot of looking at art, and my mother collected, you know—my mother has a very fine sense of, like—although she was a chemistry professor, she did needlepoint, and she just had a really, you know, very nuanced sense of style and also the way in which the home was taken care of. I mean, just—and that's, I think, been inherited from her, probably from her Aunt Tesse, my grandfather's sister who lived in Castleton and who had three husbands, lived in Detroit, then she moved up into Albany. So there was a certain sense of—yeah, just, yeah, style.

So I think I was very much aware of that as my mother also brought a lot of—when we were in Tanzania, we brought sculpture—she brought Makonde carvings, ivory. You know, she was very much about the fashioning of the body and style. As children, we were, you know, definitely were raised, yeah, my brother and I were very much taken care of, because of how we dressed, you know. All my clothing, you know, we were—it was

fastidious and we were—and maybe it wasn't fastidious, but we were definitely, you know, we were taken of. We were—[laughs]—manicured.

ALEX FIALHO: Were there any particular exhibitions or cultural outings that resonated with you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, we would definitely go see the—as children, we would definitely go see the West Indian Labor Day Parade. We'll see that, dancing of Harlem, you know, Alvin Ailey. What else? What are the exhibitions would we have seen? A lot of dance, also plays as well, you know, growing up, yeah. Not to mention my grandfather—any, you know, popular culture in terms of TV, but often with a cultural bent. You know, just aware—clearly, there was always books in the house, you know, art books, culture books.

I remember I grew up in a church, is where I grew up, in a AME church. It was definitely the pantheon of us, say, you know, the black political elite, the social elite, artists, and Langston Hughes—growing up in the church in terms of reciting Langston Hughes's poetry, you know, definitely pageantry, plays, putting on religious plays, you know, performing, let's say—while in church performing maybe—the only black plays they were performing [. . . –LAH]. That was something that was a part of growing up. Yeah, again, I'm just thinking, reflecting on that right now, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: What was your first camera?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So let me get back to the camera. So my grandfather's—he shot, as well as my cousin Ricky Johnson, who, he was a photographer, as well. He died. He was the first of my generation to die. He died, actually, young, in a really tragic car accident, and he was the son of my Uncle Phillip, my grandfather's youngest brother, and Aunt Shirley, who just died, and we got to honor her on this—like, this coming weekend with Uncle Philip, her husband who is still living, and he's 95. They were my godparents. And so he shot photographs of me as a child, so like, yeah, beautiful portraits.

And also my stepfather, he was a photographer. He—after he left Tanzania, after being one of the early architects of the ANC school, the ANC freedom fighter school in Tanzania, after being in exile. Yeah, leaving, going from South Africa to Tanzania, he got a scholarship for—a full scholarship to go to East Germany, where he studied media. He studied media studies. So I was very much aware—photography was something that was always part of the house.

I do remember that there was a magazine called—I don't know if I can pronounce it—*Sechaba*, and it was a magazine put out by, I think, either the PAC [Pan Africanist Congress] or the—I think it's the ANC, but it was about active resistance in terms of, like, you know, armed warfare. And I remember reading something in that magazine, like in '75—'70, actually, when—'70, '75—and really being, I mean, maybe, I'm sure, titillated or really reading—it was—I have never really shared this before. There was something about torture in that. And I remember being sort of excited by the, not so much being tortured, per se, but there was something that was—some—there was some arousal took place.

There was a interest in—that was my way of, like, processing, from a young age, when I grew up in a, you know—after my parents, after my mother, my stepfather got together, you know, the ANC was hugely a part of life. Anyone—the ANC, African National Congress—that my father was very much, very, very much involved, was one of the early architects of that and a major officer in New York. So any given time in the Bronx where we were grew up, that anyone from, you know, an exile community has passed through my house. People now who are former presidents, or, you know, ambassadors now in South Africa, et cetera, have—remember the house as being—that was a cultural hub in which I grew up in.

ALEX FIALHO: I feel like that story you said about that magazine is relevant to your work.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: *The Watering Hole*.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, *The Watering Hole* in particular, but more broadly just the sort of confluence of photography, desire, and sexuality, just all thrown into the pot, in a sense.

Tell me a little bit more about the ANC context of growing up. Were you meeting these folks when you were in your home?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yes, I was—

ALEX FIALHO: Were you overhearing—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I was—oh, yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —conversations?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I—

ALEX FIALHO: How were you engaging with that?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I was—good question.

ALEX FIALHO: Or more importantly, how was it influencing you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, good question. I was young, so I was—I was nine to 11, so it would have been maybe, really, 11 on. So really, really—well, maybe before that, really, if I—it would have been nine on, because if they met, probably when I was eight or nine—Lee, the man who raised us, Pule, he took care of the house while we were gone. The house was subletted, but he had built the basement out to create an apartment for himself down there in which he watched the house. So clearly, that was in '74. I think they met in '72.

And I said they had a—they were having a relationship. He was my mother's boyfriend. So from that, you know, from the moment when he moved in, that South African music was played throughout the house, you know. That was very much all the time. There were many cultural events; if his people were visiting town, students, you know, political dignitaries, et cetera, that was very—that was [an] integral part of the culture life my mother had invested in. She took that on as her—that was her life. She was married to a South African revolutionary, and so she became one.

So a lot of her time and energy—I mean, so that was just part of the cultural space in which we occupied at the house. It was a cross-fertilization between very, you know, diasporic communities like a South African, but it was sort of like a very hip maybe—they would have been, like, maybe 30-something. Young, you know, I don't know, like, professional-class people who were also students, political figures, et cetera. So that was this way—so I was young. I'm sure, you know, I was rambunctious, and I was also the son, you know, of my parents, and I was probably spoiled and I was also—my father was, you know, handsome, and he was also respected and he—well, he was still young, but he was someone who was considered an elder in that particular movement. Smart and handsome, you know, and—

ALEX FIALHO: Was there anyone in particular who came through your home that you have an anecdote that you remember or might have had a passing conversation or contact with?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Several. I mean, there was one—one was Coapage ["Coaps," we called him –LAH], my father's best friend, and they—yeah, very, you know, smart. Yeah, I mean, it wasn't so much like they were just passing through. Coapage was—it was my "Uncle Coapage." He was someone who was there all the time. He was my father's best friend. They were brothers; they were in exile. You know, it was an environment where you had my father—I mean, my stepfather had not seen his family. He had left, let's, say, in '61—no, '59—they're burning the passes. Now we're talking about—so we're talking '70—well, we met in '73, '74; it was like '77 when they got married, so he's talking about 15, 16 years not having seen his sister and haven't been back to the country, so that was part of the energy. So there's a lot of, you know, there was obviously the melancholia around that, not to mention, you know, the drinking, but it was also—there was an excitement and energy around, you know, being the son of someone as—handsome, you know, couple and all the complicatedness of, you know, their stuff. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did the context of exile—let's dive in there a little bit.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think, oddly enough—it's funny you should ask. I never quite [thought] about this, but I think in a way it probably mirrored the level of exile that I had from my biological father, you know, who lived less than an hour away—well, in that case, probably lived less than 45 minutes away, Croton-on-Hudson, where he still lives, so that I was being raised, let's say, by my stepfather, who was exiled from his home and very much part of, very much active in the vision of that reconciliation with the family through the dismantling of the apartheid. And I was, let's say, less than 45 minutes away and was experiencing, let's say, a psychic as well as physical exile from my biological father. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: So your first camera?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: My first camera, I think, was given to me, I believe, by Lee. It was either my grandfather or Lee. I think it was, might have been Lee. I think my stepfather. I think he gave me my first camera, if I'm not mistaken. And my first camera would have been—it could have been—probably is—it could have been my grandfather or it could have been my—yeah, I have, like, in that point you should have, like, a Instamatic, you know. Yeah, it would have been my parents, probably. My parents gave me my first camera.

ALEX FIALHO: Around what age?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I can't—it probably would have been—probably had a camera at seven or eight, or nine.

Yeah. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Were you drawn to creativity in your teenage years?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, a lot of the creativity was also in terms of my—[laughs]—emerging queerness. I think there was more about—it was almost—it was that I was creative, yeah, creative in a certain sense, like performing skits for my family. My cousin Peggy and I, you know, with my cousin Janae, during any of these culture events, whether that was Christmas or Thanksgiving, for family, or it could have been, let's say, a holiday party or a party that would involve a cross-fertilization of, let's say, you know, the family plus South African family plus the diasporic community, which could be anywhere from, let's say maybe, like, 15 to, let's say, 50 people. Or a visiting dignitary, and then often there would be, like, skits that we would perform, some sort of dance, some sort of, you know, dance, skit, or some, you know, creative—[laughs]—some creative—something that was made up on the spot, et cetera.

But then I think that when I got back, I think at a certain point all that got shut down, probably in junior high school. Really, when I got to high school, you know, when I really—all that got shut down. Because then I became very much aware of the body, of the gesture, of the gesture that could be, you know, catalogued and named and, you know, and demonized. That maybe sounds—yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: What were some of the—how did that get shut down? What were some of the effects or—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I became very repressed, probably secretive, more cerebral, more aware of the body. I should also mention, I wore a back brace for a number of years. In my junior year, it was, actually, it was my eighth year. It was determined—earlier; actually, since seventh grade—it was determined I had scoliosis, curvature of the spine. My cousin had it as well, but she had—Peggy, who is in the [Ektachrome] Archive, she—

ALEX FIALHO: There's an amazing photo of her back—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —in *The Good Life*, right?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Exactly. Or—in *The Good Life,* as well as several photographs, have run all kind of—there's one of Peggy and Gail in Fort Green that Mickalene Thomas is writing about. But she had the—since she was a performer at the age of 13, she was singing before hundreds of people in her father's calypso band. I and my mother, we opted—instead of doing a surgery, we opted for me to wear a Milwaukee back brace.

And so I basically—I don't know if you've seen the brace, but it's quite, you know—basically, it's steel, three rods with pads that fit on your hips and go up the spine up to the neck, so it was something that—which is really, it was like being in a, you know, in a walking wheel—but some sort of—it wasn't a wheelchair. I could walk, but it's something that I had to wear 23 hours a day. And so that was something that, at once, it made me a target, but also became—so the energy shifted away from being about me being—that my body being a mark of queerness as opposed to being a mark of difference because of the physicality, you know, the physical constrictions or the—not the constrictions but the—being perceived as being handicapped in some sort of way.

ALEX FIALHO: What was the effect on you, psychically, of that?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, it was very difficult. You know, I think it was—yeah, I think it was clearly very difficult, because I'm, obviously, being teased, but also it was physically uncomfortable. You know, it's something that I—I think I said, I further withdrew, and—yeah. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you end up going to Wesleyan?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: My brother—good question. I actually, I went to Wesleyan—good question. There's a former boyfriend of mine that I met through my brother, this guy named Phillip. Phillip Fairweather is a doctor, and he claims to this day that I actually went to Wesleyan because of him.

I had met him—he and my brother were in a—what do you call that? A high school advanced, you know, science prep program, you know, for—I think for minority students who had excelled in the sciences. And so he met Phillip there, and Phillip was the first, probably the first guy that, after Tanzania, after shutting down completely, that—I guess it wasn't at first, but that I had really engaged with after that. It was actually during to go visit him on—I stayed with him during pre-frosh weekend while I was visiting the school, and we were physical, you know. But, yeah. We were physical. And so he—oh, he always claimed that I went to Wesleyan—and maybe it's true; I'd

never really admit that but, you know.

But I knew I wanted a smaller school. I did apply to Harvard. My brother went to Harvard, but I knew that I—I think Wesleyan, I wanted a smaller school, you know, so I wanted—I wind up going there. I knew that it was progressive, you know, just after visiting the program, just this—it felt like—yeah, because remember, I was in—I went to St. Lutheran's for, you know, for parochial school from, I think, sixth to eighth grade or maybe seventh through ninth grade, and then for the last three years I was in Truman High School, and that was just the beginning of, let's say, almost the shifting of the model of high school based on a penal system.

I remember the guy who had been brought in from, I think, from Bronx Community College or someplace else, this guy my mother knew, I think from City College, and he knew that I knew him, and that sort of—so I was always in situations where I was—always had an out. Doesn't make any sense that I was always—at least I had the awareness that—oh, well, that I was different. Does that make any sense? And always there's something, you always relied on the fact that I let the person know that I know, so they're really watching me; I'm watching you.

So I was very much aware of that. But anyway, I was going from that type of environment where I was, you know, from parochial school with maybe, like, a maximum, I don't know, 30 people in my class to, let's say, 750, with the back brace. And it [was] kids in the junior high school, you know. It wasn't the most difficult of schools, but I was—I was in prep, you know, I was in, like, a lot of, yeah, prep classes, et cetera, AP classes, et cetera, but still—but I made a lot of friends there. But a lot of my friends were, like, the kids who are in the—a certain social, you know, scene and—but I exceled there. I was very—in terms of, you know, I helped a lot of kids. I was very conscious about schools, particularly, I believe, growing up in a family that I did and also living in Africa, just having a different awareness about what's possible outside the world. I mean, when I was young, as a child, you just know there's other things that are possible.

I remember the guidance counselors telling my brother he should maybe apply—he should not apply to Harvard; he should apply to, I don't know, Colgate, which is a good school anyway. Or in my case I should apply to wherever and not apply to Wesleyan; that's a far reach. They didn't—it was in their purview or their understanding. I mean, it's how, you know, what is it called, racism or whatever works in terms of—and I'm not sure if it's racism per se, but it's the way in which, yeah, how people are creating glass ceilings and always having them moving around that. "No, this is how this is going." You know? And that's been sort of like the story of my life with the kind of family, you know, with my parents and my grandparents, my mother in particular, in terms of, like, always pushing through that. And not in a way that is super smart, maybe, or political but maybe different, but in a very nuanced but direct, you know, way, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Before we move into the college years, is there anything from high school and earlier family dynamic, creatively or otherwise, that you want to have on record in some sense?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, what do you think?

ALEX FIALHO: I think we did a lot of work there, so I'm—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: I think it's rich, and I think a lot of that will probably feed into where we go from here.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Take it—take it along.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: So you studied econ at the beginning—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —is my understanding.

[Audio break.]

So Wesleyan—tell me about your academics from the beginning.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Beginning of Wesleyan or beginning of where?

ALEX FIALHO: I guess a little earlier, and get into Wesleyan as well, please—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I've been okay; I'm an okay student. If I apply myself, you know, I could be—you know, I'm smart, obviously, but if I apply myself. It's interesting, I'm thinking about my brother. My brother was like an overachiever, you know, and he's super smart. And it's just thinking about his commitment—and maybe this makes me an artist—well, he's an artist as well, but in terms of, like, say, these imaginary—like, for example, my mother's a chemistry professor, right. I couldn't fail—I wasn't into chemistry, but I couldn't effing fail an exam. So I studied with her for three, you know, for a couple weeks. I got a 95, a 90-whatever in two of the regions. So I'm that kind of style. If I can zone, zoom in and get it, you know. I was good at math. I was behind in English because of—well, living in Tanzania, it's sort of like when we arrived there, there were—it was a former British colony, so they were more advanced, obviously, than the Americans in terms of—then I got back and sort of fell behind. But when I apply myself, you know, I would say I could be a good student.

I tend to be thinking more—not linearly, but—not the linear way, but more in a, like, a spatial space, so it's more—I tend to—I never really thought about this, but I—yeah, thinking in images, you know, thinking of—there's different ways of thinking about—yeah, so I would say I'm highly perceptive, and I'm very intuitive and also can be very suggestive, you know. And, yeah, very hyper-conscious about, feel a lot of my energy went into, like, say, honestly just learning how to anticipate a situation where the—I'm sure it had some roots of being in an alcoholic family; alcohol's in the family—being, I mean, hyper-sensitive or hyper-intuitive and also—or when I came back from Tanzania, being aware of being called "faggot" before I was, that kind of situation, be uber aware. That said, when I apply myself, I can do well, obviously; you know, I went to good schools, et cetera.

But I, well, I can also be lazy, you know. A lot of the time, there's also just in terms of—is in daydreams and survival, is in daydreaming as a survival, as it's almost somehow to escape reality. And I think a lot of my time—and that's part of my—a lot of my creativity comes from when, eventually, when I focus and tapped into it, you know. A lot of it was also about how to negotiate space, and maybe I might have felt safe with. Does it make any sense or—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, that all resonates.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Also, sexually had a—not only was I a faggot. You know what I'm saying? Junior high school, but I was also the husband of, let's say, always the top head honcho boy. I was that kind of—yeah, I wasn't a cocksucker. I wasn't the gym—I wasn't the gym locker room cocksucker. I was the imaginary wife of a lot of the boys.

ALEX FIALHO: How so?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, it's more, it was just how what I—it was the effect they gave. It wasn't necessarily the sense that I was, you know, somebody with—they would laugh at me—"He's my wife"—because I had a certain demeanor. I sort of gave you—I could hang with the big boys because I was smart and I was also very intuitive and I was also attractive in a certain type of way. And I wasn't fighting, but I would definitely—I had the power of the mind and the power of intuition, and I was always, particularly the bad boys, you know, the small ones, there was something we might have had there. It was true; we may have never transgressed that aspect, but men were attracted to me in that kind of way, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: That all resonates in terms of how I know you and—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —think about you, as well. How about the economics at the beginning?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, my grandfather, the economist, you know, I felt that was a way out for me, coming from the background that I did. I think there was—well, my grandfather, he studied economics, so there was that, or I could become a teacher like my mother, or I had a high math aptitude, but, you know, I realized in order to jump to the next stage, you went to, like, this program at MIT during the summer.

Like my brother did prep. It was, like, an advanced program for minorities from all over the country, you know, maybe 15 of us, MIT for six weeks, something like that, and I did that. And I realized that wasn't really my interest, you know, but you sort of know, Oh, so that's—that person's really into math, you know what I mean? I could do it and I was good, but that wasn't—does this make any sense? I was also more interested, like—[laughs]—in the guy who was doing it, more attracted to him. It's an interesting matter how so much creative energy, or someone's energy, gets syphoned into somehow staying in a space with the imaginary or, like, fantasy, et cetera, and that's fascinating. I remember a friend of mine, Jacqui Bradley, she was saying to me right by the door—oh!

[Audio break.]

Hey, testing. Ginger tea spill. Let's see if it works.

[END OF SD01 TR01.]

ALEX FIALHO: So can you tell me more about the process—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: That's a beautiful photograph, by the way—that one by itself. I love that, honey. Yeah, I get it.

ALEX FIALHO: —the process that got you to becoming an artist, and studying art.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, during my sophomore year, second semester, I went over to London. I went over to—not London, but Amsterdam—I wanted to be Izod prep—and came back and dropped out of school. I came back with orange hair.

My brother was in a post-graduate fellowship from Harvard, a traveling fellowship, where he was studying African diasporic communities in Europe. For example, the Caribbean in London—I guess in Amsterdam would have been the Suriname—and where else was he? I think he was also in Italy as well. So I visited him in Amsterdam, and that was a reunion for us, you know, because he—I think he had realized that he had been—you know, we didn't really see each other. I went to visit him during his junior year of college, and we had had, you know, a difficult time. I think he was going through his healing process and he was trying to—we were having a rapprochement.

And so I—it was my second year of college, Wesleyan—I was out; I was, you know, at that point I was sort of out, but still a little, you know, relatively—how would I describe it?—finding my way at Wesleyan. And so I went over there and I dropped in—so I remember the first night I got there, feeling unattractive, feeling, you know, I don't know, feeling, maybe, just probably the residue of being in high school and getting rid of the braids, so it took two years to come into my own, really.

And, yeah, so when I came back—I went there; I had, you know, a couple of affairs there. It was just a watershed in terms of opening a space. I started taking photographs while I was there, and I came back, you know, and dropped out of school for a semester. I didn't go back to Wesleyan. I wind up, eventually did—but I wound up taking a semester off, took a French class at the New School, and a photography class at FIT.

I think that semester—I did go back and finish up my econ major; my grandfather was encouraging me. Remember, I was also very close to my grandparents, asked their opinion, you know. My grandfather, he and I were very, very close. And I was going back to finish my major, and it just wasn't happening. And so it was Lee, my mother's second husband, the man that raised me, my stepfather, who, you know, basically, "Let him do what he wants to do," because I wasn't happy.

And so that—I had taken a photography class; I had taken a photography class at the African-American center at the Malcom X House that Jackie O'Meally had set up. Jackie O'Meally is the wife, the former wife, of Robert O'Meally, you know, who is a [Romare] Bearden scholar, you know, an [Ralph] Ellison scholar, at Columbia, and again, I was also—I think I took a class with him. But he was someone, you know, he's a brilliant, brilliant man, and also a really interesting model for, you know, black gentlemanliness. And anyway, I don't know why I bring that up.

Anyway, I took—his wife set up a lab. She was teaching dance, and she was into photography as well, so I sort of started taking pictures, had a teacher of a class there at the Malcom X House, where I was living at the time, during which time we went down to actually—I was part of the—[laughs]—hard to believe, I was one of the [selection committee –LAH] to go down to interview—not to interview, but to suss out [Louis] Farrakhan, who we wanted to bring to speak at Wesleyan, which caused a huge controversy in '85. In fact, the demographics of Wesleyan—at least the people who were selected to come in afterwards might have been changed—because no longer were they selecting kids from urban—they were going for the Jack-and-Jill girls, straight out. After that—and we would talk about what was going to happen, the demographics of who was selected, and that they wanted definitely, you know, bougie folks after that. But that's a digression.

But anyway, so I—alright, so basically, it's my junior year; I decided to take, you know, photography. I took photo class with J. Seeley, an important photographer, who I learned a lot from him, in terms of really, you know, how to take a photograph, as well as Ellen O'Dench, who was head of the DAC, the Davidson Art Center [Weslyan University], you know. She wasn't head of the center; she was head of the Art Center, that housed an impressive Modernist, you know, photo collection. And I was introduced to people like—what's the photographer's name, the young photographer who died? Her mother's still living, is a well-known sculptor?

ALEX FIALHO: Francesca Woodman?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Francesca Woodman. And also, you know, 101 hits of, you know, modern photographers, from [Aaron] Siskind to, let's say, you know, André Kertész. So that was my introduction.

And I became close with her. She took me under her wing, and I also did—I think I started doing—I was an intern there, at the Davidson Art Center. I also took—so basically that was my thing my junior year.

I went back, and my brother just came in—time is getting sort of mushy—my brother had just gotten back from Europe, and he had brought me this makeup kit, and that was—I was living in this fraternity, literary fraternity, Alpha Delt, and doing a lot of drugs, was hanging out, you know, friends, a social scene. I was much more—I always was—clearly wealthier than I was, but I was sort of like: I had been traveling to Europe; I had been, you know, I had lived in New York; I was working at Patisserie Lanciani after college—not the college, after coming back. It was, you know, where I met Robert Mapplethorpe. So I was sort of like—that was my introduction to, let's say, the downtown New York scene. So hanging out in Club Area, going to Area, you know, other clubs, you know, Palladium, et cetera, while I was in college. So it sort of came—that's when I met Basquiat, in '85, you know—

ALEX FIALHO: When you came back to New York on breaks?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: When I came back from Amsterdam, I sort of, overnight—I remember the first night in Amsterdam, you know, one of the leading models had a—you know, took me home. And it was like overnight, that there was like this infusion of, let's say, you know, a shift in my sense of who I was, my sexuality, having another renaissance. I was having my renaissance, maybe the second one.

The first one had happened in Tanzania, let's say, from years ago—that was '85, so it was like, '85 to—so 10 years later. So I went from Tanzania, which was a certain idyllic sexual expression, freedom—I had two affairs, two long-term relationships, two relationships there. Then total shutdown, and then opened up again like in, beginning in Europe in '85.

Then I came back to the U.S. and that sort of—the scene was prime at that moment. It was, like, you know, the mid-'80s; it was, maybe, right around or during or before—there was obviously consciousness around AIDS, but it was also a time of a lot of sexual, you know, expression, at least for me, being where I was coming from in terms of being much more introverted, et cetera, and of hanging out, you know—I think I mentioned meeting Basquiat at Club Area—a bunch of people, et cetera.

ALEX FIALHO: What was it about Amsterdam and Europe that allowed that?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think—I don't know. Maybe—good question. Maybe—I mean, it's not uncommon, you know, to go abroad and have those types of experiences. Maybe there's—it's less, you know, the type of social oppression around sexuality, the complications around race, around cross-racial desire. There's that, and there's also being away from the family, being away from not only the family, but the confines of, you know, the university—all those things; it was something.

It was also the time that there was certain—I don't know why. Actually, that's a very interesting question, because I think at the time, in Europe, there was almost that—being with my brother, there almost became—not that it wasn't happening in the U.S., but I was exposed to a certain type of, let's say, cosmopolitanism there that was—in the social space with my brother and his friends, but also the social scene that was happening at that time, in terms of, let's say, pop music, for example, Bronski Beat. That was the age of consent. It was Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*. It was also Frankie Goes to Hollywood. So there was clearly a shift that was happening, in Boy George. It was something that was happening in popular culture that, by being absent at that particular time, sort of became the conduit with which I actually experienced that.

I'm sure that people in ports, who experienced that, like people in downtown New York scene, but I wasn't a part of that. Remember, I went from the Bronx to Tanzania, back to the Bronx, to Connecticut. That—and through Europe, I went to the downtown scene. So in a lot of ways I was—someone could say I was naïve, you know, going and coming from the boroughs, but that is probably what sort of saved my life, because I wasn't, let's say—when I went to Area that first night with my cousin Alex, I remember, you know, this guy offering us a bottle of champagne, and it was Basquiat.

And to find out, like that, you know, it was a—and he was really, really nice. He was lovely. But I was also very timid at the time. You know, who was this guy? Could I trust him? et cetera. I wasn't seasoned in the way that, "Oh, that would be great. What else do you have?" You know—[laughs]—I was much more, I was definitely a product of my grandparents, you know, churchgoing, certain type of education—you follow what I'm trying to say?

ALEX FIALHO: Definitely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: But through Amsterdam, coming back through working at the particular—getting a job. You know, I kind of had—it sort of gave me a certain flair. Getting a job downtown as a waiter, I sort of came into my own. I came into my own sexuality, also—not so much my sexuality, but the way in which it wasn't seen

through the prism, let's say, of a racialized society. Does that make any sense? Or, either racialized society or a "heterosexual/other" paradigm. Does that make any sense? Because there's also the racialized, but there's also the way in which, in the confines of, let's say, and the tight conventions of black heteronormativity that I was coming out of, despite how progressive, you know. Does that make any sense? So.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you have orange hair when you met Basquiat?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't know if I had—I'm sure I had something. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: How long were you in Amsterdam?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I was there for five weeks, I believe. Maybe four weeks. I was there for four weeks, and then I was in London for two—

ALEX FIALHO: So not too long, really. In relationship to its effect.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yeah. Exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: I heard about the hair in a few narratives, so I'm just curious—how did that come to be? Was that just a product of the radical change that you made lifestyle-wise—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, you know, my brother had his hair done while he was there. It was sort of like being, you know, it was almost like being with a—it was almost like the idea of, you know, getting—it was the style. You know, people getting their hair done, and also getting it cut in a certain way. It was clearly a break from, let's say, the pulse of variety in Afro—there was a way in which, you know, that there was an element of modernity, let's say, to it, post-modernity, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Were you taking photographs by now?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes, yeah. I was.

ALEX FIALHO: And then how long were you in New York working—before you went back to Wesleyan—art context?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Good question. I was in Europe for about, let's say, about a month, a month and a half, over spring break. So that would have been—I want to think that it was like—spring break is probably—winter break—probably six weeks, five weeks. So I went there for, like, an intersession-like thing. I did a two-week residency. I think I went to London first, if I'm not mistaken. Went to London first, and then that was a two-week thing with a friend of my father's. It was two alcoholics. It was a mess, honey. They were mean; it was Dickens-like, you know, weird thing, you know, using my money to go buy alcohol. But that's a whole other story. And cold—London was freezing.

And then I went from London, I believe, to Amsterdam. And so when I got back—I probably came back, probably in February to New York, and I took off that semester. And that's what I was taking—I'm taking a class in New York; I met—

ALEX FIALHO: What class?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The French class at the New School—

ALEX FIALHO: The French class.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —photography class at FIT. I studied with this guy Jim Collier, a photographer—that's his name—African-American photographer. I learned a lot about lighting from him. In fact, I ran into him not too long ago, a few years ago back. It was really good to just see him on the street. And then I was also working at this café that turns out where my future partner, one of my future partner's boyfriends, Kevin Walls, designed. And he was good friends with Robert Mapplethorpe.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me about meeting Robert.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Very—that's my one regret, one of the few regrets I have, of not photographing him when I went to his home. And I knew that it was him, you know; I had seen pictures of him. Apparently, I would have seen the *Black Book* by that moment.

While in Amsterdam, I should just say that I—there were two—that was very much an influencer, because I went to the bookstore there—there were two books. Clearly, I was starting to look into photography. I was starting to think about it in a different way, as opposed to just taking a photograph. It was two books I got at the bookstore

there. One was called Allan Sekula, [*Photography*] *Against the Grain*, and the other one was *Perspective* magazine. You'll have to get the correct spelling on, for that. But it was like, you know, a very—the Dutch are very good at design albums. But this is a critical journal on photography, and there was an article by Andres Serrano. So I always credit those two—seeing those two photographers, or artists, Serrano and Sekula, who I would later—both who were in an Archive—I mean. And one would become my mentor at CalArts, many years later. Which I never told him that, which is interesting. I never told him that I, yeah—

ALEX FIALHO: —thought of him as your mentor?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, now, he wasn't my mentor. He was a curator of the photo program. But that I first came across his book a few years before.

It's interesting how that happened, *Against the Grain*. And I had bought it, purchased it, there—because that was very different from the Modernist canon that I had been exposed to at Wesleyan—in Amsterdam, through those readings, seeing—I think *Piss Christ* [*Immersion (Piss Christ),* 1986] would have been done by then, or I think *Menstrual Blood* [*Milk and Blood,* 1986], or whatever else Serrano had in the book *Balance of Cooler*. I mean, it seemed obscure to me, but it was something that I obviously felt drawn to, you know, because I read it.

ALEX FIALHO: Were you engaging art, and art history, in those years prior at Wesleyan? When you say the Modernist tradition, were you being exposed to—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, I mean, I was exposed to—I took a class my first semester—

ALEX FIALHO: Okay.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —with well-known art historian [John] Paoletti. Yeah, I was taking classes. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And then, how long were you in New York at that stage?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I was in New York, let's say, that whole spring, and then through the fall, through the summer. I went back to school the following semester.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me about Area and Palladium and downtown, and its impact.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I mean, again, I was sort of, again, I came late to the game, you know. I remember meeting Michael Alig, you know, at Area. We almost had a relationship, and we didn't, thank God. I mean, not thank God, you know, I liked him. He was cute. He would wind up—I think he thought I was more butch than I was, or maybe he was projecting onto you.

But anyway, I remember hanging out—[laughs]—with he and his friends, and taking a taxi from, let's say, Area up to the house in the Bronx, where we crashed. And I didn't know it was supposed to run—they basically left the taxi hanging. And I was like—and this was totally new to me. These are kids who were club kids, you know, and I was like, you know, who was at Wesleyan, hanging out over—the one who was, you know, the good guy hanging out with these kids, you know what I'm saying?

I remember me eating in a restaurant with them, and someone said something mean—the waiter said something mean to me—and having Michael defend me. Because I was sort of like, I was—I mean, I had obviously had Africa; I had had my family; I had had all that experience, but I didn't know, you know, I didn't know the ways of the world, the type of, let's say, downtown sort of survivor. These kids were, you know, from—well, basically surviving, you know, and being able to navigate, negotiate multiple spaces. I mean, my experience is different, let's say, from [David] Wojnarowicz or Zoe Leonard, in terms of sex worker, drugs, et cetera. I had my own relationship to, like, other aspects, in terms of seduction, or—but that wasn't my particular narrative. Mine is more through, you know, AME, Africa, ANC. That's a whole—that's another trajectory.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a little more about your interaction with Robert Mapplethorpe. I'm interested in Lyle and Robert. And Robert's place.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, so I was a sophomore, a sophomore/junior. I said I loved his work. I think he gave me his number and I called him. And I was afraid to go by myself, and I took my brother. And that would have been—what year did Mapplethorpe—what year did he die? '89?

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: '89? Was it '89?

ALEX FIALHO: I believe.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Or was it earlier? We can look. Anyway, there was something, yeah, I think there was—I went by to see him, and, I don't know, maybe I wasn't authentic enough, I don't really know. I don't recall much of—I know it was '89; I know that I was with my brother. And that was sort of like taking my brother unannounced.

ALEX FIALHO: Was he asking you to come over to be photographed, or—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, I think it was just going by to see his work. I think—who knows what it was? But clearly, it was two of us and not one. And I knew that—intuitively, I knew to do that, you know; I knew that there was something there. I mean, clearly I was interested in seeing the studio. Maybe that's not even true. I was interested. But at the same time it was—I took my brother. So that would have been—and I had had relationships, so like, you know, basically that signaled something—that I was here, I was interested, but I also had a chaperone, basically.

ALEX FIALHO: Made sense.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. [Laughs.] So that—needless to say, that did not lead to anywhere. I mean, he could have taken portraits of us both, but, yeah, so it was—and that was like, I think, the last time—I had maybe seen him once at Keller's, maybe a couple of years before. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Did you ride the downtown wave for those, that spring and summer?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I did, yeah. I mean, I was either hanging out—

ALEX FIALHO: Living where?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I was—good question. I was—well, I was living at—good question—I was living at my mother's house in the Bronx, my house. But I was also crashing a lot on, at Murray Hill with my cousin Alex. So we were doing—I was staying with them a lot of the time, downtown. But, basically, I was hanging out—yeah, that was basically with my Uncle Harold and Aunt Pat, and their two daughters, in Murray Hill, and sleeping down. Guess what—I might have been sleeping—where was I sleeping? I guess I was sleeping in one of the beds down there, yeah. It was interesting, because I lost a lot of time downtown, and then I was also—I was involved with—I had met, through Alex's boyfriend at the time, this guy named Lyle—who was also named Lyle, and we were hanging out a lot. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: You went back to Wesleyan in the fall. What year is this?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. '85, '86.

ALEX FIALHO: And by that point had you decided to pursue art, and Lee had opened up that avenue in some senses?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think—good question. I think I went back to finish econ, and then that semester wasn't working. And then I think that spring—that would have been the spring, yeah, because I took off the summer, the spring and the summer—that fall. So I think that—I think during that semester I changed majors. Yeah, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And how did that go? The development of your work at that stage?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I just—at that point I stopped doing drugs. I fell into it, and I just basically—I stayed an extra semester and just really, you know, hyper-hyper-focused on my work; started then, started exploring.

I was taking a lot of courses in African-American literature. I was studying a lot with Hazel Carby, you know, in 19th-century women's literature. We read a lot of, you know, Skip Gates, who was providing, looking or exploring for a historical framework for the work I was doing. I started exploring the White Face series, the early stage of that, a lot of nude studies—really doing a lot of, you know, nude self-portraits, portraits of others.

And then over the last year—it was during, I guess, my last year; it was the summer of, let's say, '87—I went to the Maine Photographic Workshops for a two-week workshop on the zone—not the zone system, but on advanced printing. I became an excellent printer. And I took a class at the Maine Photographic Workshops, and that was a way to learn how to, basically, to extract or to develop these prints in the way they needed to be printed.

So at that point, once it all connected, once I made that commitment, let's say, to, This is what I'm doing, you

know, I stopped doing—I was doing a lot of Ecstasy at the time, A guy, one of my boyfriends—I should say that I had a few boyfriends, a couple boyfriends, at college, Wesleyan. One of them was an Ecstasy dealer, who wasn't exactly a boyfriend. Basically, he was straight, but at the time, a lot of, you know, mid-'80s, a lot of—androgyny was in. I was androgynous in a certain type of way. So a lot of, let's say, you know, straight men were—you know, it was a lot of experimentation. It's so different, so strange. Maybe, actually, maybe it's a return to it right now, you know, in the young generation. But it was definitely, you know, it definitely was much, much more fluid.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's talk a little bit about those projects that you were making by the end of your time at Wesleyan—*Reflection of Past Life Through Glass* and *Americas* and *Constructs*. Talk me through your development of those projects, because those are still really resonant bodies of work, right. The Guggenheim just collected *Americas (Triptych)*, and that's from undergrad.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes. Well, basically, as I mentioned before, once I turned my lens, if you will—focus, you know—onto photography, it became the things, the conduit—the things got distilled. So my interest in history, in pop culture, in vaudeville—all those things became distilled through, and pictorially distilled, in the image. All the things became distilled through the image itself. So my interest, the study of, let's say, you know, portraiture, or Modernism, or the performative, or self-portrait, the body—all those things sort of came distilled, let's say, through the images I was working, through the performative gestures I was engaging and also photographing.

And so the whiteface series, I mean, those works—I was doing a lot of nudes, portraits; a lot of theatrical began then, in terms of, like, just shooting. But when the first photograph from the whiteface series—that became my first series—was done, I think it was soon after my brother had returned from Amsterdam, and he came up. He was working on this film set there, and he brought me this makeup kit up to Wesleyan. And I think he had known, because a year before, I had gone—which I can't, to this day, I don't know where—I think those negatives are in storage someplace. I hope my mother didn't throw those negatives out, but I know I have them somewhere.

I did a series of shows, eventually, of self-portraits with a friend of mine—Fred, my best friend at the time—in my bedroom, color, super-punkish, like really, like, drag, you know, cross-race, drag, punk—I mean, really ultra, really out there. And so it's curious how that energy got refined into the black and white, which has a more, you know, evocative of a certain type of classicism, et cetera.

But when my brother came back from Amsterdam, he brought me this makeup kit. I did a couple photographs at night. I very distinctively remember that. I was tired of hanging out. I was hanging out, as I said before, I said a while ago, now, with Erika Cosby, a lot of kids. There was a hip, cool crowd.

And some are affluent, super-affluent, but they were hip and cool, and I was part of that. I was, you know, sort of part of that crowd. But then with photography, I sort of left that trying, hanging out or being in the periphery of that, and so they pierced through that, and found my own sphere, my own. So—and a lot of people are in the photographs, that I was hanging out, with, like, you know, Kym Ragusa, or Stacey Rouse; these are people who are in the photographs, you know, et cetera.

And I found my own voice. So I became less sort of, like, a hip, cool kid who traveled to Europe or whatever, to someone who was now creating works that were, you know, people were looking at. I had developed an eye, basically. And that eye was very much influenced, and parallel, but influenced by the coursework I was doing at the time. Namely, a lot of studies like, I've mentioned Hazel Carby's seminal analysis of, let's say, the 19th—the minstrel culture; also you know, the notion of passing, the radical 19th-century black women's fiction; you know, challenging stereotypes. Also challenging stereotypes of the tragic mulatto, looking at its subversive role in, let's say, antebellum, as well as, like, yeah, in literary theories.

I was very much, not so much as linking, not illustrating, but—or even, like, vaudevillian culture, thinking about, you know, image in vaudeville, in terms of going back to the 19th century, the fact that actors, that black people were portrayed by not only white actors, but white male actors, so really flipping a lot of this role reversal. So basically mining the discourse that I was being exposed to, finding a pictorial way in which to somehow engage, not to illustrate, but to somehow draw, to extract something from that. Yeah. So that became my undergraduate thesis.

ALEX FIALHO: That're incredibly striking to this day, as many people acknowledge and will continue to acknowledge, I'm sure. How did you develop that eye? And to use your own phrase, how did you come to, I mean, honestly, these really stark but confrontational, raw, incredible early works?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I mean, it's curious. I think that, with the—good question. I don't necessarily see them as raw. I think they're quite refined in terms of, you know, their—

ALEX FIALHO: True.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The structure and the, you know—they're very, you know, they're portraits; they're using very distilled symbolism, whether the bowler hat, or the crinolines, so, basically, working.

There's also study in lighting, black and white, very much influenced, obviously, [by] looking at some of the work I've been exposed to, whether that's Robert Mapplethorpe or, let's say, [André] Kertész, or, let's say, Francesca Woodman, or Van Der Zee, et cetera.

And really trying to—not even really trying, but sort of like also in emerging, the pop culture, as I mentioned, being Bronski Beat, you know, from '85, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, seeing how in the mid-'80s, how a lot of, at that point—and I think it's, again, you know, emerging now. Beyoncé and hot pepper sauce, you know, or what had happened in the last two years in terms of her shift becoming more politicized, and that was very much part of, let's say, pop culture that I was exposed to.

For example, I remember in Frankie Goes to Hollywood, in [an] '85 video, there was an image of, let's say, you know, Ronald Reagan as, like, Frankenstein the green monster, in terms of his lack of, you know, utter lack, and criminal silence around HIV, around AIDS.

So I think there's a way in which that I was aware about that, but also obviously, Boy George, but how this almost, to use some of those cultural references that I had been exposed to, by being in Amsterdam, orange hair, you know, hanging out, the DOK [nightclub], desire, you know, sexuality, even from a young child, learning how my body was, you know, even a lot of my, you know, young men—I mean, young men who, let's say, were part of the ANC, how I was perceived. So very much aware of again being a wife to a lot of these, you know, to these guys who were good. You know, the tough guys in school. Very much aware of allure, desire, looking, seduction, androgyny, gender.

So a lot of things were almost an outward manifestation to tropes of a very internal process. And so I think that's what it was, in a way. So it was less of a, Oh, let me put on a wig. Because, as what's-her-name said, you know, many years later—Anna Deavere Smith—"I could put on a wig and try to be Billie Holiday, but the wig is just an artifice, accoutrement, is what one actually embodies, is able to somehow deliver." So it was almost a conflation of that.

There was a way in which, in a pictorial way, to be able to manifest what has been an essential strategy, let's say, from a young age. Also ambivalence around, maybe, at the once ambivalence around skin color, but also using it as a way to—that exists in my mother, for example, being my mother, in receiving a brown paper bag, when she was pledging, all that type of stuff.

There's a way in which, I think as a child, and being a queer child, one in which—I remember, after Tanzania, being perched on my mother's living room—and it's the one time, I think, she only became—I pushed her to the—when I was perched on the couch with glue-on nails, you know, crazy glue-on nails, perched on the couch, and she grabbed my hand: "What is this?" I think that was in those photographs. It was almost as if to say, well, that I'm going to sacrifice the nails, because, you know, that was the condition, you know, the fact that—she didn't say, "If you want to stay in this house, you can't wear those nails," but that was almost, I guess, you know—[laughs]. I mean, I could have gone a number of ways. I could have been—I'm not sure I would have been pre-op or anything, you know, like that, but there was definitely that energy. I could have—like, my brother was even in this film; I think I could have gone that way, you know, in terms of androgyny; a lot of people were going that way. I mean, obviously, *Paris Is Burning* came out of that. But I obviously chose a different route. But the revenge, if you will, within the pictorial landscape.

ALEX FIALHO: Great. This is really great. Thank you for just diving in the way you are.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me a little bit more about the process of those early photographs. Where are you taking them? What camera are you using?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay, I—it's so funny because the camera I—my stepfather—I had a really nice Nikon camera, and on the eve of taking my class, first class, at—second class; my first class was African-American department, at Malcolm X House, I should say—the first official photography class in terms of in the art school was—on the eve of that—with Jay Seeley—my camera was stolen at the fraternity. I left it on the table. And I was devastated by that. But then I went there; I showed up at class the next day without a camera. I showed up the first day, and my professor, it was credit him that he pulled out a K, Pentax K1000. Well, he's, you know, pointing—well, it's not a point-and-shoot, but it was a very simple but really good camera. And I took remarkable—but you know, it doesn't have a Nikon lens, of course, but it's still a very good camera. And I was able to take my first series of photos on that camera.

So that was primary. All these I shot in, hard to believe, all these I shot with—the early photographs were shot—let's say, the early, early ones, like the whiteface—the first—the three of them that were done in my—a couple of them, for example, that were done in the context of my bedroom. For example—

ALEX FIALHO: Your dorm room, in a sense?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: My dorm room. For example, this photograph right here, this one right here is my first photograph I have taken.

ALEX FIALHO: *Ecstasy #2*?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: *Ecstasy #2*.

ALEX FIALHO: '87, '88—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: '87 or—

ALEX FIALHO: First photograph you've taken, meaning—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: First photograph—I attribute this—this is probably my first art photo I took, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: In the *Blow Up* catalogue?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In the *Blow Up* catalogue. And it's dated '87-'88, but it's really—all of them '87-'88—but this is probably taken '86. And this is done—

ALEX FIALHO: Why is it dated '87-'88? Printed, or—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, because the whole series is dated '87-'88. So basically, I did not get published, but the photograph itself, it's probably—it was taken basically—this is the breakthrough photograph. That's the breakthrough one. At Alpha Delt. For my first photo. Probably mid-semester, yeah, mid-semester of my first class. Photo class.

ALEX FIALHO: Why is it a breakthrough for you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: That's a good question. I don't know. I think in it, it captures—the photograph captures a certain embryonic almost, like, almost a breaking through. It's almost like a—well, it's a release. It's almost coming out. It's almost a prime—it's a primal scream, primal gesture. It feels very African. It also feels very primal. It's performative and it's also—it plays on a similar motif that comes later due, using the mouth. You know, it's about articulation of absence of speech, or all those things.

ALEX FIALHO: Is *Ecstasy #1*, which is on the page next to it, also—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It's around the same time, but if you're looking at both of these photographs, *Ecstasy #2—Ecstasy #1* is when I actually go into the studio. This was done with the equivalent of, let's say, a goose lamp, you know, college light, that I put very close to my body to get the reading and be able to get probably a 30th of a second, you know, whatever. So hence, you have the mouth in focus, but everything else falls out of focus. Whereas, I took that same energy into the studio where now you're actually working with, you know, a velvet chair that's there or a velour chair, or velvet chair. There's a more, you know, maybe more precise lighting, but the expression is still there. But it is curious, the fact that this—that *#2* actually precedes *#1* in terms of the dating.

ALEX FIALHO: That's incredible to me.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Why?

ALEX FIALHO: I don't know, it's that you're 22 and just going for it. And that's what's coming out.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well.

ALEX FIALHO: Really early on. I'm debating direction. Let's stay with this series of early works for a little bit longer. You continued the whiteface series into the *Americas*?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, basically, the whiteface series, the *Americas*, comprises—well, the *Americas*—good question. There were 20 photographs in total. Ten non-whiteface works, 10 whiteface works. That was my undergraduate thesis.

ALEX FIALHO: Called the *Americas*?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No. That was called *A Reflection of Past Life Through Glass*.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Out of that came the *Americas (Triptych)* that—I pulled a triptych out of those 20 images.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Once I left from Wesleyan and went to CalArts, when the—began a discussion around the work, because, as you know, a year later I found myself at CalArts. And at that time for a semester, I had met, let's say, Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste from Sankofa [Film and Video Collective—AF], from Black Audio Film Collective, as well [as] Sonia Boyce and Martina Attille, and they—so in '89, as soon as '89, a year or two later after the photographs were being taken—well, a year later, '87-'88, the works were getting talked about and written about. So at that point—

ALEX FIALHO: Rightfully so.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, I was beginning to—and this is in the British context—I was beginning to, let's say, have to somehow come up with language or to name something that had not yet—I had not yet named.

It wasn't like CalArts; it was—which was more about, you know, critical theory and about, less about the image itself that—does it make any sense, in a way, that I almost had to catch up to the work? Because the work had been made, then I'm graduating; I'm graduating, and then a year later, my second semester, or my first year of grad school, where people are talking about the work. But I still hadn't—I'm catching up. So the *Americas (Triptych)* emerged out of that. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So with what, *Constructs*? *Constructs* came—is dated '89, so that's what? That's like a year later. And *Constructs* was this guy named Rama. Rama was from—where was he from? Bakersfield, California. And Rama was an out, queer guy, you know, super smart. We never fooled around, but we were friends. I liked him.

So I left Wesleyan, you know—which there's a political thrust, and obviously, Wesleyan was very much engaged in the anti-apartheid movement. There was that energy, you know, feminism, but there wasn't really discussion, let's say—as far as I remember—of, let's say, AIDS or sexuality. There was around sexuality. There was a gay organization that I would attend meetings on occasion. But when I got to CalArts, I immediately fell into this hyperactive, excuse me, hyper-political landscape, you know, where I was studying with people like John Greyson, the Canadian filmmaker, queer theorist, to, let's say, Catherine Lord, who is a friend, who was my—she was the dean as well.

There at CalArts, you had a mentor, then you had an adviser. She was my adviser, and I think Allan [Sekula] was my mentor, something like that. And as I went from, like, you know, a relatively Modernist program to, a year later, like, a super-charged, super-political landscape where there was awareness around, you know, the AIDS crisis. There was a discussion around AIDS activism, et cetera. So I actually came—I was not aware of, let's say, as far as I know, in retrospect, of—when was ACT UP formed? In '89? When was ACT UP?

ALEX FIALHO: '87.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: '87. So, basically, I was sequestered at school. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So, from New York, I would go out. But I was in New York, to the Bronx, family, and then maybe through clubs. And obviously, I was aware of HIV; I was aware of—clearly even when I was in Europe—I clearly was aware of, like, obviously condoms, et cetera. But it wasn't till I got to the West Coast, I became, you know, much more exposed and aware of, let's say, AIDS activism.

So *Constructs* came out of that, because when I got there, my first semester, a friend of mine—I don't mean the guy Rama who I became friends with. I had two good friends, you know, a few good friends there, several good friends, actually, but he would—I liked him because he was, like, super queer, super political, and super out. I mean, he reminded me of—[laughs]—he was just really young, you know, from Bakersfield, and he's not fucking with nobody. You know, super active. And he was curating a show, I think my first semester, and—it could have been second semester—and I stalled and I stalled. He asked me to do something, and I said, you know, "I'll think about it."

And so that night, I went and did these photographs, the *Constructs* images. They were my first breakthrough

photographs there, because I had sort of shut down my first semester. You know, it was hard. I was having a hard time making work. I was not familiar with the language that they were speaking, so it took me several, you know, several months, you see, to get acclimated to try and understand the language and also just the level of intense critique. It was very, very different for me. It was a challenge, I should say.

So it must have been second semester that I probably went—I graduated a semester late. So I graduated amidst the mid-year. I graduated '88. The spring of '88 is when I graduated, that fall of '88, I was at CalArts. In Europe in the summer, and then CalArts. The honeymoon was over, you know. I had landed on the West Coast, and I had been thrust into that, and I put myself in that place. And so that was '88. Yeah, so when was ACT UP? It started '87?

ALEX FIALHO: '87.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, so it was a year after.

ALEX FIALHO: And that's actually—when I was pausing to decide the direction, I was going to take us into the direction of a conversation around HIV/AIDS. So it seems like that's the fitting way that we're going here. So tell me about the first time that you heard about HIV/AIDS.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: [Exhales.]

ALEX FIALHO: It probably wouldn't have been named as such, perhaps.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, I think—no, I think it was. And I think I remember—well, my mother is a scientist, so she was, you know, always super aware of, like, you know—she was concerned about me going to the West Coast to go to grad school. She was concerned about San Francisco. She—about me getting exposed. You know, I was moving to San Francisco Art Institute.

And so I think just how I read about even—I remember, I would always follow what she was reading. I remember she was reading James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*. And I remember similarly reading that—similar to reading that—because it's interesting, she would never say, "You should read Baldwin." That wasn't the kind of teacher—that wasn't the kind of mother she was, that, "You should read this." But she—it was by example, let's say. I saw her—my mother was a reader, you know. And so her lounging in bed, reading *Just Above My Head*, I—so it was by example; so I became curious about that.

And I remember reading the term "faggot" in the book *Just Above My Head*. I remember reading the term "faggot," and delving into Baldwin. Does that make any sense? Because it was something that clearly—and I'm not sure if she thought maybe that was too mature for me. So it is curious in terms of thinking about her form of pedagogy, because it's less about, "Oh, these books will help you." I mean, she exposed me to things. But it was always about through example, as opposed to—demonstrating as opposed to me saying, "Well, this is what you need to read." Does that make any sense? So, yeah, so—

ALEX FIALHO: And then having—expecting you to follow a lead, in a sense?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I mean, maybe not an expectation. Maybe—yeah, maybe it was an expectation. Yeah, maybe that's just how it works in the context of my family. But it was more like—as opposed to prescribing or directing you. I mean, clearly, we had stuff we learned in school, et cetera. But it was more about watching and observing and being curious. And so I think she might have pointed an article out to me.

I remember once asking—I asked her what hemorrhoids was. Because I might have read something about, maybe, I don't know, gay sex and hemorrhoids. I remember her doing this little—[laughs]—to this day, I remember her doing this little illustration and drawing out what a hemorrhoid was for me, you know. So she was that kind of mother. She would, you know—but she would draw. I mean, some mothers would say, "Why do you ask?" You know, that wasn't her style. She would draw it. She drew whatever you asked it was.

ALEX FIALHO: If you asked, she drew it.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. Well, not that she would always draw it, but that was a way she—at that particular time, that was probably the most efficient way she could say it or express it or share it or illustrate it to me, so I would actually understand.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And so—but yes, I'm sure she—did she point that and somebody say, "Well, I'm concerned about HIV or AIDS, blah blah blah," and cut out an article? She would never do that. But I'm sure the article would have been there, or something like that, or I would have, might have, heard about it, let's say, going to, maybe, at that point, we were talking about if I was going to maybe a club. I'm trying to think about—

so we were talking about '89, so I would have been going maybe to Tracks, maybe one of those places, and clearly there might have been Gay Men's Health Crisis or one of the—what is it?—GMAD, Gay Men of African Descent. There might have been those, clearly, those guys setting up, let's say, outside of a club.

ALEX FIALHO: Would you have heard about it before? Maybe in the '85 downtown moment?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't know. I think it might have been, let's say, people talk—I think people would have been practicing, or talking about, but it was not—from my understanding. I might have heard about it—did I hear about it from my brother? That's a good question. No, probably it's more like in the cultural-social sphere, like, seeing it maybe at clubs. Seeing it, like, in gay spaces, like, when they do those, you know, an intervention, or before, you know, if maybe Gay Men's Health Crisis, or Gay Men of African Descent has set up some sort of booth outside when you walk inside the entrance, probably in that space. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Because I wouldn't have been at a sex club at that point. So it would have probably been in that sphere, or at a bar. There might have been something at a bar. But I was not, for example, I was not a young—I was not hanging out. Like I go to the Gay and Lesbian Center now. That was not on my radar as a child. That was not in—that wasn't the space.

ALEX FIALHO: How did it come to really start impacting you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: What?

ALEX FIALHO: HIV.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Probably, as I said, on the West Coast through being at CalArts, became much more aware of it. And definitely in LA, at that point they were talking about—because then when I went up to LA, I was going out more and—you know, bars and stuff like that, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you tell me more about that time and how it started impacting you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Can you be more specific?

ALEX FIALHO: Of course. Did you have friends who were becoming HIV-positive? What were you hearing about it? And how were you internalizing it?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay. I think I probably was reading about it in newspapers or magazines. Yeah, probably in newspapers and magazines. I'm just trying to think, trying to go back to—I don't recall—and even maybe I heard about it at, let's say, CalArts. I mean, excuse me, at Wesleyan. But that's something that was slightly removed, being Connecticut, from that space. Because I did have, in, like, in '87, '86, I was—I had an affair with the first guy, like, you know, who, that I had, you know, penetrative sex with. Charles. And, like, we were not using condoms. And so would I have been conscious of it then? You know, I wasn't. And—but I do remember—

ALEX FIALHO: And at that point you're about 21, 22?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I'm 20—20. 20. No. I do remember—no. Now I think about it, a friend of mine, this woman Lisa, she had mentioned it, about using condoms. And she was very sexually active. She was ahead of—you know, she was very sexually active. She was sexually active. And yeah, I was sort of like—maybe I was innocent, you know, because I wasn't, but yeah, I mean, this is complicated. I'm just trying to think about—really? Was it really when I got—that I became conscious of it? I mean, I was obviously conscious of it before, but in terms of, like, to politically understand it, probably wasn't until, let's say, when I was—probably '88. Yeah, in that sense. Yeah, '88, I would say.

ALEX FIALHO: And what were some of the political understandings that you started to come to?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, just in terms of my—I guess I was fortunate enough that talking about AIDS activism—a lot of the things that Douglas mentioned, let's say—Douglas Crimp mentioned in his book—what was it? *Melancholia and Moralism*, when he, you know, talks about, you know, Patient Zero. I mean, these are all firsthand—particularly Patient Zero, or Danny, you know, all of these are all—and it was interesting in his book, just seeing it a few months ago that, seeing—or Gregg Bordowitz. And, you know, his collaboration with Doug Crimp. Or I think it was an essay that was, you know, that was in *October*. These are all seminal essays that we were being exposed to. We were also reading. At the same time, being in the—what time are you leaving tonight? Being in the social—

ALEX FIALHO: One more hour.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Or not.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Being in the social sphere where I was becoming more aware of it. Does it make any sense? You know, that there clearly had been a shift that was happening around—that things felt even different than they did three years before. It felt different, let's say, than, let's say, in '85 in Amsterdam. You know, when there was—yeah. Yeah. So.

ALEX FIALHO: Did that start impacting your work at the beginning?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: What?

ALEX FIALHO: An awareness around AIDS?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think—I mean, it's complicated. Did it start impacting my work? I don't know if it impacted—I think not so much. Well, in the sense that *Constructs* was—as well as later works—was almost an aggressive assertion of sex-positiveness, yes. In that sense, the understanding that there was a clamping down. There was a prohibition against the body. And at the same time, I was just sort of—I was just coming out, if that makes any sense. So there was—

ALEX FIALHO: As an artist.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: As an artist. Well, also as an artist, also being—I mean, I wasn't just coming out. But having been on the West Coast, on the East Coast, coming out, being away from my family, being away from the social sphere in which I grew up in, also being on the West Coast, being in an environment that fostered sex-positive—also sex awareness or, you know, and not just around AIDS, but around, let's say, pornography. Around, like, sex work, et cetera—there was an awareness around the body, et cetera.

So I think it impacted me to the extent that I understood, you know, the necessity to—not only to create but to explore, let's say, a sexual identity. To explore the possibility of the body and the contradictions around the body. As opposed to someone saying, "This isn't here." Because I was—I did, for example, mention seeing, you know, a lot of the early, obviously, the *AIDS Demo Graphics*, you know, Gran Fury, et cetera. The fact that there was clearly a debate that was going on, and mine was also about a certain affirmation around the body and sexuality, et cetera.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's—since we're in more or less a full CalArts moment—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: —tell me about how you got there.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I got to CalArts because after I got—you want heat or no? More heat or less heat? Fine?

I got to CalArts because I went to—I found out that there was a—after undergraduate school I decided I wanted to go to grad school either way. I mean, since I basically had had basically a, you know, a year and a half of, like, intense, you know, art school, you know, I mean art study, at Wesleyan, I wanted to somehow continue that discussion, continue the work, you know? I was onto something. I mean, clearly, I knew that I had touched something, and I wanted to create. There was a yearning to, you know, I'm not sure "to create"—a yearning to be in a space where I could continue. Clearly, I was going to continue my education.

That was something that was instilled in me from a young child. You know, that's what we do. You know, that's what my grandparents did. That's what we did. Period. And the importance of that. So that was a given. So I thought I was going to go to grad school. So I was looking at—I think I applied—I looked at Yale. And at that time I would become—you know, I was pretty savvy around just thinking about, like, what—similar to with high school, I wanted to—I was aware of schools, where to go and just being aware of what would be good to go. So I think I looked at Yale. I think I applied to two places. I think I applied to three places: Yale, San Francisco Art Institute, and CalArts.

And fortunately, I did not get into Art Institute, which is great. That's not true. I don't even think I applied there, actually. They were recruiting me. I applied to there; I applied to Yale; and I applied to CalArts. But the Art Institute was recruiting me. And at this particular—because I had the portfolio, the whiteface work, you know, *Reflection of Past Life Through Glass,* at an art fair. And then they were really, the Art Institute—I think it was Art

Center, actually, now that I think about it, which is a very good school. A very, very good school.

ALEX FIALHO: SF Arts Center?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Pasadena Art School. It's a very—it's more of a really good program, but I was being recruited not for what would become my thing, you know. The art school itself, but it was more for, let's say, for the photo school, which is—these are people who, you know, it's the real deal in terms of, let's say, high-end—not so much commercial, but commercial, but, you know, it's a high-, high-, high-end, a really good art school, but less theoretically inclined.

And then I met Catherine Lord and her then-partner Millie Wilson, who both became my professors who—and particularly, Catherine, who told me to come to—she suggested me, you know, in her own inevitable way, encouraged me to come to CalArts, and that's what I did.

And there was something very—I was very attracted—I mean, not in a sexual way, but there was something—I mean, she clearly wasn't, you know—I mean, I assume that she was a lesbian. But, you know, she was cerebral but also how—in a way—have you met her? Catherine Lord is, you know, very, not dry but, you know, intense, but also very butch but also very regal. And so I wound up going to CalArts.

And I went out to visit. I went out to visit. And Deb Willis, you know, Hank [Willis Thomas]'s mother, had—[laughs]—put me—no, I think—was it Deb? Either it was Deb or it was my friend. I think it was both Deb and my—and—oh, I didn't mention my *Essence* days. We should go back to that.

ALEX FIALHO: We're going to get there.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And that goes back to '85 when I got back—I worked for *Essence* magazine. I was interning there in '85 right after grad school—no, right after coming back from Europe. And my—Greg Gray, he was the art director at the time. I applied for the internship in photography. And beautiful photo editor, but was tragically homophobic.

So Greg, her boss, the art director, took me under his wing, and he brought me an amazing—one of my first photo books, on Horst; you know, it's a famous fashion—European fashion, you know, modern photography. And he noticed I was, you know—major shoots and made a lot of—working for that magazine, I realized that I did not want to do that. I did not want to do fashion and photography because for me, you know, this—I met Renee Cox, actually, at *Essence*.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And the superficiality. I mean, it was almost like an apparition when I saw her. She came in, you know, tight, tight, torn blue jeans, before they were fashionable. You know, blonde, blonde, you know, dread tresses. And I got exposed to that world of, like, you know, magazine editorial work which, you know, 10 years later I would be shooting myself, but through a fine arts lens as opposed to being a, you know, commercial photographer per se.

But how did I get on that? So it was Greg, the art director, had introduced—both he and Deb Willis introduced me to Todd Gray. And at that time, I remember going to see Todd. Todd, you know, Todd Gray is a photographer. He's a close—a good friend of mine, a very close friend of mine. And he was Michael Jackson's photographer from, I guess, from then, one of the first albums, to *Off the Wall*. And Todd was super, you know, very handsome, African-American photographer whose parents—I mean, he was—he went to CalArts undergraduate. He was back for his—10 years my senior, maybe 10 or 12. And he was back at CalArts to get his master's degree, to study with Allan as well. And he was a big man on campus, you know? Handsome, et cetera, straight. And he had maybe, you know, 50 album covers under his belt. Everyone from—he took Stevie Wonder to Ghana. He shot him in Ghana, like, you know, 20 years ago, just to give you an idea.

So I remember wearing this sweater that I had, I think, convinced my mother to buy for herself, but I really was wearing myself. It was a Agnès B white sweater that sort of, like, fit me—[laughs]—you know. So, you know, it was when androgyny was in. So it was, like, a white sweater that only came to maybe two inches above my wrist. And blue jeans, you know, light blue jeans with the cuff and a pair of white Keds. And I remember Todd seeing me, and someone said, "Let me see"—[laughs]—I must have, you know, because I was, you know, I was queer.

And I remember him seeing the whiteface, you know: "Let me see your portfolio?" You know? But he said it in such a way, I felt like he was, you know, questioning me, et cetera. Because he was the big man on campus. And *zoom*. And that was history. There's something about the power of those photographs of, like, no matter how sissified or what I was, that they—once they look at the picture, bitch meant business. So that was my entry into—[laughs]—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: That was my entry into CalArts, you know? So, and it was through Catherine Lord, and so that was my—[laughs]—that was my time there. So it was, yeah, you know, it was a challenge at first because—yeah, it was a challenge. Yeah. Because I was, you know, I was from New York; I was an East Coast—LA is a complicated city to get into at first, and there's also a certain language that people speak that I was not familiar with. It took me awhile adjusting to—also I was one of the few people of color in the program. You know, it was also, you know, Valencia's conservative.

If you see the seven-hour documentary on O.J. Simpson, that gives you a climate of LA, the fascist police. And then I'm also an hour outside of LA. There's a cross burning, you know, in Valencia, California, where the school is. So it's sort of, like, you know, it's like, Wild Wild West. But then you have this elite art school in this conservative, right-wing conservative enclave and with super-progressive politics around sexuality and gender. And they're just beginning to explore the discussion around race in the context of the institution. So that's when I sort of entered into the scene.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your relationship to AIDS activism as it was developing at the end of the '80s—whether it's ACT UP, Gran Fury in a New York context, Queer Nation in an LA context—were you seeing this work? Were you going to protests? Were you influenced by the graphics and imagery that were coming out at that moment?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: That's an interesting question and good question. Again, I mean, it's interesting because in thinking about this, I realize I was sequestered by different degrees along the way. Whether sequestered by my family being the family I came from, you know, in the Bronx, having, you know, sequestered—you know, I was protected.

ALEX FIALHO: The upbringing?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The upbringing, yeah. The upbringing. Then Wesleyan and then even at CalArts, where I was exposed to AIDS activism. I wasn't one who was demonstrating on the—I wasn't demonstrating in the street, but I very much was involved in queer theory or AIDS, you know, AIDS activism. But I wasn't someone, I mean, AIDS, you know, the theory around AIDS activism, but I did march. I mean, clearly, I marched. I did not march in Washington.

But that's why I think it was so important to have that photograph of John Greyson, let's say, and the third photograph that opens up my book in—that's going to open up my book in—my upcoming book with Aperture, because of him sleeping at the AIDS—him sleeping at the '89 San Francisco gay parade. Because that was my access, you know, the fact that he introduced me to queer theory.

ALEX FIALHO: He was your teacher at CalArts?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: He was my teacher at CalArts. You know, he was also a mentor and a friend, whose house I stayed with, you know, during the summer. So I was very much, I was involved but maybe not—I want to say tangently. I wasn't like a Gregg Bordowitz, for example, or, let's say, Tom Kalin. I wasn't. In fact, I'm younger than them, both of them. But—maybe I'm younger than them. Gregg and me are around the same age. But I wasn't in New York. I was in LA. But I was also within the academic thrust. And that maybe has always been the critique of me in a certain sense, that I found my own way.

That said, I was also—I mean, it's complicated because I think, in a way, how do I—how does one create or—because one strategy was to say that I did that with maybe doing that show with Rama where we made the work for *Constructs*. And that way, that it wasn't about AIDS activism, but it was about challenging the policing of the body. The queer body, the queer black body. There was that.

There was also—I mean, and maybe I was. I'm very much involved, let's say—and there was that first shoot in '89 that I met, let's say, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for example, or, let's say Marlon Riggs. Or that same year, that same semester, Essex Hemphill. So I remember meeting with—you know, and becoming very much aware of, you know, becoming a good friend of both Marlon and Essex and having them at my home, for example, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: In—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In LA. In the home that my then-partner, soul mate, Tommy Gear, and I shared, that apartment that we inherited, let's say, from Catherine Lord and Millie Wilson.

So I think, in a way, that I was very much—I did go to demonstrations, but I wasn't—unlike my friend Rama, who was all about AIDS activism and being on the front line, that was not my particular story. That said, I was radically talking about issues around sexuality, the body, et cetera, and a lot of that was influenced by the first—

I was second generation, to be exact. But the first generation of people like Douglas Crimp, you know, Gregg Bordowitz, Tom Kalin. Basically, I was on the receiving end on the discourse around AIDS and—does it make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I mean, that said, I was very much influenced, obviously, by *Demo Graphics*, you know, Gran Fury. I wasn't—when I read about people being in ACT UP, being at the [LGBT—AF] Center, that wasn't my story. I wasn't here.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I was on the West Coast.

ALEX FIALHO: How about—you just said "second generation." What do you mean by that?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, for example, let's say, I was more on the generation of—at that point was more, like when I got tested, let's say, in '89. And I remember at that time going out to clubs, and I remember going down to—and that was sort of my opening up into an adverse and personal, you know, visceral way because of what had—having to deal, not to deal with issues of health and the body. So it become less theoretical.

So that was after my first year of grad school. So it went from, like, being, let's say, Oh, this is just ideas and theory. I mean, clearly, I was aware. I was watching films, let's say, you know, about Patient Zero or the film about, you know, Danny, you know? So I was very much aware in a—

ALEX FIALHO: A film about Danny?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The film—it's a film, *Danny* [1987, by Stashu Kybartas]. It's a very sex-positive film about a guy looking at his body. This was a body with HIV, a body with AIDS. And who is in advanced, who is basically—his progression to advanced stages of HIV. But also of AIDS. But it's a desiring body. It's a body that has KS [Kaposi sarcoma] lesions or what have you. But it was a body, which is sexual at the same time.

So these are things I was exposed to. So I was very fortunate to somehow have someone like John Greyson and Catherine Lord to bring in, you know, known discussions around the body and sexuality. You know, controversial pornography, also around gender, and then race came later, et cetera. So.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me about the development of your work at CalArts in terms of entering that discourse and dialogue, how it affected your practice, and maybe any shifts or developments in what you were doing there.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It's hard to say, because—yeah, I think it was more what manifested later. I mean, I did take off a semester while I was at CalArts. You know, I got involved with Tommy Gear. It was after my first year of grad school, actually.

My first year of grad school I was totally shut down. I was also—I wasn't happy. I was overwhelmed by, you know, theory. I was maybe, probably, lonely. I felt that, you know, that the romance is over, because I had a very short window of, let's say, going from, let's say, being—I don't know. Maybe, you know, traumatic high school. Maybe three years of, let's say, being out, going to clubs, having sort of a more open, I don't know, sex-positive, fun-loving joy that I had about late adolescence, early adulthood.

And when I went out to CalArts and, obviously, you know, the emergence of where more discussion around, obviously, HIV, also the anxiety around it, that the romance was over, in a way. Even though at that time I had not been directly affected, or I hadn't been, you know, tested. But it was within that first year that I had met Isaac Julien. I had met Isaac Julien, but I had also met Marlon Riggs. I had had met, let's say, as I said before, Essex Hemphill, who were men who were out, who were positive, you know, Bill T. Jones, you know, what's his name? Felix Gonzalez-Torres. So there was almost like—

ALEX FIALHO: Did he teach at CalArts at that moment?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Felix, he taught for a semester or two.

ALEX FIALHO: Were you in his class?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I audited one class, yeah. And there was almost—

ALEX FIALHO: What was the class?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I forgot the class right now, but I remember he did a—what do you call it? Not a timeline,

but he did a bottle for future for 50 years. We created this—

ALEX FIALHO: Time capsule?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Time capsule, yeah. A time capsule that was supposed to be opened in 50 years. And, yeah, there was a certain sense that maybe my work was not—it is interesting, because my work, in a way—that I maybe was not reflective of the period that we were in. The fact that there was a major crisis, and I wasn't affected because I was not from New York. And I was maybe half a generation after them. Does that make any sense? I was slightly younger than Felix. I think Felix was born in, maybe, what was it? Maybe '57 or maybe '62? We can even look it up. Like, Marlon is, you know—but I'm curious. I think Marlon and Essex and all of them are maybe—like I was always, I mean, relatively young. I mean, how much is—when was—my point being, ultimately, is that I was a little younger than these guys, and I was slightly sequestered, if that makes any sense.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So—

ALEX FIALHO: Felix was born in '57.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, '57. So I was basically—so those seven years made a huge difference.

ALEX FIALHO: Marlon was born in '57.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Essex was born in—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: '54 or '55?

ALEX FIALHO: —'57.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. Oh, wow.

ALEX FIALHO: All three were born in '57.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So that's very telling. Because I had—I remember I was, obviously, much closer to Marlon and Essex. They were close friends of mine. But there was that—all those seven years; there was—well, Tommy was born—my ex, you know—he was born even through, you know, five years earlier than that. But that was a romantic situation, and so he, in a way, he became sort of a teacher. But there wasn't—that seven years was a gap. And I wasn't at ground zero. I was sort of on the periphery, if that makes any sense. It makes sense. It makes total sense to me.

But CalArts, I had to come up against, in a way that it was irrefutable. And so I found a way to see how that would—not that I intentionally made work about it, but I remained true to what I was doing, what I was pushing. I mean, a lot of work—I wound up doing a show called *Secret Life of a Snow Queen,* but it was very sex-positive. It was a tough show. It was a tough war. And some of it was, maybe, romantic. But it was formally gorgeous. It was a way that—yeah, so.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me about getting to know Marlon and Essex. Did you get to know them together? Did you get to know them more separately?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It is interesting. I want to pedal back a little bit—

ALEX FIALHO: Definitely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —around the stuff around HIV and our production work, because there was one trajectory that one could have got on that particular journey, could go on the journey of, let's say, like my friend Rama, about AIDS activism, right? Or the journey of, let's say—and I did it, but I did it in my own way. But on the same time, there was still the pressure of, what does it mean to be me making art, and what is the next? And making that next link. So in a way—

ALEX FIALHO: To the crisis?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, not so much to the crisis. It was the crisis of living. I mean, the AIDS crisis is the crisis of, let's say, that's like—three years later we were talking about Rodney King. That was—so there were multiple crises going on. AIDS crisis was one. There was systemic racism in LA. There was a different, virulent racism in LA that I had never experienced, let's say, in New York. And it was up close in front, you know? So

there was multiple crises. The AIDS crisis was the one I was being exposed to. There was also the policing around the body. There was also the crisis of being in a school where there was all this discussion around sexuality, but maybe when it came to issues of race, it was completely absent. So there was that crisis.

So it was multiple crises happening simultaneously, and what does it mean? And a lot of them were actually—I felt challenged, but also felt emboldened by all of them. But it wasn't just, Oh, well, I'm a black queer artist and I only explore issues around, let's say, AIDS, for example, or HIV activism, et cetera. Because that wasn't my trajectory, to the degree that it wasn't the trajectory of, let's say, of Essex Hemphill or Marlon Riggs, and that's a brilliance of, let's say, [Riggs's film] *Tongues Untied*, you know what I'm saying?

He does eventually talk about, let's say, HIV in the context of that film, and later in the—even his last film, he talked about *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*, you know, when he's making the film on advanced stages of AIDS. But he also has a historical perspective which precedes, goes before the AIDS crisis, but not ignoring the fact, its impact on him. But there were other social forces that were equally impacting him: homophobia in the black community, racism in the white community. So it's a multivalent, complicated problem that I was confronting. Does that make any sense? So—

ALEX FIALHO: Completely, and thank you for that intervention. I think it's important to bring all those different issues to bear.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. And at the same time, making work that was going to be able to function and have—it wasn't about having a career at the time. It was about, Oh, well how do you make all these issues sexy, smart, and fun, and be able to communicate to multiple communities? Because it wasn't just about me making work that was going to function in the context of CalArts. Remember, at that moment, I made work that actually spoke to a lot of those issues, and challenged them.

But I was always able to make a bridge to other communities as well. Namely, four years ahead, *Black Male*[*: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994]. That work that was done at CalArts in response to the policing around the body during my first semester, my first year, of CalArts—six years later would cause a bomb at the *Black Male* show. And I think it's important to say that. That work was—I'm repeating myself—that was at the *Black Male* show, which was read in that particular way in '94, had its roots in being made the night before at CalArts for a show around AIDS and sexuality and the body. So.

ALEX FIALHO: For a show around that or—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The full work, *Constructs #1—4*, were made the night before for a show that Rama was curating during my first year of CalArts. All four [of] those works were in student Gallery 403, and that's how Nancy Barton sought me out, upon seeing those. Four, five years later—four years later, they would—three years later, they would show at Exit Art. Papo Colo and Jeanette Ingberman curated them into that show, and then a year after that, they would arrive at the *Black Male* show.

ALEX FIALHO: That's the show that Rama was trying to get you involved in, and you were saying you were putting it off a little bit, and then the night before, you created those?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: That's great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: That's really rich history. What was the larger context of that show in Gallery 403? Who else was in it?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, it was a solo show.

ALEX FIALHO: Solo show.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes. I think I've actually just conflated two things. What I did for Rama also was a piece called *Reclaiming Sensuality*. It was a highly sensual three self-portraits, with a text by Essex Hemphill from *Conditions*[*: Poems*], that was written in conte crayon directly on the wall. That would later show at the San Francisco Camerawork. Yes, so there was both *Constructs* in that, that were done around the same time. So they're very public, mural-based work, coming out of, let's say, more Modernist, black-and-white, framed, you

know, 11-by-14 prints, to—

ALEX FIALHO: Prior.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —to like, large push-pinned, overscale mural, black and white, that were pinned to the wall itself.

ALEX FIALHO: Amazing.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So it was about basically reclaiming space, public space, semi-public space, semi-private space—but something that was definitely through the magnification, the scale, in a way that it was a level of confrontation. Yeah.

So you were saying? What else were we talking about? You were talking about—yeah, so it was during my sophomore—it was that summer, after a year of being [at] CalArts, where I totally—I had shut down, and I think I actually might have met Marlon and Essex and those guys that fall.

ALEX FIALHO: Essex was in Philly, and Marlon was at Berkeley?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Marlon was in Oakland, teaching at Berkeley. Essex was in Philadelphia. I think he came out, and—no, Marlon was in Oakland. He came to show *Tongues Untied.*

ALEX FIALHO: At CalArts.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: At CalArts. Essex had come out, I think for—a few times, he came out. But the time we spent a lot of time together, when he came out, he was in a residency at the Getty, at the Getty [Research] Institute. Getty Humanities Institute, I think in '91. And we spent a lot of time together. You know, he came over—in fact, before he did the Humanities Institute, he came out as doing something at LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions], and the photograph of him in the Archives, with the pink wall, is from LACE. In fact, he was a huge inspiration, because I—

ALEX FIALHO: —with the cigarette and the mirror?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: With the cigarette, exactly. Very vocal. In fact, I was supposed to—[laughs]—I actually won a thing performing with him, but I didn't have the voice that he had, you know. He was somebody. He was a total, you know, survivor. He was also the son of a—his father was a minister. A very complicated relationship with his father, that I have read. I believe close with his mother. But it was different—you know, it was like worlds apart.

He had a big crush on Essex. He was, you know, fearless in a way that I might have been maybe more, I don't know, maybe more bourgeois, in a way. Yeah, there was a certain, you know—he reminded me of the men that—you know, those were the men whom I chose, [was] drawn to. But it was a different sensibility. He was hungry also, according to that, and I was unaware of that at the time. But according to that book, if it's taken at its truth—the book that, what's the guy's name?

ALEX FIALHO: Martin Duberman?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Martin Duberman. Did the struggle with finances, et cetera. But he was hugely, you know, big heart, very passionate, and incredibly articulate, very handsome, very, you know; he's also, now the book is out—a fragility as well. Sometimes you don't realize when you—I was also—suddenly I had a partner, who was Tommy. I was, you know, according to Todd, I was—he used to call me, you know, "Mr. Time of Year," because I had a partner who was taking care of me. We were taking care of each other, but he was 12 years my senior, and he was, you know, had a good job, et cetera.

ALEX FIALHO: Holding it down for you.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Huh?

ALEX FIALHO: Holding it down a little bit.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: [Laughs.] Yes. Are we getting off too far?

ALEX FIALHO: No, I actually want to stay on your relationship with Essex and Marlon for a while.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay. Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: So tell me about the first time you met one or the other. Did you meet—like I asked, did you kind

of meet them in tandem?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, I met—I was trying to flesh it out, in talking to you. I think I must have met—Marlon told Essex about me. Him and Essex came out, was when we met. Something like that. Marlon, you know, I fell in love with right away. Marlon, it was such a brilliant film. He winded up staying with me—with Tommy and I—at the house. And then I would visit him when coming to town. Then he asked if I would collaborate with him on a couple of things, so we knew each other, probably, '89; he probably passed away I think in—he wasn't at Black Nations/Queer Nations [conference]—which was when? Black Nations/Queer Nations is, I think '95. He was not there. Marlon, also—

ALEX FIALHO: He had passed away by then?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: He had passed away. I think he passed away in '94. I don't think Marlon made it to—Marlon died before my *The Good Life* show. Essex was alive when that happened. Essex was a huge influence for me on *The Watering Hole*, but Essex died right before *The Watering Hole*. And these were men who, like, were, you know, intimately involved with my—not so much the actual production, but in terms of, like, helping me to find my voice. Particularly Essex, in terms of encouraging me to get in my face. I was rambunctious and "get in my face"; like, I was in people's faces. I remember Essex telling me that specifically.

ALEX FIALHO: To get in your face?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: To get in my own face, like getting in other people's faces, because I was, you know, brazen, and I could be aggressive. And he was encouraging me to get in my own face like I'm in other people's faces. Get into my work. And he would always tell me that it hasn't been done before, so do what you need to do. You know, be fearless with what I do. So I always credit *The Watering Hole* to him, in that way, because he was a huge champion in terms of pushing me, you know. Similar [to] the way bell hooks did. Yeah, definitely.

ALEX FIALHO: What was the nature of your dynamic with either or both? Were you reading their work and then having conversation?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, no, I mean, I would watch their films. You talk about—in Marlon's case, you know, I would look at their films, I would know their films. Whether Marlon, Essex, Isaac Julian, et cetera, I was an ingenue. I was young, I was attractive, I was smart, I was easy to be around, and I was also someone who was, you know, like—I was savvy and I was also—I was smart and I had went to CalArts and I was like, you know, I was—I sought them out. And I was also connected, you know, in the way that I was, you know. I wasn't connected, but basically it was symbiotic. It was a relationship that was mutual.

It was also, I was clearly, they had seen me—or, you know, I'm assuming; maybe they didn't say that—but they saw me as representing the new generation. I think all those people, Marlon, Essex, bell, Isaac, they were—they understood, had a clear sense of—John Akomfrah—you know, a clear sense of the historical and legacy building, coming from that tradition, in terms of passing the torch, I mean, without question. And they saw me as someone who was the inheritor of that, you know. So that makes total sense. So at the same time, you know, we were eating out when I would visit Marlon. I also—I worked for him, for two of his films. I'm in one of the films, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: Which one?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*. I was the still photographer for that film. So the film—the photograph—the *Crips and Bloods* photograph, which is going to be in the book. The book has been written about by Clarence Otis, also Marlon Riggs, Metropolitan Church, Carl Bean, you know. Church, you know, Carl Bean? Carl Bean, he was one of the first out gay ministers. He had his own church, MCC. He was the Bishop Bean. I met him through Marlon. We also shot Bill T. Jones. You know, these were all the subjects that were in—Alice Walker—all the subjects that were in, you know, Marlon's film. I mean, brilliant documentarian, you know.

It was also signaling—it was a time where Steven Lavine at CalArts, coming from the Rockefeller Foundation, he was doing—I forgot what it was called, from the Rockefeller Foundation—but anyway, really, really taking, let's say, the idea of multiculturalism to the next stage, in terms of importance. So it was almost like a watershed, because up until that point, CalArts—I mean, Catherine Lord had done a lot, but she was really pushing that. Really pushing, from the top down. You know, so they all came to that program. So really, the institutions were shifting. And I saw myself as someone—I was there and up front and, you know, beaming and, you know, over here. [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: What was your capstone project there?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: What capstone?

ALEX FIALHO: At CalArts.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Meaning?

ALEX FIALHO: Thesis, finished—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I did a show called—the show was called *Secret Life of a Snow Queen*. I had taken off a semester, and I went back to school, and really, you know, applied myself. I really did a lot of research. I don't know how to describe the work, but the work was—I guess it was video installation, photographic installation, incorporating mirrors; there was a sculptural component. You know, it was post-studio. There was a lot of sculptural components we worked at.

It was huge. I mean, it was ambitious for me, at the time, without question, and formally rigorous. But also really explicit in terms of its sexuality, and also really—there is one piece I did called *Last Night I Had a Dream*, you know, about being fucked. It was also dealing with stereotyping, because up until that point, I was struggling with how to represent and to critique, let's say, the commodification and the justification of black male sexuality, particularly black gay males or black gay sexuality. Very much influenced by *Tongues Untied*.

At the same time, how do I bring in the notion of, let's say, not only the object, but also the ambivalent relationship to that? Also to bring in my design relationship, let's say, to that, you know, the thing about having someone who is multivalent in a way. And how do they get distilled to look two-dimensional, three-dimensional? You know, a two-dimensional photograph, or a three-dimensional object, how do you implicate bringing the viewer into that? You know, caught in the act of looking, within the mise en scène, et cetera. Those were some of the elements I was doing. And also really trying to pull back the, you know, the curtain on the unspoken desire, seduction, looking, et cetera. So it's highly seductive, but also really teethy, but formally, you know, rigorous.

And that sort of like, you know, catapulted me—sort of took them, after being under siege by theory and just by—you know, it was intense. I remember this professor of the class I was taking, Morgan Fisher, and he said to me that he could not understand my work because he did not grow up in a black community. He said this to me in the context of a class critique. And whether that or any number of other things had been said to me, that was the, you know, the grist that I chewed on and spat it out and made them pay for it. So I came back with a vengeance, yes. But it's really about—so it wasn't about AIDS per se, because it wasn't about that, but it was really about how do you take these things and really, you know—

ALEX FIALHO: —wrestle with them.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Wrestle with them, but also to make people have to deal with them in a way that, you know. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Is that the project that's eventually, in some form, shown in the New Museum window?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, it's not. That work showed in—a fragment of that work, three of the works showed in—wasn't it three? The mirror pieces showed in—Polaroids, I was shooting a lot of Polaroids at the time, SX-70s. I had a hard time working, so I started—John Bock, a professor of mine at CalArts, I think he encouraged me. I went and got a Polaroid at Samy's Camera, and I've shot hundreds and hundreds of Polaroids. At the time I was also—a lot of the Polaroids became the basis for some of the journals, you know, that are going to be an Archive book. Particularly when, you know, when photographs in journals, men that I slept with—so in a way, it's about HIV tangentially, but also—

ALEX FIALHO: In what sense?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, mapping. You know, a list of lovers I slept with. Cataloguing, listing, as a way of, like, referencing—

ALEX FIALHO: Indexing.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Thank you. Indexing, or for example, there's one photograph of a sandwich that I ate, you know, the monitoring of my body. The monitor of food intake, that type of stuff. So it was about, I guess, HIV and AIDS, not in a direct way, but in terms of, like, the caring for the self. And how does one theorize, how does one index, how does one look at the body in relationship to, let's say, the everyday, for example.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you end up back in New York?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I graduated, I believe, in 1990—'90, '91. I was living with Tommy in LA. We wound up going to Europe in '92. We had a breakup there, and I moved back to LA for a few months, and came to New York and did the Whitney [Independent Study] Program. And then I came here and did the Whitney program, you know. I did it for a year and then went back to LA. I was living at—I rented—I did not move back into Tommy's; I had a breakup. I was living at Nancy's apartment. I rented her apartment.

ALEX FIALHO: Nancy?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Nancy Barton. A close friend. And that is where the video that's in the Whitney Biennial exhibition, of me and the phone. That's Mother's Day. That's on the eve of me getting ready for my first New York solo show, *The Good Life*.

ALEX FIALHO: The impulse throughout your work is archival, and we'll get into the Ektachrome [Archive], and we'll get into a lot of that project tomorrow—or, excuse me, Wednesday—but I'm just curious—it's prolific; you made a ton of work, it feels like.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: You think so?

ALEX FIALHO: I do. I guess maybe because I'm sitting here, and your wall is filled with pages that will eventually go into the Ektachrome Archive.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, that is interesting, Alex, because I think, in a way, I never thought of this as work in a way that—for me, it almost functions as notation.

ALEX FIALHO: "This" being the Ektachrome?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The Ektachrome. The Ektachrome, the journals, et cetera. I think after going up to CalArts and not feeling under siege about being able to make work, not having only black-and-whites, not having that type of work, that type of way of thinking about work. Being appreciated. Remember, this is a post-studio program, and remember, I took a class with Tom Madison—a really good class, semiotics—and I remember him looking at the black-and-whites and dropping a cigarette on one of them and me putting them away and realizing that this is not the audience for these works, et cetera.

ALEX FIALHO: The black-and-whites?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: All the *Americas* series. So I began taking Polaroids, and there was a way of just documenting, and the Polaroids document, let's say, my—I mean even, like, for example, the image of me. It's an interesting question about AIDS activism, because in one of the earlier Polaroids that's currently now—in one of the Ektachrome images, self-portraits, which is currently at the Gay and Lesbian Center as we speak—the one of me in bed with the Read My Lips T-shirt; I think that's '89—so that, for me, speaks to the emerging or the exposure and almost the embracing of that identification with, let's say, a Grand Fury, ACT UP.

And the fact of bringing that energy back from LA to New York. And wearing it in the context of my home. So there was that as well. So in a way, of bringing information I had received, sharing it with my brother.

My brother talked about this, in terms of the way he himself—he's back from Europe; he was working at PBS. And he didn't go to grad school. He didn't get a degree in art. But we were exchanging ideas, et cetera. A lot of readings that I was doing and I was sharing with him, et cetera. He learned, you know, tenure at UCSD, based on his film work. So.

ALEX FIALHO: I think that's such a powerful image, too, the one you're referencing from the Ektachrome Archive that right now is up at the LGBT Center—that it's not just you in the Read My Lips T-shirt; it's you in the Read My Lips T-shirt with the cum shot self-portrait. The Read My Lips T-shirt is two white gay men kissing, so there's a lot of—there's a lot thrown into the mix there, in terms of the fraughtness around sexuality, race—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes. Well, personally I went over, really, because in that particular—I think that photograph is one—that image is one of several—*Read My Lips*—then, you know, I think that it's—that's the antecedent to, let's say, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, right? I think that came first, right, *Read My Lips*? And then *Kissing Doesn't Kill* came later, right? I believe it does, if I'm not mistaken.

ALEX FIALHO: You're right.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So in that one, maybe there was a critique of that, and then they diversify. Because the first one was *Read My Lips* with two white men, but I think, you know—I don't read it as necessarily being white men. I mean, clearly they are white men, but I think in a way it's more about the idea of two men kissing, and how to read that photograph instead of reading—I mean, it could be fraught with that, race's role, but for me, it's more, almost like a sex-positive, the fact that the shirt, with "Read My Lips," is underscored by the thrust of

the post—let's say, the post-ejaculate, you know, with the cum on the tip, in the moment of ecstasy. To find a way that—to almost invest a certain charged sexuality or eroticism within the realm of, let's say, the sex-positive. So I think there's almost, like, emerging, as opposed to seeing in opposition. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And then—but yes, I think there's that. So I never—I mean, I think the opposite. There was a critique, obviously, of Gran Fury. But I think they were, you know, more than most, were uber-progressive, in terms of, like, attempting to somehow provide a—I mean, they eventually did, in terms of, you know, *Kissing Doesn't Kill*. If you remember those signs that were all over the city, bus stops. There were, you know, lesbians, lesbian representation, color—you know, it was a range of different, let's say, figures who were portraying that. So.

ALEX FIALHO: Lola Flash, Julie Tolentino. Two women of color, making out.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

ALEX FIALHO: I'm going to prompt you, in relationship to that display at the LGBT Center, which is a show called *Divided States of America*, curated by Stuart Comer [and Ariella Wolens, alongside Alison M. Gingeras, and Robb Leigh Davis—AF].

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: The image is paired with another photograph of pill bottles, I believe, in the display. Is that correct?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, the other photograph it's paired with is *Nature Morte*, and that's from, let's say, '92 and in that scene in Rome is—I don't think it's pill bottles. If I'm not mistaken, I think it's toiletries, et cetera.

ALEX FIALHO: I see.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So here you have, let's say, this image of a figure, you know, wearing a Read My Lips, as a Gran Fury T-shirt with, you know, a post-ejaculation, you know, pre-cum—or post-ejaculation cum, still aroused, a figure in the ecstasy against his—you know, it's a display of let's say, of—there could be pills among other beauty accoutrements. So I think in a way, for me, its subversiveness is the fact that it's not just about why I wasn't taking—I wasn't taking medication for another 25 years. That's just for the record. But it was more about the everyday, because I think in a way that, you know—the everyday, the toilet and beauty—

ALEX FIALHO: It's what you're speaking to, in relationship to the indexing that happens in the Ektachromes—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: —which, as I look over your shoulder, it's a collection of both photographs and portraits and candid scenes, and then also intimate pictures of your journal and the way that both are rubbing up against each other—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —to produce both, I would say, like a collective portrait, as well as a more personal digging into—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —your own personal relationship to a lot of that project.

I think we're pretty good, on today.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you have any thoughts on what we've gone through and maybe opening it up to any developments, or is there any more at this point?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Now I'm just wondering how much—what do you think we're covering? How do you think it's going? I mean, you know, it's curious to me, because even thinking about—I don't know Ron Athey. I met him a couple of times, but just thinking—because I'm thinking about, even like going with Essex to a bath house and not knowing, not having the vocabulary—being, in a way, sequestered, and all that was reactive—

ALEX FIALHO: You?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Me. I was active at a young age. Meaning, I was active in Tanzania as a child, you know. I mean like nine to 11, then going through a period of repression and then coming out. I was out, but at 22, so there's a way in which—I mean part of me—[laughs]—did I ever have my queer express? I mean, clearly, I did; this part of me was slightly sequestered, in a way. And I think it is what it is. I'm saying, it's not like I haven't had the experiences that I've had, you know, clearly.

ALEX FIALHO: And reading and producing work at a high level from an early age.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: But I guess, what has been at risk of that? You know, is there a risk, in terms of like, did the work—was it a form of sublimation? I mean, to what extent was the element of sublimation, took place in the work, as opposed to—

ALEX FIALHO: Into the work?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, sublimation, that the work sublimated in certain experiences. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I mean, the fact that my friend Leyden, a close friend of mine, said that—well, that's not true, because in *The Watering Hole*, I mean, clearly, I was there, as I shared with somebody that wasn't—I didn't mail order that, honey. That's all lived experience, you know? And I was documenting.

But in a lot of ways that feeling the pressure, or not even the pressure, but maybe the sense of urgency that when I became, when I seroconverted, feeling the confluence between that and the type of energy around AIDS awareness, AIDS activism, social activism, the theorizing around the body, the confluence with that with race, the pressure cooker [at] CalArts, in terms of, like—which is a highly pressured environment, where you are highly encouraged to engage; I mean, it was a tough program. And to be able to produce and then deliver and also to triumph in the end. There's a way in which I wonder if I missed out on certain lived, like, experiences, if that makes any sense. I mean, it's curious. I think I have lived, clearly, but it's curious that in looking at the Archive, and that for me is important, but the Ektachrome—because it does document the fact that I actually did, like, live in certain—

ALEX FIALHO: Circulate widely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes, I did circulate. But I think a lot of that's mediated. Does that make any sense? A lot of stuff that, and maybe, you know, that's a function of being an artist. Maybe that's one function of being an artist. So, say, the fact that part of the pleasure is mediated—

ALEX FIALHO: In what sense is it mediated for you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, in a certain sense, I mean, can one be a participant and also, let's say, also a documentarian? I'm not really sure. Or is one always straddling that? You know, can one fully throw oneself into pleasure? Maybe; I think in some ways I did. But then there's always that, you know, that other—and maybe that's sort of like, whether that's a blessing or a curse.

It was always that side of, let's say, Well, do I—this has to be—this is something that needs to be documented, or, This is something that I need to, not take, but I need to somehow engage in. It's a question I have for myself, you know.

And in retrospect, no, I have no regrets about doing it. Maybe certain things I have regrets about doing, in terms of, like, I might have been more consensual on certain things. In terms of, you know, well, maybe hurt less people. But there, even, in terms of my relationship with Tommy, just in terms of, like, the breakup we had in Rome, you know, just like, there was a way in which, being consumed at a high—being consumed—because, remember, at CalArts when I was there, there wasn't just being passively there. One was consumed. You know, one was also—I mean, it gets to where bodies get consumed every day. You think about, like, if you go to a real black body, and bodies, and gay bodies, whatever, you're constantly being objectified. And how does one negotiate, extract, negotiate? Does that make any sense? I mean—

ALEX FIALHO: And in your early 20s—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In my early—yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —is when this is happening.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah. Yeah, so yeah. You're right. And at the same time, still to be able to not get dragged in the undertow. Because there was an undertow of, let's say, well, if you're not doing a certain type of AIDS activism, or AIDS kinds of work, you don't have a voice. Because that was, at least at that time, was a certain pressure: Was this political enough? You know, does it—are you making work? What's going on? Are you socially engaged? So how do you address that, the need, the urgency, to do that, at the same time, the self-care? At the same time to make work, et cetera. So it was complicated, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: I think what I'm coming to—what I've always felt, and I'm coming to feel even more strongly after this first three hours of conversation, is just the way that your work really pierces it. "It" being all these issues that we have been throwing around. It's not in the undertow. It actually is just getting almost right to the heart of the issue, and the voice has been there from those first photos.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, it's interesting, and I appreciate it, but sometimes I even—I maybe end up thinking about—who am I thinking of? He was at Boston [Museum of Fine Arts] school?

ALEX FIALHO: Mark Morrisroe?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Mark Morrisroe. I'm just thinking maybe that's what was maybe the, What is this? The, you know, words are—it always looks—something on the [other] side always looks better, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: The grass always looks greener—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, I mean, I'm just sort of wondering—no, because maybe I can identify just in terms of like, Wow, what does it mean? Because sometimes, you know, I could be—you would be in the past, certain people who would just be out, and there would be a party and totally—[laughs]—you know, enjoying. Maybe that's with drugs, and acting out maybe a total abandonment. I'm not saying I haven't had abandonment, but there was always—I mean, once I crossed that portal till I say go, that type of critical language, once I got exposed to that at CalArts, there was no effing turning back. It was almost like, Well, you got the bug. You got the bug of HIV, but the bug of a critical language. And sometimes—does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Of course.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I'm not—I mean, in a way that—

ALEX FIALHO: A consciousness, an awareness.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: A consciousness! There you go.

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And the question is, so how do you—and it's interesting that—

ALEX FIALHO: —that it became about negotiating and navigating that.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, but I feel like in my later life, in my late 40s, that, you know, I find that I'm even having more of that now than I did then. And maybe that comes with age, after having created this space so one could actually go back to maybe—maybe more pleasure comes in, the pleasure in everyday. Does that make—yeah, it makes total sense. You know. Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: Thanks for day one.

[END OF SD01, TR02.]

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Lyle Ashton Harris for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic Oral History Project, day two, on March 29, 2017, at Lyle's home near Washington Square Park, New York, New York.

Lyle, thank you for day one and the rich conversation that we had. I'm looking forward to continuing day two here.

I wanted to start off with your work, specifically, and go into a really important exhibition from '94: *The Good Life* at Jack Tilton Gallery. Can you tell me about the context of having that show with Tilton Gallery and then the process of creating that really great body of work?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I'm not sure where to begin with that. Well, I should start off by saying that after graduating from CalArts, I—well, I think in 1990—I was working at UCLA for Dr. Vickie Mays, who was doing—she and her partner; I'm forgetting her partner's name now; I think Susan Cochran perhaps, but I know it was Dr.

Vickie Mays—did a major, up to that point the most extensive study on black men's health. It was the Black C.A.R.E. project, Pride community—Black C.A.R.E.: Black Community AIDS Research and Education. And I had actually found out about them through my former partner, Tommy Gear, who was my partner at the time, Tommy Gear.

There, I believe, was a calling for interviewers who would interview these men, black men, for this men's health study. And these men primarily are men who were not homeless, but men who had never been in the healthcare system, and the only reason their wives had been—girlfriends or partners—had been in the healthcare system was because of reproduction. So these clearly are men who were from a certain socioeconomic background, who were poor.

So I think while in grad school, Tommy had heard about this. We both interviewed, because they were looking for recruiters, and ironically, I was not—they thought they could identify more with my partner than me because they felt that maybe I may not come off as authentic in terms of my voice, et cetera. And with my partner, who was white, they may feel more—a certain akin to him, which seemed odd to me, but anyway, that was that.

But a year later, I actually—after graduating from CalArts, I reconnected with Dr. Vickie Mays. I think I went in for an interview. That was my first job right out of grad school, and basically, in fact, some of the texts that I—the language that I heard—I had samples for a project of mine that I did for the Guggenheim essay that was commissioned by Jennifer Blessing for the *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose* that was exhibition on gender identity at the Guggenheim in '97, but I had worked on the essay while I was at the Banff Centre for the Arts in '96.

But getting back, you know, to working with these men, it was my first job, and I remember distinctly going out. Basically, we would recruit men for this men's study where they would basically be tracked over a period of time. So we would—and in terms of "track," meaning they would have an HIV test, among other tests, but, like, a 50-page extensive interview asking them questions. It was a way to try and—because as you know, during the AIDS crisis, the first stage or even, you know, moving to the second stage, it was a lot of criticism from organizations such as, let's say, GMAD, as well as other minority organizations, that were critiquing the lack of, let's say, culture-sensitive language to get the message out to black and Latino communities. So this study wasn't exactly addressing that per se, but was trying to look at the various—not so much language differences, but cultural differences that might manifest in terms of language.

For example, they used a term, let's say. It seems sort of simple, but there's a vast difference between, let's say, cock and dick, you know. If you suck someone's dick, it's very different than, you know, versus someone's cock. I mean, it's culture-specific. Cock being, I guess, associated with, you know, white gay men, or white men, whereas a dick is something which is intrinsically—I'm not saying intrinsically, but something that is specific to black language, let's say. Black idiomatic use. So that was quite fascinating to me.

So I remember right after college, right after grad school, I went out to recruit men on Skid Row. And I had, like, a fake $50 bill, basically saying, you know, "Would you, like—can you be available? You want to make $50?" And I mean, this is literally on Skid Row, LA, 1990. And I remember the first day that I was out there and I was going to ask—I was asking, and I walked on the curb. I would drive down there and walked on the curb, and my mind wanted—but my body did a U-turn. I was—because it was so radically different than what I was experiencing, let's say, at CalArts, et cetera.

So that was a major shift for me in terms of really having to, like, engage with men. So I remember [inaudible] was still on one, so I had to go down to Compton, et cetera. But it was an amazing, let's say, cultural experience for me to really to look at black men's health, you know, from a different social background than ours, than I'm from, et cetera. And the irony is that I could—although initially they thought they might not read me—a black psychiatrist, Dr. Mays—that they may not read me as being authentic, but I'm not sure even if today, but 10 years ago, when I heard they're still using my name, thinking that I'm Lyle, as a way of tracking, because I was the first contact for a lot of these men that I would follow in terms of, like, over a period of, let's say, the weeks and months, you know, and really engaging in their lives, you know, via the phone, once I made initial contact.

So anyway, so I say that to somehow say that was sort of the transition, a very important transition to some—they go from the rarified, provincial sphere, of, let's say, CalArts, you know, rarified, to go to something that was really getting a certain sense of LA, another side of LA. So I had experienced, let's say, the art, you know, a certain, the west side of LA, and then, obviously, the rarified art world of, let's say, CalArts and that critical discourse. But to get this whole other side of LA, which is, you know, men who are disenfranchised, you know, politically along race, gender, and clearly, you know, sexuality, et cetera. So that was sort of the backdrop, if you will, for—well, I moved to New York, to the Whitney program, and went back to LA, and when I got back—

ALEX FIALHO: What did you learn from the Black C.A.R.E. project, on the ground?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, as I say before, just in terms of the importance for language specificity. Also how language could be—depending on how one uses it. Also what is the intentionality behind the use of the

language, how that could be a bridge or, let's say, a wall. I mean, in the most strictest sense, in terms of it's really a reflection of what—if one were to open up that space or close it down, et cetera. So you know, in a very—in a nutshell.

ALEX FIALHO: How about HIV/AIDS specifically?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, just in terms of—good question. It was, I mean, several things. It wasn't about HIV specifically, but in terms of, let's say, knowing the fact that these men could be in their 30s and 40s and 50s, had never been in a dentist's office or doctor's office. I mean, that was, like, you know, that was shocking, but it was something that was so, you know, it was revealing and upsetting and, at the same time, engendered in deep terms of compassion. And also just being able to communicate with people and also having just a different level of compassion towards people, you know, towards these men.

And also trying to find, to talk with men who might, let's say, have engaged in MSM [Men Seeking Men]. This is prior to the *New York Times*, you know, MSM, you know, the dark, shady cover of the *New York Times Magazine* that came out. I think maybe there were a couple covers that came out, but there was one, a very important one. I think it came out as late as—I think it was late '90s. I'm not sure when it came out, but anyway, this is prior to that.

And so it gave a much more human understanding of the demographics and the environment, et cetera, as opposed to just, you know, the trope of, Well, these are somehow men who are trying to get over—and they're, you know, perpetrators of, let's say, spreading HIV, et cetera. It was more looking at how the systemic, you know, classes amid racism and structures that exist within society that keep people out from certain spheres that would give them access to healthcare. So HIV is just one of a number of, as I said on Monday, of issues that they were dealing with: class, race, et cetera. So, yeah, so that's what I think I sort of learned.

ALEX FIALHO: So—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So how does it relate to the work, you were saying.

ALEX FIALHO: So you moved from Black C.A.R.E. to the ISP itself, right?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The ISP program, exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: Which is obviously back to the rarified art context.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, well, back to the rarified arts center in New York City. So it wasn't exactly totally out of—exactly, back to the rarified arts, yes, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Though my sense, your particular cohort in the WISP was an interesting one in terms of black cultural production, in that I believe you were with Renee Cox, Dread Scott, and Michael Richards—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: —all at the same year.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you just tell me a little bit about the ISP—how that was a development in your career, building on top of the critical discourse of CalArts?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think it's important. I mean, clearly, I learned a lot there. I'm exposed to a lot. It is ultimately a space where one is exposed to a certain critical discourse. But it's also a finishing school, you know. You also—to see what I had experienced in CalArts in a different realm, but it was obviously more geared towards—it was an important experience to me, but it was also, I was able to just somehow see the resistance to somehow, despite somehow the pretense or the discussion around certain critical issues that when it came to issues around race, that it seemed lacking in terms of its ability to be able to create a space for that. I mean, clearly, we were there among people like Mariko Mori, Uter, Kuter, or something, you know, Jutta [Koether]—I forget; I think I'm not pronouncing her name. So it was interesting. Johan [Grimonprez], he was there as well. There were several people. It was [an] important, obviously, critical framework in which to grow and to be exposed, you know, to Mary Kelly or Benjamin Buchloh, or any number of—what's her name? The brilliant Indian.

ALEX FIALHO: Gayatri Spivak?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Spivak, exactly. But also somehow seeing just the rarified aspect of that. For example, we wanted to bring Greg Tate to speak; I think that was the time. I think while I was there, I was doing—I did some stills. Connie, a friend of mine, a former, I guess, colleague of mine from CalArts, Connie Butler, who

wound up not only being the director of education at the Whitney, she invited me to take photographs during the Basquiat exhibition that I think Richard Marshall curated. What year was that? I think it must've been '92, '93. So here you had—

ALEX FIALHO: At the Brooklyn Museum?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, not the Brooklyn. It was at the Whitney.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh, at the Whitney Museum, yeah, excuse me.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So here you had Greg Tate, I believe, who wrote—I'm not sure if he wrote for that catalogue, but he obviously did the famous book *Fly Boy in the Buttermilk*. And the fact that we had to somehow argue, let's say, with Ron [Clark], that he was someone who was important to come and speak to the participants of ISP. Which is almost akin to, I remember when we, I mean, different, obviously, but we wanted to bring—as a sophomore in college, we went down to DC to invite Farrakhan to come and speak to—to talk at Wesleyan. So, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And then from there, back to LA?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I went back to LA in '92 and I had a breakup with Tommy. We had been together for three years. We had traveled prior to me going to the Whitney ISP program. We had traveled for—we didn't really talk about HIV, have we? We haven't talked about it much in relationship to my own development. Or were you going to bring that up later, or what's the deal? Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: So I think let's dive in, in that sense, now, then. At the end of day one, you disclosed that you seroconverted in 1989.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think it was—yeah, I think it's '89. That's the date, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And how did that affect relationships and your art practice, either or both, at that time, with Tommy, with the work that you were making at CalArts?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Good question. Well, I just—I mentioned that my first year at CalArts was tough, you know, a tough adjustment. And I think my mother came out. I think my mother and my brother came. Both came out near the end of the year, that summer, to visit. And I think it was a time my brother was out there, prior, maybe a few weeks before he came out, that I was tested, and I tested positive. And so—and there was a lot of tension between us around that, you know, the two Tommys. And just because my brother, in terms of the residual—the difficulty he and I had in terms of our friendship, and then also with two Tommys in my life, my brother and Tommy Gear, who I—he and I were very, very close.

So it was complicated, but it was obviously important to have them both out there during that time. And I think I took off a semester. I'm not sure if I took off a semester. I think I took off a—no, I think I know what happened. I did my first year of school. Then I went back for the third semester, and I think it was during the third semester that I actually got tested. And—I was tested.

ALEX FIALHO: What was the context of that test?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't recall now. I think I took it at—perhaps it was at the—I'm not sure why. I think I just decided to get tested. I was hearing about, obviously, the importance of doing that. I remember Tommy, I think it was—I think he might have been encouraging me to get tested. I mean, we were safe in terms of about we were safe from the beginning, in terms of, we practiced safe sex, he and I. And—what was I going to say? I'm not sure what it was, but I do recall going to a clinic in Hollywood. It might have been the Gay and Lesbian Center, but I don't think it was, but I think it was a clinic there.

But I think my brother came out soon after. My brother came out soon after, and that was sort of a tense period. But they were there for me, you know.

And soon after, Tommy Gear—I mean, I remember distinctly going to the Martin Luther King Hospital, you know, to—so I guess AZT was clearly, obviously, being pushed, and I had the sense about me—well, a couple of things, you know, I was in excellent—I was in very good health. I was asymptomatic then, and I remained so for the next 25 years without medication. But there was a sense that the importance of finding out what options there were in terms of if I had to take medication, et cetera. So I remember—and I'm now going to see this famed doctor. I'm forgetting his name now, a doctor at the Martin Luther King Hospital, African-American doctor. And I'm not sure if this was a dream or I imagined him—[laughs]—having, let's say, a Bentley, which I believe he did, with—it felt like 25—imagine, like, 25 skulls attached to his car, you know.

And I was fortunate enough to have a relationship with Tommy, who—similar to my mother, actually—their

interest in counter-methodologies or alternative methodologies to mainstream health, et cetera. My mother's a scientist, but she—just in terms of, like, before health food became faddish, like it is now, you know, that this is going—we'll be eating tofu, like, in the '70s, you know, just—we never really took medication. I mean, she wasn't doctrinaire about it. I mean, we took aspirin and stuff like that, but in terms of, let's say, you know, the importance of, let's say, diet, health, et cetera, I mean, that's something that was, you know, fresh air, that kind of—was integral to who she was as an individual, as a mother, as a scientist. And Tommy similarly was, although he did not have the academic background my mother did. He was more self-taught, but quite, you know, quite brilliant in terms of reading up on not only alternative care, but having his eyes out for alternative methodologies in terms of dealing, let's say, with HIV or treatment.

So he happened upon, or found, or read, a small, maybe half-inch, I don't know, advertisement or listing, let's say, in Long Beach, one of those gay rags, you know. Now that, you know, that litter all over the Gay and Lesbian Center here, but at the time, they didn't have glossy covers. You know, it was, like a, I don't know, gatefold, you know, stapled thing, but basically about this guy, Dr. Zhang, who was doing testing—not testing, but he was offering alternative treatment to HIV.

So we went to see Dr. Zhang in Long Beach soon after I was—and we both began his regimen of, you know, bitter melon and garlic and other Cordyceps, other things. Now you can get [those], let's say, at Whole Foods, but at the time, they were Chinese herbs that he was—he himself was an M.D. and had a fellowship to Harvard, but he was studying alternative treatment to, let's say, HIV. He went onto write several books, one on HIV, a couple on HIV, and he was quite, you know, highly influential, as well as books on Lyme disease, et cetera. So I developed a relation with him, and we've known each other, let's say, since '89. So it's through acupuncture, through herbal treatments. So that was my course of dealing with, you know, with HIV. So.

ALEX FIALHO: Did it influence your practice? How did it influence your practice?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I'm not sure if—well, I mean, it's several things. I think there was maybe a splitting off, in a way, that the one part of me was highly rigorous when it came to health, in terms of, there'd be both times that I practiced, you know, macrobiotics for a while, hyperaware of what we ate, et cetera. But then there was a flip, you know, dark side, in which I was—that was a very different experience, let's say. I think sort of, like, split off. I could have both highly regimented and regulated, at the same time, on the flip side having a much more, let's say, darker exploration that I think was all done in *Watering Hole*. I think it was almost a type of, let's say, a bifurcation. I think it was almost a splitting off, if you will. So—does that make sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely. I was thinking about that in a sense, so—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, bring it. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: How about your work with Black C.A.R.E.? How did that come in? How did being HIV-positive affect some of the interviews that you were having at that time? What were some of the conversations that you were having?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I guess in terms of empathy. I mean, it was several things. But, yeah, I think maybe in terms of empathy, in terms of being there for guys.

But the reality is, I had access to a radically different sense of a different life. I come from, like, working, middle-class, you know, a working, middle-class family. I had access to healthcare. I had access to, let's say, money. I had access to information, et cetera, to—and food. This country is, you know, a lot of people—it's based on a dietary warfare that has even become much more accelerated, to be able to eat. I mean, I'm not saying anything new. To be able to eat all good food or fresh food is something which, as you know, is, you know, there's a class read in that. Yeah, the ability even to know.

So—but I think just in terms of being deeply empathetic and at the same time knowing the importance of having boundaries and not trying to—yeah, it's complicated because being the Al-Anon-ic that I am, in terms of being overly empathetic, to the point that—I always had to realize not to overinstruct, to be there. And I think maybe just the act of listening, the act of, like, being a constant source of engaging or asking about the other would be a—following them, if you will, tracking them over a period of time.

But I think in terms of my work, I guess maybe sampling some of the language, or maybe it helped me to get that much more. I think in the way it influenced, clearly, *The Watering Hole*. I think maybe, yeah, it's because in terms of thinking about the level of subjectivity of the men, for example, who were young men, and in some cases boys, who were consumed by, let's say, Jeffrey Dahmer, that was in my experience. I had had a Kodak moment, you know, that a lot of these young men, young boys, or boys, young men, who had been lured to his home, you know, for five dollars or, you know, the invitation to be photographed, that wasn't my particular—that wasn't my experience. I might have been lured for any number of reasons in terms of sexual turn-on, but in terms of their—that level of class.

So for me to, in a way, create a project that dealt with that, that engaged the language, does that make any—to inject that language within. For example, to say "vagina" or to somehow say—I mean, stuff that had a certain edge. This was prior—edge, which was the class—we needed to inject that into the work and to give, though, somehow to point directly to their level of subjectivity, particularly as men, for example, were not grieved within the black press or, you know, or the white press or the mainstream press, et cetera. I think, in a way, not directly, but tangentially, it gave me a wider sphere of those subjectivities as well.

ALEX FIALHO: In what ways did you find solidarity and community at that time? It sounds like engaging folks like Marlon and Essex was one example that we talked about on Monday.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: What were some other ways? It sounds like maybe, perhaps, CalArts was, I don't want to say alienating, but it wasn't—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, it wasn't. CalArts was, you know, okay, it was a form of mine. It was one community.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It definitely was one. I had close friends, you know. Obviously, Todd Gray. Todd, who I mentioned earlier, after being, you know, us being classmates—he was 10 years my senior. I worked for him, and then we became very close friends. In fact, he introduced me to Tommy Gear or Meena Nanji. It was a number of people that I actually met there on my relations with John Greyson or, you know, any number of people that I had met there. So I had that certain sense. I definitely had that, and I was someone who was popular there, someone who definitely hung out, let's say, with, like, a lot of, you know, the it-men or whatever they were. Does that make any sense?

There was that aspect, but then there was the aspect of hanging out, let's say, with my friend Terry, who I met at the time and, let's say, going to Horizon and Catch One. There was that aspect. So then it was as we were hanging out, let's say, you know, with hustlers on Santa Monica Boulevard. So there were multiple communities that I was actually engaged in, engaging with simultaneously.

There was also the black queer intellectual scene where Marlon Riggs, Essex—and so there was that side. So I think, again, there were multiple simultaneous communities that I was surfing and engaged in at the same time.

ALEX FIALHO: How about solidarity in living with HIV, or—where were you finding—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think maybe it was more personal; maybe a part of me was, you know, I'm sure was ambivalent. I mean, remember I could identify with certain people, obviously, who had HIV, whether that's Marlon or Essex, you know; I was also—I was not having complications. I wasn't having complications; I was someone who was recently diagnosed, and I could identify in terms of being sympathetic, and I was empathetic to Marlon, and to be able to listen and to them, to be there for both he and Essex, and to hear—at the same time it was also dealing, you know, complications that—Tommy was also asymptomatic at the time.

It wasn't a situation, let's say, from my recollection; it was theoretical. I mean, it was practical, in a certain sense that HIV was in my body, but I wasn't dealing with Epstein-Barr like a friend of mine, Rama, his friend was dealing with. It did not register bodily on me, although I had imagined that maybe it did, in terms of maybe feeling more tired, et cetera. It could have been psychosomatic, et cetera. But in terms of me dealing, let's say, with taking medication and having to deal with the side effects of toxic medication, that was not my experience. But I could read about it. I could talk about it. I could read about it. I could see the film *Danny* in John Greyson's class. But that was not my experience. I could read Gregg Bordowitz, but it wasn't—you know, I could understand theoretically and empathize and be there and speak to it, but it wasn't my—that wasn't my experience. I could speak maybe more in terms of, let's say, maybe the terror, if you will, of this stigmatization of it. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: As opposed to dealing with the facts of having to deal with diarrhea because of medication or whatever else. That wasn't my experience at that time.

ALEX FIALHO: How about at that time, or—this might move us ahead, but how about the idea of loss and losing friends?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Of course, that was deeply, deeply troubling and, you know, sad for me. Also being close to the way it was in terms of Marlon, having him be like an older brother, and then—you know. I think it was loss, but also in terms of, like, just seeing—I mean, I was fortunate enough to have friends and—whether those two or

—you know, I wasn't friends with Felix, but having spent some time with him and just sort of like seeing the bravery.

And I guess I had partly, sort of embarrassed about it, the fact that, I—clearly, a lot of people who were struggling, you know, dealing with living with HIV or writing about it, you know, dealing with and speaking in a very activist way, and that's something I definitely supported and identified, but in terms of in my body, I wasn't feeling in that way. But I could feel the loss, obviously; I could see the loss. I could see the loss, but I could also see the bravery. And, let's say, being with someone like Marlon Riggs, and seeing just how brazen, how brilliant, and how beautiful he was in terms of to the last day, you know, shooting a 10-hour day and then going to rest and the unabashed, you know, embrace, of life on life's terms.

So I was very fortunate to be in close proximity to men who offered me a way about acceptance. But I think it took many, many years for me to fully, fully, like, embrace that, you know? Whether coming back to New York, traveling to Africa for 10, you know, for seven years. So there's a way in which I sort of had quite a delayed reaction in terms of having to—I think, in a way, that I still had work to get done, and I wasn't sure if I—in '92 I did, I think, the project [for] the New Museum, and that, you know, in a very, I guess, in a direct way, I just talked about loss, et cetera. And I was associated, but in terms of, like, me, there was other things I was also working on.

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me about the New Museum and its relationship to loss—in what way?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I don't recall right now, but I think it was a conversation between my brother and I, and it's a portrait of me taken by Todd Gray looking at a portrait of, let's say, the whiteface image of *Miss Girl,* and I think—I don't recall what the text is, but it's talking about loss and desire and—yeah, I guess it was about being public. It's also about being—yeah, I mean, I actually don't really know, honestly.

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you for your candid and moving responses to this topic. It's not easy, obviously, opening up. So it's much appreciated. In response to your evoking and discussing Marlon's bravery and brazenness—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And Essex's.

ALEX FIALHO: And Essex, of course. Which yesterday I got a really strong—or, excuse me, Monday, I got a really strong sense of Essex's bravado.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It's so interesting in thinking about how Martin Duberman portrays him as being a little, not coy, but a little—at least my reading of the Duberman book in relationship—

ALEX FIALHO: That's the recently published one, in dialogue with Michael Callen.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The recently published book called *Hold Tight Gently*. His biography of Michael Callen and Essex Hemphill, and the battlefield full of AIDS that—that wasn't asked. I think a scholar should—I think I would have been asked or found a way, and maybe he was, et cetera, but I mean, a scholar who organized one of the—or one of the producers of Black Nations/Queer Nations, where Essex did one of his last public appearances, that—to scour everyone who was there and to ask them. Does that make any sense?

I feel like in a way that it was lazy because I felt like—the portrayal, I mean, it was instructive in terms of seeing how he perceived Essex, and I could see that aspect of him, but, for me, he was so much more. There was something that I felt his—his energy was something that he wasn't able to really touch. And so yeah, so.

ALEX FIALHO: That's something that has been a recurring theme. This is my ninth or 10th oral history for this project, and a few folks have spoken to contemporary historizations of earlier years in relationship to AIDS.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think that's such an important time because that book is also brilliant. I just read a book by Kevin Mumford, you know, called *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis*, which is a really brilliant analysis of black gay subjectivity. In that, I felt that there was a very nuanced reading, or Douglas Crimp's book, brilliant book, on the mourning, *Melancholia and Moralism*.

ALEX FIALHO: *Melancholia and Moralism*.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And I felt that it was just a much more subtle, you know, read. And, I mean, I'm not totally, you know, shitting on Martin's book. He does offer a very detailed buildup. I mean, obviously, reading of Michael Callen and all; so building up of—and, again, the history that I was unaware of. For example, how important he—even before ACT UP emerged. And sort of with that was also challenging of Gay Men's Health Crisis, et cetera. I guess I feel like there could have been more when it came to Essex; it felt skeletal. And it makes you think about the difference between knowing somebody, you know, and reading the biography. I mean, that's not uncommon to experience that, you know?

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly, and I think that that's actually a hope in response to a few of these conversations I have had with people about some historizations and how fraught they can be.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I hope that one of the stakes of this oral history project is that, due to the length of time that people are in conversation about their lives, it will open up some of these avenues that then scholars like—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, that's why I'm doing it.

ALEX FIALHO: —Martin will be able to open, will say, "Oh, if I'm talking about Essex, I need to talk to Lyle. Here's some moments; let me dig deeper."

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I hope that that's what comes from some of this.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, and I think, in all fairness, since this is difficult material, I think time will—you know, I think it's really the next generation. I think he's of a certain generation, and I think he's laying certain traction. It's almost a gift to the next generation, too.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: To more fully flesh out, and to actually have a more nuanced reading of it.

ALEX FIALHO: That's one reason why I think, for instance, these conversations that are intergenerational in the context of me as interviewer, or the work that I have done at Visual AIDS as a foundation for moving forward around these considerations—obviously, it's an ongoing epidemic—just feel like important investments.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: So in follow-up to Marlon's bravery, brazenness, the critical discourses in which you're operating, whether it's CalArts, ISP, I want to talk a little bit about some of the larger historical, contextual moments of the early '90s that are a backdrop against the AIDS crisis and vice versa: the AIDS crisis is a backdrop to these moments. Whether it's—let's start with the Dia Black Popular Culture conference—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Black Popular Culture conference.

ALEX FIALHO: —at the Studio Museum in Harlem—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —which your Ektachrome Archive—one of my favorite images, period, is in the Ektachrome Archive—it hangs above my desk—is the *Unleash the Queen* photo of Marlon at that conference.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: Just tell me a little bit about the conference, and tell me a little bit about the stakes and what came from that. Maybe some of the fault lines that—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I don't know that I can actually speak to the conference, per se, I mean, because, I, myself, I was not a participant of the conference. My brother was, and he made a seminal intervention when he asked, I think it was Skip and Houston—[Henry Louis] "Skip" Gates [Jr.] and Houston Baker—about how they felt in relationship to the narrative desire in *Looking for Langston* [film], and so there was a—

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —seminal moment in which black queer subjectivity went from just being spoken about within a literary context to talk about structures of feeling a relationship to that. So that was a very important moment, but as you know—

ALEX FIALHO: What was the response?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't recall what Skip said, but I do—recently have read—reread or re-looked at—Houston Baker's response, which starts of a, "He's not a gay," in his talk that was delivered the next day. And that was his disclaimer. He opened up his talk with that statement and went on to talk about a friend of his that he was aware, I think, who had actually died, who was HIV, he was a major literary theorist. It was a way of disclaiming at the same time, talking about allegiance.

But because it was a pivotal moment in which black queer subjectivity was being injected or brought forth that was definitely engendered by the seminal, groundbreaking film *Looking for Langston* by Isaac Julien. So it became the springboard between that and, obviously, on that, you know, cross-Atlantic and Marlon Riggs's groundbreaking film *Tongues Untied*.

So those are two anchors that, unlike before, where these are two pivotal figures who have wrestled with, from an archival standpoint, you know, the history of—or challenged the heteronormativity of, let's say, black letters. So one, from dealing with the Archive and the sense of Langston Hughes with—*Looking for Langston*, or—you know, Essex, in Essex, not Essex, Marlon Riggs's case, is really his ability to use the talking heads—you know, the term "talking heads" documents you on his head to talk about not only a black gay subjectivity in relationship to racism, also in relationship to class and relationship to, you know, cross-racial desire.

All those things in a very anti-talking-heads, you know, format, a very autobiographical—there was something that was a certain centrality to that, prior to the Black Popular Culture conference, there were both the Isaac—I'm not sure if Isaac was—but both Marlon and Essex had been—at least Essex had been at the Getty Humanities Institute.

So clearly, there was a shift that was, that was—so the Black Popular Culture conference was the first of its kind in terms of bringing not only these issues of queerness, black queerness, but also black popular culture in the larger sense, to mainstream. It was a time where—because prior to that time, there's a way in which there was a certain marginalization of, let's say, whether women's studies or a black studies or ethnic studies, whatever, you know, marginal studies, that was relegated to the margins. And this was a centrality, I mean, obviously, falling from—Postmodernism is a critique of them from margin to center. I mean, clearly, all these things were—that was the, almost the epitome of where these things were really coming center stage.

And so you have—I mean, this is just my experience of it so—this landmark conference was organized by Michele Wallace, an author of *The Myth of the Superwoman and the Macho*—I'm forgetting the title, you know, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. And that was a seminal, seminal conference that dealt not, let's say, with ethnic studies, but looking at black popular culture as—and all of this epistemological weight as it bears on American society and, you know, in general, but also in terms of challenging the literary canon and, you know, and all canons in terms of American culture. That's my understanding of it.

So it was a range of people, from—I mean, it's interesting because even looking at some of those photographs right now, I'm not quite sure—it may seem like there was such a cross-fertilization of fault lines among multiple communities, whether that was the black intelligentsia/our community, such as Kinshasha Conwill, let's say, who was at the head of the Studio Museum in Harlem or, you know, the legendary Faith Ringgold, preeminent Afro-American female artists who they challenged, you know, the Met—she, you know, in terms of representations of women and blacks in the Met's collection, to, let's say, Douglas Crimp, who, you know, famed for the Picture Generation, but then also his collaboration with Gregg Bordowitz in terms of, let's say, of '89 MIT. First it was in *October*, then the MIT [book] on AIDS—

ALEX FIALHO: *Demo Graphics*.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, it wasn't *AIDS Demo Graphics*. This was a book—I think it was '89; MIT published a book, *AIDS*—I don't recall, but it was a seminal book with a collection—opening essay by Gregg Bordowitz, you know? What is it? A seminal text looking at criticism around AIDS in contemporary culture.

ALEX FIALHO: People like Cornel West—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Cornel West, you know, Houston Baker, Skip Gates. Who else? I'm not sure if Barbara Smith was there; I'm not sure if she was; she was definitely in the Black—she was actually at Black Nations/Queer Nations; she was a keynote speaker there. But Marlon Riggs, Faith Ringgold—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —Coco Fusco. Actually, I don't know if Coco Fusco—I think she must have spoken there. But there were, you know, Paul Gilroy. It was a range of—Valerie Smith, who I think was head of—I think Valerie Smith—she used to be, I think she was once at Princeton, but now she's head of Swarthmore, the president of Swarthmore.

So it was a very, you know, seminal conference that—yes, I was there. I was not a participant. But I was following in the tradition of my grandfather. I was very much interested in, you know, in documenting events. And from a much more, you know, maybe a non-document—or a new documentary approach, in terms of just taking portraits of people I was interested in, you know? And just seeing—and there was a sense, I think, that something was shifting, or there was a certain sense that there—maybe that's overstating that something was shifting, but clearly that there was something new and that was exciting, and I was triggered by things that

were exciting, and those are the things that I shot.

ALEX FIALHO: Which was—what was new?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: What was new about it? To see all these people in one room in New York City for the opening night of the Dia Center for the Arts and then for the second night at the Studio Museum in Harlem. What we just assumed now, for example, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, that level of diversity or, you know, people from the uptown/downtown thing, that was new. That was the first time in my lifetime that that type of, let's say, cross-fertilization was taking place. Not saying—

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —I mean, clearly it had happened during the Harlem Renaissance, you know, 60, you know, 60, X amount of years, decades before, but this is clearly something that was new. It was looking at an analysis of the black in black popular culture.

ALEX FIALHO: How about—what do your images now impart from that moment?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, curious, because they feel—I mean, you have the Studio Museum in Harlem—it was curious, because the other evening, Thelma [Golden], at the celebration dinner for John Akomfrah, that Thomas Lax organized around John Akomfrah's magisterial film on Stuart Hall at the MoMA, and for the recent acquisition that she had never seen, I mean, of installation shots—she had never seen images of people interacting with the work, or people engaging with each other in relationship to the work. And that was a very different thing, for example, to see my brother talking to, let's say, Gary Simmons and have, let's say, David Hammons's famed work, in the shadows in the back [. . . –LAH]. And so there was something about, that there's one thing to have images of the installation shots themselves, but to see that this was a living embodiment, and people were actually not only engaged in work, but there was an element of celebration that was actually happening, this is something new.

So getting back to the Black Popular Culture, looking at those images right now, just seeing those relationships, even seeing, for example, the image of, let's say, Angela Davis and Manthia Diawara and, let's say, Ed Aguero, and just thinking, just the bravura of, you know—the energy. It was something fresh, beautiful, but also—yeah, fresh, beautiful, brilliant, and clearly not through the lens of, you know, of trauma with something. With something that was fresh and, you know, different.

ALEX FIALHO: Here are some of those pictures just to think of, Glenn Ligon with—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —Arthur—I'm forgetting his last name, but he's a trustee at the Whitney—

ALEX FIALHO: —in front of your *Constructs* photo.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —in front of an image of me in *Constructs* at *Black Male*, Andres Serrano.

ALEX FIALHO: In front of a Glenn Ligon painting.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Glenn Ligon painting, image of Thelma with Ray McGuire from '94, the [*Black Male*] opening dinner. I'm just thinking about the relationships, you know, and also how, I think, the photographs, in a way they document just what we may assume, or just may be, relationships that maybe just occurred. It was something—there are certain seeds there. You're seeing the mirroring of love, but also investment, you know? I mean, to see that image of, let's say, Thelma and, let's say, Ray McGuire, from '94, and thinking [about] being at the *Black Male*, you know, gala dinner, to see him being the head of trustees and just thinking about—

ALEX FIALHO: At—head of trustees at?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The Studio Museum in Harlem. Just thinking about legacy and how this—what we might celebrate right now, with the Studio Museum in Harlem on the eve of making major expansion—that these are things that have been in formation for a while. The fact that speaks to the history without it being historical documents with a capital H, but there's something about the residue of the image, the photographic, that is told through my eyes, or through the eyes of this particular lens, that captures a certain—that from a maybe, if not direct, but maybe a tangential lens, but one that is soft and mercurial and also, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I've always thought about it as photos of the sort of up-and-coming legendary children in a way.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I mean, yeah. But they weren't children, and that's the whole thing—

ALEX FIALHO: Of course.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —and at the time they were—if you think about a lot of those photographs, because what was being at that time, sort of, it came to a rare right now—at the time, it was being debated whether or not—you know, there's a big debate over Toni Morrison, in terms of her critiquing. I forgot the guy's name, but whether or not the canon's becoming too diverse. You know what I'm saying? I think we may be getting off topic here, aren't we?

ALEX FIALHO: So my thought—to get back to your work, in a sense, is: What was the—what camera were you using to take some of the Ektachrome photos? And what was the process of getting such amazing candid shots?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, that's a good question. I think, and I definitely, you know, in the tradition of, including in my grandfather, you know, Nan Goldin, or—who did [the film] *Kids*? Larry Clark, or just a certain tradition of documentary, just really being present and really removing that space in between it and being brazen. That's something that I do in terms of with the camera, being able to—and also knowing, and I think that also assumes somehow intelligibility.

It wasn't like I was photographing strangers. I mean, some were friends and some were not, but I was very much in the know, and very much aware of what was at stake, even though I didn't shoot in a calculated way, but as a way to somehow to disrupt that space. In a way that it was about pushing through that, pushing though what I might have thought about them, or pushing through where they might have been, and to transgress that and to move into that space, and this is something that needed to be documented.

ALEX FIALHO: One thing that I love about the Ektachrome Archive, as well, is that it really opens up for me your work, and the range of your work as a photographer in particular. In that I have known about the early work and the formal prints and the portraiture context, and this, of course, formal in its own right, but the more snapshot energy, the intimacy, the less posed—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —the more lived [experience—AF].

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It is curious, because I think the Ektachrome speaks to this impulse that has been with me since the beginning of my practice, even before the practice with a capital P. But I think what had happened when I [was] first starting, I saw the necessity, let's say, through the more formal structured work to make a certain intervention. The fact that only by having 20 years of doing this type of work have I laid the groundwork for this to actually have its own space.

Does it make any sense that I saw through the *Constructs* the need to somehow challenge certain dominant representation? I mean, there was a formal strategy that was absolutely necessary to break down those structures, in a sense. Even with *The Watering Hole*, for example, in terms of, like, moving from more formal portraits to, let's say, collage, the montage in that case, to almost formally somehow erupt sort of hegemonic representations of, you know, blackness or queerness or violence against the other, or consumption in a more specific way that there had to almost be a breaking down of high-low, breaking down those boundaries.

So I think along the way there, since that work is what got responded to, this other stuff is something that I do—I mean, that impulse to document something which is in my blood and in my body, it's how I see the world, how I experience the world. One way, I should somehow say. So it encases whether using, let's say, you know, the Nikon FM or the Leica I inherited from my grandfather, that's something that is intuitive for me. That's something that—it appeared that I did not do it, but the more formal work—in a way was work, you know—and this feels like play.

ALEX FIALHO: That's great. Excuse my naiveté with something as basic as process, but what is an Ektachrome—what is Ektachrome and how does it relate as—why is that the medium, particular photographic medium and process that those images work in?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I love slides; I love the slide of reversal film. I love positive film. It was what my grandfather shot. And I think it was through watching him compose images, and also the idea of, you know, doing slide shows—there was something about the idea of photographing people, getting the images back, and then creating a narrative, and that's how we experience the images. And I mean equally, you know, similarly seeing like Nan, like work in '92 in Berlin, for example, and seeing—

ALEX FIALHO: What work did you see there by Nan?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I mean, she was in a DAAD [German Academic Exchange Service] fellowship in Germany. And on a turn in my trip, or maybe midway, I should say, through my trip with Tommy—a fateful trip, where we broke up in '92 in Europe—that after dropping him off in Prague, we landed, we actually flew into Paris, was there for about, I guess, a few days. I was staying [with] my friend Greg Gray that I mentioned

yesterday, the former art director of *Essence* who took me under his wing. But he went on to be an art director for *Maison Figaro*, or *Madame Figaro*. And we were hanging out in Paris, you know. We were hanging out in Paris visiting him.

Yeah, so we had one intense night at the Palace, doing mushrooms, which that was the last time I've done hallucinogenic drugs—[laughs]—that was enough. That was in '92. But after we left Paris, we went down to Rome. We had a breakup in Rome. Rome, Venice, that's a photograph in the Archive of us that, you know, at the Grand Canal. And then I dropped him off in Prague. And then I went on to visit Nan in Berlin. And from Berlin to London, we hung out. We stayed with Isaac, and I met this guy, Thomas, who I had an affair with.

ALEX FIALHO: How did—what work of Nan's did you see in '92 in Berlin?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In '92 Nan was working on what would become [the book] *The Other Side.* So the photograph *The Jury,* that's in the Archive, with Martin Wong and the Wall. She was working on that project at the time.

But I remember her—David Armstrong was there, who was, I think it was. So I was staying, I'm not sure where, in Berlin. But I think I saw Frank Wagner when I was there. I think I saw him when I was there during that time. So—and that was the last time I've actually been in Berlin. And that's like two decades. And it's surprising I haven't been back.

ALEX FIALHO: Two and a half decades.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Two and a half decades that I haven't been back. But the late Frank Wagner, who had curated me in a show, *Blacks in America*, a show with Adrian Piper, Hilton Als, and a few others, that was at his art center in '91.

So she was working on that book, and then once I seen it, I was very much interested in her process of, let's say, you know, the diaristic. So that sort of converged with seeing my grandfather's, you know, process of a studied documentary project of the family.

[Audio break.]

ALEX FIALHO: So to continue conversations about this sort of cultural backdrop of this moment, of the early '90s, that you and your colleagues or your, you know, creative cohort were just really opening onto. And it's a legacy that I feel like I work in and around now. And from a younger generation, I'm curious about exhibitions like the '93 Biennial and *Black Male,* in which your work was included, from your years in CalArts. Just continuing this discourse from the Black Popular Culture conference into spaces like the Whitney, and the way that curators like Thelma Golden, artists like yourself, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Gary Simmons—take me there a little bit further.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: You know, it's interesting because *Black Male*—excuse me, the '93 Biennial, that's the one, the super-famous one, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yes.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And I was interviewed for that. So I'm almost wondering if I dated *Untitled (*[*for*] *Tommy)*, in the Whitney, maybe that's '92 instead of '94. It might be two years earlier. I'm not sure. It might be two years earlier. Because I—

ALEX FIALHO: What are you referring too?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The video *Untitled (*[*for*] *Tommy)* that's in the Whitney exhibition, the two-channel.

ALEX FIALHO: The 2017 Biennial?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The 2017 Biennial. Because I was interviewed for that Biennial.

ALEX FIALHO: For the '93 Biennial?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: For the '93, and I was not included. And I referenced that. But dates are fuzzy for me. But I wasn't part of the show.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I loved the show. I wasn't in the show. But I was in the *Black Male* show that was on the heels of, let's say, my first show. Jack chose it in '94, called *The Good Life*. It was a collaboration between me

and my grandfather. And we had started out an hour and a half ago about what the work was about.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. But I'm so happy that you—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —digressed.

ALEX FIALHO: No. That we strayed earlier and kind of got a lot of this—I was trying to start with some of your work, in a sense.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: But this all was the context, for lack of a better word.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, yes. So, yeah, I mean that show—Jack Tilton, I had met Jack—after the Whitney ISP program, I went back to New York. Tommy and I were separated. I think—

ALEX FIALHO: You went back to LA.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I went back to LA, excuse me. And now that I think about it, doing this interview, I think that's when I was actually living at Nancy's. I did not move back into the house. I think I moved back into Nancy's. That could have been maybe '92. It may not be '94. Because—I'm not really sure, actually.

ALEX FIALHO: You're talking about the date on the video still?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, the date of the video. Because I remember—I'm lost a little bit right now. Pull me back. What was I talking about?

[Audio break.]

After New York, when I left the Whitney ISP, I went back to the U.S.

ALEX FIALHO: To LA.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Excuse me, I went back to LA. And for some reason I came back here and I was getting to know—I did a show—I know: Simon Watson. I met Simon Watson, the curator, you know, the famed, you know, queer curator, who had worked with a lot of—an important curator, I should say, who worked with a lot of slash gallerists, artists who were doing very interesting challenges.

He worked with everybody ranging from—I think he—he worked with a range from Nicole Eisenberg, to, let's say, early Sherrie Levine; so he's worked with a range of different people. And he had [an exhibition space,] Simon Watson's Living Room. And I did a show there that was a very big success. It was my first New York—it was essentially my first New York show, Simon Watson's Living Room. And that show did very well. But it was a show that not was in like a—I mean, it wasn't in a tourist place; it wasn't a commercial gallery. But it was more like a salon, if you will.

But he introduced me to Jack Tilton. And Jack Tilton initially wanted me to do a show, a two-person show, with Luigi Ontani, the legendary Italian artist who first took Clemente, as far as I know, took Clemente to India. In fact, he used to show at Sperone Westwater. Luigi's a lovely artist, Italian, you know, from a certain, how would I say, a certain legend. He's, you know—definitely dips his big toe with oil—orientalism, very much into—his relation, you know, India.

But anyway, he introduced me to him, and he felt that because of the queer subjectivity, the global—not even global, but almost, like, the European, sort of old-school phantasmagoric relationship to the, you know, the orientalism or to queerness—that that would be a good match for me to do a two-person show. And I said no. I would not do that. I did like Luigi and we actually became friends. He introduced me—in fact, Luigi, you know, had a crush on me. In fact, when he would come to stay at the—what's the name of the famed hotel in New York? You know, the Chelsea. He had a whole altar made, you know, out to me for my *New York Times* review, you know, plus the cover story that Vince Aletti did on the *Village Voice*. But—

ALEX FIALHO: About?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: About my show.

ALEX FIALHO: At?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Jack Tilton, going gack to *The Good Life*. So I said no, I wanted to do a solo show. I did not want to do a show—and that was the best decision I made. Because that would have, I mean, that would

have [been] good in terms of a European context, but in terms of—as Richard Powell has said, the show *The Good Life* echoed in a new sensibility. You know, one that was black; it was queer; it was about nation building. It was also about mercurial—it was something that was considered radical, and the show was a big, you know, it was a critical success, let me say. Maybe it worked commercially, but it was written, as you know, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*—you know, the work, it really resonated with something, with multiple communities.

And the show was a collaboration between [me] and my grandfather. I drew from my grandfather's archives, similarly in the way in which I'm actually working at the Ektachrome Archive right now. His archive that he had shot, over 10,000 slides, that I inherited. Documents and friends and family, also, you know, in a manner, let's say, different. In a manner of, let's say, Van Der Zee, in terms of light. I mean, obviously, he didn't have the social thrust, you know. And he wasn't a professional photographer. But a very studied way of like, very nuanced way of, let's say, rendering the familiar and blackness. And very—but also kept very accurate details of, let's say, his time in the church. He was a treasurer at Bethel AME Church for 37 years, where my grandmother was the president of the missionary society for the same length of time. So I juxtaposed his images of his family with images of the same subjects. In some cases, 20, 35, you know, 40 years later—30 years later. And we're talking about [the 20 x] 24 Polaroid.

While I was at the [Boston] ICA, I was in a show, called *Dress Codes,* of the ICA '93*,* and that work was—the work in that show was largely taken from my M.F.A. thesis. I met someone on the board of Polaroid. And I was given two free days' scholarship to, you know, to use the Polaroid studio, and they would take maybe one of eight photographs. So they have, actually, very important photographs from that collection of mine, from that series.

And so the show was comprised of not only collaborations with my grandfather but several other artists/friends, family, including my brother, you know, Thomas Allen Harris; Renee Cox; Dread Scott is in it; of course, like, Henry Dade, who was a major, you know, architect of a lot of the works, including my brother. It's a major collaboration that we actually did. Particularly, the seminal work that collaboration that my brother did of course, et cetera. So this was sort of a huge, you know—I mean huge in a certain sense that is was—there was a project that was drawing from multiple notions of the archive. One was my grandfather's archive, but also the more mythological historical archive of black subjectivity. Whether it's historical figures like, let's say, Toussaint L'Overture, or, you know, Michael Stewart, who had been killed by New York's finest. In fact, that photograph, that police officer was supposed—you know, the *Toussaint L'Overture* picture was supposed to be [with] Thelma. I had—but she at the last minute did not show up for that image. And I wind up stepping in. I got in a corset and got in a costume that, you know—

ALEX FIALHO: Thelma was originally cast—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I was asking and hoping that she would show up for that particular—

ALEX FIALHO: —role?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: That role. But I stepped in. The one that she posted the other day. And then obviously, the one of *Saint Michael Stewart*, you know, et cetera. So—

ALEX FIALHO: I'm actually curious about the *Saint Michael Stewart* image in particular. Both in the context of Rodney King, two years earlier of course, and then that particular Michael Stewart conversation that you were utilizing for the photograph. And then also a contemporary context where, you know, recurring white male police violence against black bodies—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —black men, unarmed black men, is—you know, our horrific contemporary moments.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Dive into that photograph a little bit in the context of Rodney King, in the context of Michael Stewart, in the context of today.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It's complicated. I mean, I was very much moved by that. As you know, Michael Stewart was a friend of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who I had met at Area. I think I mentioned yesterday, or two days ago, in the interview that I had met him at Area my first night. But he was also a fixture in the downtown art scene so that, you know—Keith Haring. He was part of downtown East Village scene. And he was killed. I had not met him. He was killed by, you know, New York City police officers, and allegedly he was kissing—well, he was kissing a white woman, you know, in the train station. And I'm not sure why I tapped into that, but it was something that—I don't know, it was something that was so—I mean, I knew Basquiat had been forever altered by, you know, by that. I think Ouattara took him to West Africa. And this is old. I'm hearing, you know, third or second parties, so I'm not sure that was the case. But I know that he was—I've heard that he was really challenged with it.

And I'm not quite sure how I actually—it's interesting because the photograph isn't illustrative of that. But clearly that was symptomatic on, you know, the violence against black men, black boys, black people, which is something which is, you know, which is systemic, which is as American as homemade apple pie. So I think in a way that the title came later.

But it was about looking, about taking on the custom of the, you know, basically embodying, to appropriate this icon, to take this structure that had been something that I think has terrorized black communities regardless of social class. And that's what so brilliant about Ta-Nehisi Coates's book. You know, whatever that is. You know, the figure of Prince [Carmen Jones Jr.] in his book for which he [was a finalist for] the, you know, Pulitzer Prize, the figure of Prince, who was from a well-heeled Washingtonian family, et cetera. The fact that he was equally, you know, subjected to police violence against—just as, let's say, someone who was from urban, you know, super-urban working class, you know, community, et cetera.

So I think in a way that that was something that I was aware of. And that was something that I had to—I mean, was I ever harassed by the police? I think I—was I harassed by—I was always hyperconscious, you know, of the possibility. And that was something always—I remember as a child, my mother gave both my brother and I, you know, a book that now—I think it was a show that came on PBS recently, how the parents are talking to, like, their young black sons. And I've seen it; this is nothing new. You know, around 30 years ago—I'm 52 now, so I think 40 years ago—my mother—there were publications that were passed out among black families, the community. How to negotiate, how to deal, you know. And that was definitely, in the context of my family, you know, which is very much a race-conscious family, how to negotiate. You know, whether from the Bronx or, let's say, Middletown, Connecticut, you know, to, let's say, LA. There was something that was so much a part, you know, of that.

But I think Michael Stewart, in a way, spoke to—in a way to engender to somehow to speak to the mythological saint, or the possibility of transcendence. Or the possibility of the spirit that cannot be destroyed, and that was the ghost that somehow ran through all of us. If that makes any sense.

ALEX FIALHO: It's powerful.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes, so I think in a way—yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: How about an image, like, some of the collaborations with Renee Cox and Iké [Udé]?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you talk about both of them? Because you haven't so much [discussed—AF] those friendships yet.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, both Rene and Iké were very, very close friends of mine. Really close friends of mine. I met Renee, as I mentioned on Monday, while I was at *Essence*. And I saw this apparition that I had never seen, I had never experienced. I was a young sophomore, and to see someone who was, you know, super-beautiful and very much aware of who she was and also was, you know, she was fearless in the way that she was. And so she was someone that I—we became good friends. I mean, I stayed with her several times and we—someone who I was—we had a very close friendship. It was a place that I actually hung out and stayed at and crashed at when I was living up in the Bronx.

And similarly, a few years later, with Iké—both were older than I am, I guess. Yeah. Renee, you know, by a few years. And Iké maybe more than a few years. And these are people—Iké was someone else. He was Nigerian [Igbo], and he was able to negotiate certain social-scapes, you know, certain communities that I was—I did not. What I had was the academic. I could negotiate, let's say, Wesleyan, or I could negotiate CalArts, and go back with a vengeance. But they had something about city life, and about the metropolis, that maybe I did not have. They were—yeah, I think those collaborations came out of that. But also—

ALEX FIALHO: How about some of the images?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, the images, let's say, of *Sisterhood* were speaking about—I mean, clearly, it's speaking to historical images of, let's say, whether that's Van Der Zee, in terms of black men in the ghetto. And so in terms of, like, dealing with the—I mean, thinking about a certain, I don't know, portrayal of, let's say, black men in the Harlem Renaissance or something very—we wanted something which is very—talking about the complexities of two men who love each other, you know, who are from different backgrounds, him being Nigerian and me being American, but also having a shared sensibility. But also that we're queer with different sexual orientations, I mean, even that is—I don't even know what that even means. But, you know, the fact that there was a shared commonality. But it was also almost a fierceness and almost like a mirroring that was—there was almost like a twinning, if you will, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: One of my favorite photos from the Archive, the Ektachrome Archive, is the two where you're arm—the one where your arms are both raised and you're—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —looking into the distance.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Probably both with shades on.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: But that's just sisterhood in another sense.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think it has a certain sensibility because again he was not—it was almost, he was speaking from—it was otherworldly. It spoke, obviously, to the experience I had in Tanzania, you know, in the mid-'70s. So let's say, living in an African household, there was a certain cosmopolitanism which went beyond the plantocracy paradigm of, let's say, the U.S. I mean, there's a way in which that whole, you know—there was something else that relationship cued me into, and similar to [what] Renee had, coming from, you know, a Jamaican upper-middle-class family. A sense of entitlement and also our shared interest in transgression and the body, and also a certain anti-black bourgeoisie, you know; there was also clearly that. It was also transgressing against a certain normative, let's say, class, you know. Margo Jefferson has talked about this, you know, the raging codes of the black bourgeoisie culture.

ALEX FIALHO: And then let's talk about your brother for a minute as well. He's come up a bit throughout.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: But the photograph from *The Good Life* in particular, which is, you know—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, that photograph, as a triptych, is powerful, triptych, because I think in a way it organically developed, in a collaborative sense, with him, with us. And it really captures—in its simultaneity, in terms of the experience of the triptych, it captures several phases of the relationship. Whether us as being, you know, foes, or being—not foes, but being warriors against an outside intruder, but also annihilating.

It speaks to what Alice Walker talks about in her critique of David Hilliard's book in the *New York Times* in the editorial section, you know, 20 years ago. And I was very much inspired by that. She said it's easier to annihilate another as opposed to accepting that you shared a twin or a common bond of, let's say, you know, violence or trauma or beauty, et cetera. And so it spoke for me about the level of, the type of, like, you know, fratricide that exists among black men, and the trying to give us a more mercurial—but also at a very personal level, in terms of our own, you know, as children, in terms of the violence we might have acted upon each other, albeit psychic, you know, and a way to somehow exorcise—there was a level of exorcism, if you will.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the content of the photograph? The gun, the kissing, the contact? How did that develop?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, initially I was going to—I suggested the gun outside. And then my brother thought it would be good to also involve, let's say, having it acted upon ourselves. And I think, as I mentioned in the first interview, that imaginary play and fantasies were very much part of our psychic makeup and childhood play. But we had never transgressed in terms of, let's say, that was a part of—that was the first time we had actually shared a kiss in that kind of way. So the photograph comes with that charge. As opposed to it being indicative of a certain type of, let's say—what is it? What is the term? Having sex with a relative, what is that called?

ALEX FIALHO: Incest?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I mean, clearly it suggests incest, you know, playing with that taboo. But that very act of the photograph was the first time we had ever actually enlisted that as a way to—not to suggest, but in a way to play with the taboo. Not to suggest incest, but to talk about—I don't necessarily read it as "he and I," although it is my brother and I, but more in the sacrificial that we're two men. You know, maybe there is that reading, in terms of Cain and Abel, in terms of fratricide, you know, love, annihilation of the other, consumption of the other, you know, desiring of the other. All that stuff I think is implicated in that. Make sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely. Just to—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And then obviously, the gun is the—you know, penetration, the body, HIV, whatever that might be.

ALEX FIALHO: How HIV?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Huh? I don't know. I think it could be through the act of, let's say, you know, kissing or penetration or any of those things. The gun as a form of, you know, entering the other.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's take a pause.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

ALEX FIALHO: With the backdrop of shows like *The Good Life*, like *Black Male*, I have heard you talk about the idea of persona non grata and your relationship to the art world. I'm curious to prompt you in that way.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think in *Black Male*, the work that I had in that show, I would have chosen—

ALEX FIALHO: *Constructs*.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: *Constructs*. I would have chosen other work. And it had been suggested that maybe other works would have been more—I'm not really sure. Maybe like the triptych, the triptych of my brother and I. But, hey, it had just shown, so my—it had just shown. I mean, that work had not been made. That work—had she seen that one? I think Thelma had seen that work. It's sort of hard to somehow reflect back on that particular period, because I think so much has happened since then—that that work was considered scandalous at the time. The way in which the public reacted to the show in general, but in terms of my work in particular. Particularly—

ALEX FIALHO: Which show?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The *Black Male* show.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: There was something mercurial, and there was enough of—in *The Good Life* show, there was enough of the root of the family that grounded, that anchored its transgression. So that was a strategy in terms of like, for all of this, let's say, transgression, that it was definitely grounded in a black ancestral or black notion of the nation, et cetera. And that was sort of a structure in that one. So it was able—it was a container where the images and construct seemed to echo or seemed to channel something else. It had a sort of punk aesthetic and—I mean, it obviously had its relationship to Mapplethorpe, just in terms of it being, you know—to the *Black Book*, et cetera. But clearly something was—a different articulation was happening.

Just the most reductive read that I was the subject, you know, that was—that the object or the subject of the photograph was now taking the photograph as well, with both subject, with both, you know—the author as well as the subject of the photograph. And I—I think that—and there was a certain brazenness, or a certain joie de vivre, a certain rawness to the images in terms of its almost outlandish, to use Okwui Enwezor's term. I find that very amusing, because he referred to, at one point, my work as being "outlandish." There was a certain outland —

ALEX FIALHO: Who?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okwui Enwezor.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: He referred [to] that a few years later when he did his very important essay in my book *Excessive Exposure*, in referring to the Michael Jackson work that I did as outlandish, but there wasn't—maybe he was referring to *Constructs*. I'm not really sure. I don't recall. I think it is, actually, the Michael Jackson, but there was a certain sense that there was a rawness to it.

Maybe people perceived it as being fresh, and particularly since there was such a controversy around the representations of black. What did it mean for this, you know, black, you know, queer, unabashedly queer, subjectivity to be so foregrounded in a show around black masculinities? And so—which would be, obviously, more common today, you know, with trans culture. And because this is different from *Looking for Langston*, or this is different, let's say, from, you know, *Tongues Untied*, Marlon in *Tongues Untied*, there was something there that was unabashedly drawing from the archival, but not relying on the archival to ground it within the framework itself. Does that make any sense? And I think it's a different thing. So there was maybe a certain sense of, like, people felt that it was—

ALEX FIALHO: Drawing from the archival?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, in a certain sense. But, let's say, for example, if you think about it, if you're looking [at] *Looking for Langston*, you can actually—despite it being challenging, it's within the tradition of, let's say, uncovering a counter-narrative around Langston Hughes, which is irrefutable in terms of the importance for him being the seminal poet, one of the seminal poets, of the 20th century. Does it make any sense? And to have that so the film was the counter-narrative of re-reading queerness or gay subjectivity to that particular history—which the unspoken history of queerness within, let's say, you know, the Harlem Renaissance.

But there was something about those images that were not reliant on the archival. And they had been talking to it, but were critiquing, let's say, whether that's Mapplethorpe, for example [. . . –LAH]. So it was something that was—there's a rawness about that. And I think it was unsettling because it was also speaking to the often, you know, most recently spoken about, let's say, the queerness, let's say, within the amount of gay and lesbian people who rule the hip-hop world, for example. I'm not sure if that's true or not, but I think that people talk about that. I mean the DL, all that stuff. There was—this was not a "models of being DL." This is not the cover of the *New York Times*, oh, in-the-shadow MSM. This is something that was outrageously flagrant in its queer trajectory or queer radical, you know, gestures. And so remember—

ALEX FIALHO: In terms of the wig and the fashioning and the—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The wig. Or, the wig, you know, drawing on, you know, signifying on the '68—I forgot the guy's name, but, you know, the Black Power gesture that was at the Olympics in '68. Who was the, you know, that whole gesture that cost them their title. It was drawn on the—at the same time drawing on the contrapposto. So the classicism against, you know, Roman classicism, well, Greek classicism, against the thing Black Power signifies. And that, and then the frivolousness, if you will, of, you know, of the dick being framed by lace.

So there was something raw, pungent, but also monumental. And I'm thinking right now that I remember—[laughs]—you know, Russell Simmons, seeing him. I just remember, speaking of the documentary [*The Show*], seeing Russell, you know, talking with Bethann [Hardison]. You know, black models, famed Bethann, who—legendary and almost single-handedly created a space for black models. You know, to shake and to challenge the system—hegemonic white representation, you know, in the fashion industry.

So I remember just that there was a certain edge, that there was something that was raw. And I mean, you know, fair enough, my countenance, if you will—I remember wearing a Johnny Carson one-piece suit and this sort of—[laughs]—and I had hair at the time—and there was something in my person that was a little, I don't want to say "assertive," but I was queer, you know. I definitely was signifying. I was smart, black, and beautiful and queer. And I was claiming that in a very public way, and the works were at the Whitney. So I think there might have been that tension.

So in a way, I think I became sort of persona non grata because—particularly when the show traveled to the West Coast, where I remember speaking with Thelma among people who were—I mean, in hindsight, now, seeing the documentaries that have come out, let's say, for example, the O.J. seven-hour documentary that won the Oscar this year, in 2017, or let's say, *13th*, you know, you can understand. Particularly the O.J.—what black people are up against in terms of being—decades of being terrorized, you know, communities, et cetera—how an image like that might have, like, broke the camel's back, might have pushed them to the limit. Does that make any sense?

So and—which I can understand that. I mean, partly it's homophobic, but also partly to feel like, What's happening? Particularly since a lot of them are shut out of, like—we should check that—shut out of systems, in terms of representation, whether in terms of museums, et cetera, and what does it mean for these types of images that were evocative in their queerness, et cetera, to somehow be claiming space in such a grand, grand way?

ALEX FIALHO: And then what does "persona non grata" mean to you in that sense?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, that means it's sort of like—I mean, it was several things, you know. Different degrees. That was persona non grata for the breakup I had with Tommy Gear, in the way in which that happened, you know, in Rome. Persona non grata for transgressing.

ALEX FIALHO: How did that happen?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, persona non grata for happening, let's say, with the, you know, the *Black Male* show, and also taking photographs with people, being aggressive with my camera in terms of why—the persona non grata for photographing—not for photographing, but including the photograph of bell hooks in *The Good Life* show, without telling how I was going to do that. You know, partially nude photograph. Persona non grata for

engaging in, you know, the subject of *The Watering Hole*. So all those things. So I think it was multiple layers.

ALEX FIALHO: That's a perfect segue because I was going to take us into *The Watering Hole* next. And I think something you said about your relationship with the *Constructs* to Mapplethorpe feels relevant as a move into that later 1996 work, now in MoMA's collection. And it was the idea of the subject now occupying the space of production of the work. So in the earlier context, it was a relationship to the *Black Book*. This is obviously different in the sense of violence, explicit violence in the case of Dahmer, but again it's a sort of subject taking up the act of making as response. So just tell me a little bit about that move.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think—in 1991—actually, it was earlier than that. It was when my mother came out to visit me, back in my first year of grad school. I always get these dates mixed up because we—it might have been a second time that she came out to visit me.

ALEX FIALHO: Did she come out there because you had seroconverted?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: No, my mother and I—I think she didn't come out because of that. I think—well, she came out because we were close. She might have had an idea. I don't know. That's a good question. Did she come out because I seroconverted? I don't think I would have—no, I told her. I told her in New York, in the Bronx, in the kitchen, and that's where we had our conversations. That's something I would not have told her on the phone. She came out to see me. She came out to spend time with me. She and I were close. So she and I were close. So but getting back to your question that was—

ALEX FIALHO: Dahmer.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, so we were—she was out once; she was out visiting. I think it might have been the second time she came out to visit me. And I think it might have been right after grad school. So it wasn't the first time she came out to visit me, when she came out to pry me out of my room after my first year—[laughs]—of grad school. I was having a hard time, you know, functioning. I think it was the second time she came out to visit me.

I had befriended—I had become friends with Harold and Shirlee Haizlip. And they were—Shirlee was the author of the book *The Blacker the Berry the Sweeter the Juice* [*The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White*], and it was a very prominent African-American couple who were—come from a very, very prominent family. Basically, it was a book on black upper-class communities over several generations. Faith Childs was her agent. And so I was spending some time with them. They were confidants, and they had became surrogate, you know, parents, you know, friends. The relationship devolved into something else, you know, but at the time they were helpful. It was what I needed at that particular, you know, at that particular time.

Anyway, so I was on a set of a Richie Havens concert. Ellis Haizlip was, I think, a cousin of Harold. And Ellis was my brother's friend, gentleman friend, who he had met in Paris, who was a legendary queer producer, talk show host, called *Soul!*—I believe it was very well known—and also a patriot. He was very good friends with a lot of major cultural players of that time, and one of his friends was Richie Havens, who I met him when they came to LA, when Richie was performing.

Shirlee and her husband, Harold, took my mother and I to go see this play, to see Richie Havens in concert. We were behind stage. And I remember Shirlee coming—we were on the stage or on the seat of the stage, you know, the set, and she came and she broke the story about Jeffrey Dahmer. And I remember there was such shame that I experienced when she's sharing it. There was certain—I don't know, there was sort of a perverse—my understanding of it was a perverse way in which she was relaying this story. And there was a certain—

ALEX FIALHO: How so?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't know. Almost it was like—there was an element of spectacle to it, the way in which it was revealed or told. Remember, this is like the end of '91. It's about the genre of a serial killer. The men were, you know, were young African-American men. Some are boys, some Asian. You know, you can't help but think of, let's say, Baldwin's very important book of the Atlanta murders of—very disturbing book of Atlanta, all the missing kids. Black young boys were killed, you know, [. . . –LAH] which people—that sort of—he wrote a very important book, because they were basically—what was it? A major series of killings that were never really documented or worried [about]. I mean, that's just one of several. I mean, Dahmer—Dahmer was just one of several situations where, you know, black men or boys disappear that have been, you know, consumed, killed, or raped by white perpetrators with a psychosexual, you know, dimension, aspect to it.

So it was within that realm that I think she was telling that story, or at least [that's how] I heard what she was saying. But, I actually—I mean, I always tell the story: I feel like in a way that I was implicated because of my own homosexuality. And that's how stereotypes work. And it clearly—all, most pedophiles, at least statistically, are heterosexual, or at least they claim to be, and have 2.5 kids. I mean, those are the stats. But the way in

which, the stereotype in which, you know, homosexuality is connected with pedophilia—that's the stereotype, but there's a way in which that's how—the problem with stereotypes. That sounded good when talked about. The pathology, and in terms of how one incorporates, you know, at least the anxiety or the internalization of that, the trauma around that.

So anyway, so for a—I'm going to speed up. From that year, I think it was '91 to '96, it was a working-through process. You know, it stuck to me when I first found out about that, and I became obsessive about, you know, learning about the images, I mean, collecting images. Whether it's in *People* magazine—because there was a story that was in a couple of *People* magazines [. . . –LAH]; it was majorly in the press—to the *New York Times*, to a friend at the time of mine, Larry Chua, sent me the autopsy report. So it was like something that was part of the cultural zeitgeist. In fact, my friend Brenda Salamone, she was commissioned by the *New York Times* to do an illustration called, you know, "the face of"—"looking at evil." The *New York Times* special issue on evil, and that was one of the illustrations they actually had, of Jeffrey Dahmer. So that—it was part of the cultural zeitgeist.

So that was the backdrop when I did this project. So it was less about Dahmer per se, but the notion of Dahmer wrath. Unlike the, like, say, the *Constructs* were maybe signifying on the *Black Book* or on *Black Men in Representation*, this is looking at the notion of consumption and the body. So whether that's literal consumption or the consumption of culture, consumption of black culture. So, clearly, [I] was looking at the way in which, you know, black culture gets consumed to—whether that's, let's say, Mapplethorpe, or Dahmer, or Dana Schutz, for that matter. The way in which the claiming or tapping into that currency and using the currency as a way to somehow speak without really thinking of the larger—I wanted to somehow pull back and to somehow to look at, you know, the architect of whiteness, you know, in the public imagination, and to give it a name or face, if you will, to that level of consumption. So.

ALEX FIALHO: How did the shift toward the medium of collage come to you in the context of this?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Good question. Well, I had got a lot of resistance to—there's a way in which even though the world shifted and changed, people [were] still referring to the works, let's say, or that they—some of them remind me of Mapplethorpe. So what I began to do, I felt like there was something that I had reached my limit, that I had reached my limit with, at that particular juncture, that form of representation. That I had reached or had exercised enough [of] what I could extract from that, and I felt that there were other things bearing on me and clearly influenced by, you know, the work of Hannah Hoch at the Graphic Museum, or just the idea of high-low, really trying to break down the image. Even the studies I was doing, I had to problematize the consumption of images and, yeah, and the body and also to create a field in which multiple narratives could be playing simultaneous.

And I remember reading—there was an article in *Flash Art*. I think Mike Kelley was interviewing—what's the guy's name? Mike Kelley was interviewing Larry Clark in *Flash Art* in '91. And I remember—I think it was '91. It might have been—actually, it was '92, I believe. And I remember they had an illustration of a Larry Clark collage, and it was something that was very—I was very stimulated by it. There was something that—it registered for me, that there was a possibility of maybe bringing in these disparate elements.

So the images began to be, you know, collected, rented from Caracas. The images I collected there when I ended up being at a bar, you know, to images of, let's say, a portrait, a present that Luigi Antoni had given me—a portrait of him, a self-portrait of him being whipped by this prepubescent Indian, young kid, and just like dealing with various tropes of, let's say, encountering the other, the consumption of the other, role-reversal play for, let's say, images of Magic Johnson, saying, "Even Me," on the cover of *Time* magazine. So that obviously referencing HIV. You know, to let's say, you know, the model Tyson. There's a way in which that—very much influenced by Jean-Michel Basquiat's Blue Ribbon series that Herb and Lenore Schorr owned, bought all of them, where he was working with the, I think, the Pillsbury—what was it? You know, the Blue Ribbon—I forget what it's called, but a particular paper that was a—there was several works that were—I think there were 12, if I'm not mistaken. But there was a show that went, traveled to—I know it started in Mount Holyoke, I believe, but it went to somehow Wesleyan, a traveling show, and it was a little brochure that had—that was almost something that I was wrestling with. Between that and, honestly, you know, and Johns as well.

ALEX FIALHO: Right.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In terms of thinking about how to formally—

ALEX FIALHO: And Rauschenberg.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, excuse me. Not Johns, Rauschenberg, Rauschenberg. Well, Johns as well, but definitely Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg and Basquiat were two people, and both of them appear in the work itself, actually. At least Basquiat does. Rauschenberg appears later in some of the works, in terms of a postcard of his work.

But I was working through something. Initially, *The Watering Hole* was going to be a montage. What had happened, at the time there was a big controversy over Calvin Klein in terms of his use of, let's say, pubescent models for the ad and the images of young, you know, pubescent kids in front of, let's say, a rec room, basement-esque, with paneling. So that was something I was thinking about, and that was very familiar to me in terms of, like, where I grew up, of having that idea of a board, you know, scene-of-a-crime, mark-making collage, really thinking about accumulation.

So the images were, you know—I would just accumulate images. Images that were—oh, [I] have always been collecting that way, you know. Obviously, making my own images, but also always collecting stuff that I might find of interest. Stuff that, you know—but there was also a letter to my father, for example, my estranged father.

There was also a letter from a former lover, Lyle Brookins. Lyle Brookins, his mother wrote saying that she wished—if I knew where he was, please let him know she could help him now. So, in a way, it was also looking at my own role in terms of my—who I was in terms of my own consumption, consuming the other, in terms of, like, my own sense of privilege. My privilege in relationships that I might have been involved in, my privilege in relation to men who weren't black male, excuse me, privileged and—not black male—privilege to the men that I might have encountered, let's say, in the Black C.A.R.E. project. I was also looking at my own subjectivity in terms of my own, yeah, my own privilege, but also men that I might have objectified as well. You know.

ALEX FIALHO: And then implicating yourself in the inclusion of the sexual image of yourself as well?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Of course. Yeah. Including the image of, let's say, me and, you know, someone that I had, a lover that I had taken, even during my relationship. So it was about looking at, actually looking at the self in a way that I had never looked at it before. I had done that in a very private way, but this was in a way opening up the—clearly, there is a diaristic element, but also the merging or the sampling or the suturing of that with, you know, more, I don't know, appropriated images from popular culture, et cetera. But also amping up, you know, amping it up from, let's say, just a commentary, Mapplethorpe. Let's say, if one of us was to look at Mapplethorpe, if they're claiming Mapplethorpe as my, you know—if that's being appointed to me as my—the man who—as opposed to my work—that's also his relationship to Dahmer—

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —and notions of consumption. You know.

ALEX FIALHO: Wow. One follow-up is, does the backdrop of HIV/AIDS add to that work?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, it's interesting because Kathy Halbreich was wondering whether or not the blood, if you—the blood or the coloring, excuse me—in the photograph, which ranges from deep, maybe reddish, orangey, to, let's say, a deep purple at times, eggplant wash color. And I mean, maybe it was working on the level of the unconscious, the intensity of those colors. I think it was more—it definitely was suggestive of violence, of blood, of intensity. It may have been blood. Just a certain, a certain charge, you know, to that. But there clearly was—I mean, the references to HIV were obviously Magic Johnson. The references to Hell, the urine sample, the monitoring of the body. Even though I was asymptomatic, it was a hyper-vigilance, if you will, of the body. And conscious of, like, fluids, contamination, you know, those types of things.

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you. How about the reception of that work now, in the sense that it's being included—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, it's curious. Let's talk about the reception then.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: When the work came out in—[laughs]—September—I was a September baby.

ALEX FIALHO: '96.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: '96, and I remember Jack—I almost got into a fistfight with Jack.

ALEX FIALHO: Tilton?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Jack Tilton, my dealer at the time. Because he said to me, quote, unquote, Where is the cover image? Because the previous show, *The Good Life*, not only had several images appear in several magazines, covers of magazines, you know—I guess Michael Stewart was in the *New York Times* at least three or four times over the course of two years, in various shows, and there's a way in which the images have been very generative ahead. It produced a lot of, let's say, press around the world. Not only that but academic writing, you know, and then later on, you know, thesis, or about the work, et cetera. And this, the second show, did not elicit that type of response. On the contrary, I think it hit—it took people by storm. People were shocked. There was something shocking about it.

Even in terms of the installation itself. Because in addition to the images, there were all—it was also wallpaper, that Susan and Michael Hort—instead of getting wallpaper made, we made maybe two-by-two feet, maybe even smaller, prints that were going to be put up and made into wallpaper. And I remember, we were getting it installed, and it wasn't working. So the last minute, he had to open up his wallet, which he was always, you know—[laughs]—it was always hard to do, and get Daphne—you know, Daphne, she was Rob Gober's assistant; I think still is—and she was, you know—one of her expertises was installation. And she came in; I remember she was saying, "We need you to hire five people." And she got that shit up, and it was amazing.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the reception now?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, so just to finish up. So very little work sold, but certain key works were placed. Barbara Gladstone got a work for a client of hers. The late Robin Rosenblum got one of the most difficult of *The Watering Hole* works, that to this day hangs in his wife Jane's home—their home that they shared, now her home. And a few other collectors, including, like, Greg Miller, et cetera, you know, got works. But it took awhile.

It was a show that, I mean, what was great about it to me was that it was—it was an artist's show. And the first show was about—it was a show for collectors, or for a larger, you know, a community. The second show was—it was an artist's show. It was something that was made for artists, in a way.

ALEX FIALHO: How? Meaning?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, meaning the fact that, you know, how—

ALEX FIALHO: There was no cover image, in a way.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It wasn't about the cover; it wasn't about the *New York Times*; it wasn't about—it was more of a conceptual show. It was more about a certain type of, let's say, rigor in terms of its, you know, experimentation, that could have failed or not. It was something that—there was a rawness. There was a certain spark, you know. I mean, I had—that was clear in the first show. It was a very different kind of show, but it was about disintegration. It was about vulnerability. It wasn't about mask. Yeah. So.

ALEX FIALHO: I feel remiss to zoom us forward and past a few projects in the interests of time, but I think I'll just note them and point to publications about them as a way—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: —to do that, which is—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Am I talking too much?

ALEX FIALHO: We're diving in, and I think we're getting into really rich histories of that moment—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —which is the prompt for the larger oral history project, so I think—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —we're right on track in that sense. And I think it actually works nicely with your body of work and what's been written about it in that, you know, *Billie, Boxer, Better Days*, 2002, has a lovely publication, Anna Deavere Smith essay. You know, *The Chocolate Portraits* has the great *Excessive Exposure* publication with Okwui Enwezor—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And Skip Gates.

ALEX FIALHO: And Skip Gates.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And an interview with Chuck Close.

ALEX FIALHO: And an interview with Chuck Close. You know, *Blow Up* has the Scottsdale retrospective catalogue.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: With an essay—curated by Cassandra Coblentz with essays by Anthony, you know, the philosopher Anthony Appiah, Sarah Lewis's interview with Senam Okudzeto addressing my time very intimately in Ghana.

ALEX FIALHO: Those are two contexts that I want to bring into this interview in our last hour or so, Rome and

Ghana. So tell me a little bit about the international return in a way, having talked a little bit about Tanzania yesterday. Let's start with Rome and the sort of turn to the social sphere and its relationship to documentary photography first. So take me into Rome; take me into sort of the *Blow Up* collages.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, in 2000, I went to Rome. I won the Prix de Rome, and I had begun—I regretted it before—actually years before. After the difficult resistance I got to *The Watering Hole*, I began this project called the—what became known as *Excessive Exposure*. I started doing portraits of subjects from both the front and back, very much thinking, you know, a critique on—thinking of, I guess, ideally of portraiture, photographing both the front and the back of each subject in 20 x 24 Polaroid.

And—but I went to Rome. I thought I was going to be doing more portraits. I mean, that was the intention, to do more portraits in the studio. But it was during my first few weeks there that my then-new boyfriend, Kevin, Kevin Walls, had encouraged me to start—that it was time to start working, you know. He asked me, "What are you going to be working on?" while I'm here. And that morning, there was a cover story on racism and anti-Semitism in the *Herald Tribune*. And so I got in contact with—

ALEX FIALHO: Racism in the *Herald,* and anti-Semitism?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Excuse me, racism, anti-Semitism in European soccer, with Italy being the epicenter of it. And so this was the cover story in the *Herald Tribune*. I was not aware of that, so I got in contact with my editor at the *New York Times*, Kathy Ryan, who I worked with on a number of projects, and I proposed a story to—I had seen a story in the *New York Times* several years before, a few years before, about juxtaposing a perpetrator of apartheid against victims of apartheid, and I thought it would be interesting to do something along those lines.

So that's what I—at least what I proposed, to do black international soccer players, whether they're from Thuram from Guadeloupe or Masinga from South Africa, who took South Africa to the World Cup for the first time, to Aldair, you know, or Cafu, international households names, both Brazilian, but major household names in international world of soccer, major megastars. They juxtaposed these soccer players against, let's say, soccer hooligans. And—

ALEX FIALHO: Fans?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Fans—but fans who were also hooligans, who were screaming racial epithets to them while they're on the field, or throwing the bananas at them, you know, engaging in various forms of, let's say, taunting them and basically acting out a level of xenophobia that was anti-immigration, or the anxiety on immigration that obviously is, I mean, has become even a major crisis today, but hasn't really—there were some early manifestations of that, let's say, in the, you know, in 2000.

But I became more interested in crowds, equally interested in crowds, and then my first game I went to—I had just photographed Berlusconi for the *New York Times Magazine*. I had imagined I was going to be sipping Prosecco in the bleachers. I said, Let me take my camera along just in case, but it was only upon arrival that I—actually, it was only upon entering the stadium that I was directed towards the field and not the bleachers, and then I realized that I had a field access, so meaning that I was on the field with all the professional photographers, and not in the bleachers. So that was, like, shocking, you know.

And so that began a project where I started photographing, let's say, fans, you know, audience, spectators. And that led to me doing research on—for about a year in terms of this project, let's say about eight, maybe more like nine months, actually, nine months to like 10 months, traveling as far north as Verona, as far south as Bari, photographing players but also really a lot of the social—just, you know, the stadiums, the spectators, and spectators at the stadium. And it was during one of those—during doing research that I came across an ad for Adidas of Zidane getting a de-callousing by an unidentified Bronxian model in an ad, a full-page ad, that sort of became the fulcrum, became the trigger point, for what would become the *Blow Up* collages.

ALEX FIALHO: How about Ghana? Which is zooming us forward a little bit further, of course, but—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Okay, so—

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me about that context for NYU, and let's just start there.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In 2005, I had been teaching adjunct—I was an adjunct professor at NYU from, let's say, maybe the mid-'90s; when I finally moved to New York in '98, my dear friend Nancy Barton, whose apartment I was subletting in LA, had moved to New York, and so she got me a job with NYU. I was teaching photography there, and then I had left. I decided to leave. I thought it wasn't really working. I mean, it was okay, but I really wanted to invest more energy into my artwork. But then I got invited to come back, and actually, I got invited by the then-provost, vice provost, the Ghanaian economist Yaw Nyarko, to go to Ghana for a semester and help

develop this art program.

And so I wind up, you know, meeting, falling in love with Prince, who I met, and falling in love with the people and the culture and that one semester, based on the academic service I had done in the service of community, morphed into a seven-year assignment there in Ghana.

ALEX FIALHO: How did it affect your practice and the work you made?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think it added a whole other global sphere. On several fronts, I mean, just being in a very global African context in which I would met extraordinary people. For example, in addition to meeting people like Prince, who I had met by a woman by the name of Senam Okudzeto, who I had actually met before traveling to Ghana, very briefly. And it was a time where Ghana was going through—it was on the eve of the 50th anniversary of independence. So Ghanaians from the diaspora all over, who could be living anywhere, at least those that was in contact with—were moving back to Ghana. There was a certain sense that this was the hot spot, that this is where it was happening. So there was a major cultural renaissance that was taking place.

ALEX FIALHO: In Accra?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: In Accra. But obviously, not only Accra but also, from an academic standpoint, it was definitely taking place in Kumasi at the art school there, the university there [Kwame Nkrumah University –LAH], that El Anatsui studied at.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your pedagogy as a professor? Let's touch on that for a minute or two.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, in Ghana or in general?

ALEX FIALHO: In general, because it's been—you're a professor at NYU and have been for how long? And what do you get out of dialogue with a younger generation of artists, and what are you trying to impart through pedagogy?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I would say that teaching has become integral to my practice, in terms of—particularly in Ghana and afterwards—in terms of really, man, I've been teaching ever since—I've been teaching ever since, I guess, '95, you know, off and on, but in 2005, I sort of decided to really invest, let's say, in becoming a professor and really seeing it as a form of service. It's something—and commitment, you know, to the exchange that one has, let's say, with maybe sharing and receiving knowledge and also being in a context where you can provide students and communities with the knowledge that has been given to me. So that's something that has been integral to my practice and has highly informed my practice, I would say.

ALEX FIALHO: I'm sure you're a good teacher and a tough teacher.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: [Laughs.] I'm tough. I can be good when I'm focused, and if the students are willing, it can be a highly inspired exchange that seems to transcend—I mean, it's very cool. There's something which is very—it's draining, but it's something which is—it's hard to describe something that—the type of exchange or the connection one can actually have in that type of, let's say, structure of a class, where you're able to share knowledge, but also to be on the receiving end of, let's say, helping people to, or being part of one's, I guess, evolution or just one's sort of, like—one's expansion. I mean really working through that or something, yeah, working through. And so, I mean, I come from a family of teachers. My mother was a chemistry professor, and my grandfather was an educator, and my father was an educator, so that's something which is familiar to me.

ALEX FIALHO: What classes do you teach, and what does a crit from Lyle Ashton Harris look like?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I teach a course in photography performance, looking at the performative in photography. But that's, I mean, that could—it's a sort of a broad topic, but obviously, some canonical texts that I read, you know.

But it's also dealing with topical issues, really getting the students to look at the performative in the everyday, but also in critical texts and current things that might be appropriate for them to be looking at. Like, say, while this class is going on, for example, I think it's important the students be able to experience works that are being made today, as well as being able—the works that are being part of a larger cultural discussion that is happening.

For example, this semester, we started out seeing, you know, Arthur Jafa—they were assigned, Arthur Jafa's [*Love is a Message, The Message is Death*]. And the week after that, my chair, Jesse, and Ken, who is—he's been in the department for 30 years, or 25 years now; he's head of finances. He gave us permission to get a whole row at the Film Forum for *I Am Not Your Negro*, the documentary [on] Baldwin. Also bringing—I mean, that, for me, [is] something which is very important, you know, getting students to go see exhibitions, be able to write

about them, or to bring artists in to be able for them to engage and to be connected to the wider issues that are happening today, as opposed to it just being a laboratory that's only in the club. That's very important, without question, but also seeing that they're making them aware of, like, these larger issues that are vital and have cultural currency today and now.

ALEX FIALHO: I'm interested to hear that being in Ghana was a galvanizing process for your teaching career. I'm also keen to hear more about the context of being a queer man in Ghana, in the '00s. And also the dynamic with Prince.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I met Prince the third—I met Prince in maybe the first month I was there. It was interesting. My close friend Senam, she introduced me to a friend of hers, whose—I mean, she, you know, belongs to—brilliant woman, but she belongs to the ruling class, you know, of Ghana, and one of the ruling families on the continent. And then the first time I met her, or connected with her there on the continent, she said, "Oh, come to my home and we can go on"—"a friend's having a"—what is it—"having a 40th birthday party."

And I went to her home, and a few of the—her father has a few of those newspapers, you know, on his payroll. [Laughs.] I'm obviously in jest, but you know, quite prominent. And the party was for the legal advisor to the then-President, Kufuor. So I went from being, like, an NYU professor to being landed in the, you know, the children of the revolution. And these were the social elites, the children of the social elites, you know, of the country.

And that was very different from, let's say, like meeting—it was through her that I met this guy Mark who was the—an American—he's actually English. English, who gave up his American passport after Bush won, but he was—second Bush—he actually—[laughs]—what was I going to say? He took me out one night to this club. He was the founder of BusyInternet, at the time was the largest Internet company, service provider, in Ghana. He was English.

And we went to this bar, Henry's, which is a queer bar, the most established queer bar, founded by a Ghanaian by the name of Henry, who was an out, gay, African man. And I went there and I met Prince, you know, at that particular—I met Prince at this bar, and that was one of Prince's first times out, and he was—yeah, so we—I mean, what should—what can I say?

ALEX FIALHO: I guess to zoom out a little bit, I'm curious about the context of queerness in Accra at that moment for you as both professor and—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think [what] I was trying to somehow say is that it's like different degrees.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: When I got there in 2005, there was nothing—I filled that role. I didn't see any—I didn't want to misread. I didn't see any manifestations of queerness. My friend Senam's boyfriend at the time knew that Mark was queer, and through Mark, going out, I met Henry. So one night, I got exposed to a whole queer scene in Ghana, and through Prince, who was Ashanti and a kingpin, a bodybuilder, I got exposed to a whole other MSM, queer community, gay community in Ghana.

So over the course of the seven years, I got multiple readings or experiences of different degrees of queerness. Whether that was my next-door neighbor, who owns an equivalent of a Botanica, or, you know, a store, who had four—three siblings, excuse me, she had three children, two of which were gay. One who lived with his partner in Amsterdam, and the other one, who was 25, and lived at home with her and helped her run the store. And on the occasion of his 25th birthday party, when my publisher, Greg Miller, was visiting me and coming to work on my book *Blow Up*, we went to the 25th birthday party, and on the street there were scores of queer couples, lesbians, men together, who—and you could have been in downtown—you could have been in London or New York City. It felt that way.

So it was different degrees of, like, seeing—so it was almost like that peeling the onion and somehow seeing, Oh, there are actually indigenous multiple queer communities, whether that's something which is more working-class, you know, or more, let's say, subtle and—you know, there's a class read there as well. I mean, probably not so dissimilar to here, in terms when I would go to the Gay and Lesbian Center right now and see some of those posters, you know, from, let's say, those early formations of queer radicalness, like, in the late '60s and '70s, and just thinking about various degrees of out-ness, I guess it would be almost akin to, let's say, if you think of Stonewall in terms of having marginalized, you know, poor, white men and black—the plurality of that out-ness; you get that element there. But then you also have, let's say, the more middle, upper-middle-class people who are much more discreet. So it's complicated.

ALEX FIALHO: How about questions of HIV in Ghana, either perhaps interpersonally with Prince or in a larger

context of what is now—throughout the crisis, but in particularly in 2000s, and into the contemporary moment—a global pandemic?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: There were a lot of—there were several, let's say, posters.

I mean, Ghana was spared, in terms of like, say, there was nothing like it was in South Africa or southern Africa, in terms of the level of the epidemic and the deep level of trauma and the losses of lives, you know, and also the hysteria around that. And I'm not sure why that is, actually, but I think they had an early intervention. I mean, that's something to be explored. But there was a public discussion around HIV.

There were posters, you know, all of—in the realm of a heterosexual framework, and it took me awhile to disclose to Prince, but we always were safe. And I remember, you know, a friend of mine, Senam, saying maybe since I had not told him from the get-go, I should maybe not be causing him to be potentially dangerous. And I regret not telling him, but he knew all along, and that was really telling to me, because I had built up all of this resistance. I had been encouraged to talk about it, to bring it up, and even to the last moment, to being able to articulate it, you know, and he knew. He said he knew by the rigor in which I actually practice, you know, the rigor which I practice safe sex.

ALEX FIALHO: How about the relationship of those layers and registers of queerness to the work that you made at that moment or in response—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, my figurehead was a very formal—it's a very formal culture, you know. It was complicated for me because I was involved with someone that I eventually was engaged to. We had an engagement party there, an official engagement party that was not [indicated on] the invites. It was supposed to be just a regular party, but we had a formal commitment, you know, to each other that was—it was intense to have that there. He wanted that demonstration of that, you know. It was complicated. It's even hard talking about.

ALEX FIALHO: Did it inflect the work you made? I feel like even a piece—I don't know the name off the top of my head, but—that was shown in Belgium.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yes, you mean the piece *Prince in Red Skulls*?

ALEX FIALHO: That one, of course, but then also the one that references the website.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yeah, well, that's a later work. I think that's sort of like—I think we're only in the work—the work I was doing in Ghana was—oh, I did a cover story for—I illustrated a cover story for Anthony Appiah for the *New York Times Magazine,* looking at notions of cosmopolitanism and photographing Ghanaians wearing traditional outfits, wearing, you know, like cell phones or forms of technology, and that was shocking.

You know, it was interesting to me because I remember when my editor got in contact with me, she was suggesting doing a photo story that—as if that was an anomaly, and actually, it was quite common for people—technology is very much, even more, prevalent than it is here in terms of, you know, among multiple social strata. In fact, during the time I was shooting that story, I was working on developing that story, becoming aware of those organizations who were using technology to help compete—for example, to become more competitive with neighboring Togo. For example, what does it mean—through the cell phone, whether you're a fisherman or a market man selling tomatoes, you would be able to compete, you know, with the local and the neighboring countries along price. And now it's through cell phones as technology that one can become more competitive, et cetera.

But I think after that, I did a series on prison. As you know, the prison—photographs of the prison collages. And I was struck by the uncanny resemblance between, you know, some of the strategies I've used for *Blow Up* and—but these were actually collages that were done by prisoners. And then after that, after seeing those, I felt like I could not return to a certain romantic notion of what Ghana was, because I think there was a certain desire or search or hunger for certain Edenic representation of, let's say, a beautiful country, which it is. But I was also, particularly after the relationship with Prince, trying to look at—in what I experienced, in terms of, like, the underbelly. Anything you find in the U.S., you can find there. And I was very interested in the—

ALEX FIALHO: Meaning?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: You know, the witching hour at a certain hotel, where—you know, the dance of the Johns and the prostitutes. I mean, there's that, you know, whatever. You know, sex work, anything. I remember when I first—having sex workers, male sex workers—all of that is there. That's just one of many, many things, so, yes, I think I wanted a project that may begin to tease at that underbelly, begin to tease at the trappings or the, you know, the vestiges of, like, modernity. And I think to me that felt more truer—

ALEX FIALHO: Great.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —to what was actually a part of that culture. And that's why I want to return, because I feel like I want to—there's some unfinished business, you know, that I have to deal with.

ALEX FIALHO: Nice. I think let's wrap up—it's interesting because of the work that you're showing right now widely, in the Whitney Biennial, the Sao Paolo Biennial—the Ektachromes, take us back, in a way, and I think it's a nice full circle. And I just want to say that's how our dynamic—we were friends before this project, but I think in terms of engaging your work, working at Visual AIDS on the Day With(out) Art [project *ALTERNATE ENDINGS*—AF] in 2014, which was actually the 25th anniversary of Visual AIDS's signature Day With(out) Art program, where we showed a seven-or-so-minute slide show component of the Ektachrome Archive—is where I started to really engage with that work.

And as someone who is working in these contexts from a younger generation, I was really moved by that project. And now I feel, rightfully so, it's being showed widely: Sao Paolo, Whitney, about to have a big Aperture publication. And I think the two threads that I want to conclude on, through that project, is both what can returning to that decade that you're returning to in the Ektachrome Archive—'86 to '96, I believe—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yes, '86 to 2000—hovering around the early '90s, yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: What does doing that now do for us? And for your work?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Good question. I think for me, what—that's a very good question. When I first—I came to that work—

ALEX FIALHO: Other than the fact that they're just damn good photographs that deserve to be on the world.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think it was a working-through process after being in Ghana and coming back to the U.S., and being reintroduced to these archives that I had not seen in 15 years. It does several things. I think it really—

ALEX FIALHO: What was the process of you being reintroduced to it?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, what happened was that I got back in December, after unsuccessfully getting Prince here—we really tried and it did not work out. He was resistant to doing a way that would have been probably more appropriate for him to come here. He was into trying to come over in a particular kind of way, which I supported, you know, because I loved him, but it did not work out. And then I had to pack up, really. I had to move back because I was—it was time. So I was grieving, you know. We were monogamous for seven years, and I was grieving the ending the relationship, which, you know, took a while to get out of.

And upon my return, Isaac Julien, who had had a strange relationship with—for the last several years, we were having a rapprochement. He reached out to me via Facebook to see if he could use some of my photographs to include in his upcoming monograph *Riot* on the occasion of *Ten Thousand Waves* installation at MoMA. And I agreed, and I had a couple of assistants go retrieve these slides that I had carefully placed up at my mother's house in 2000 in the cellar when I had left for Rome, when I had vacated—not vacated, I had sublet my studio to a gallery at the—and everything had to be removed, and I did not want to put those in storage, in the event that something happened. So I understood the value of them. I understood the value of them as being more important, let's say, than some of the artwork that was placed in storage. I understood that. So there was something intuitive about that. Does that make any sense?

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So in looking for these images he wanted, I had to—3,500-plus of them—I was confronted with multiple histories, multiple pasts that were quite overwhelming to experience, particularly after having—you know, a younger self, my relationship with Tommy, travel, family, my grandparents, people that died, et cetera, and also just a certain type of—after having spent seven years in Ghana, there was something which is quite, you know, for me, somewhat formal culture compared to, let's say, the U.S. There was something that was raw about them, so I began to go through those images. And that has consumed me since, that particular time.

ALEX FIALHO: You were gesturing towards the question prior, and then I directed you to how it came to be, but the idea of what does returning [to] them do for us, or you?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think it does multiple things. I think what it does, it provides a documentation of a historical link, and it addresses your generation's, somehow, hunger; it addresses some of it. It addresses and speaks to the need to move through a certain historical amnesia around certain forms—and connects it to

representations that your generation is asking for, in a way that they have never asked for before, as far as my experience. And so it does that.

ALEX FIALHO: What are we asking for?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think in a way it's my sense that there's almost a desire for a certain level of, let's say, historical specificity, images of people's—the lives that people have actually led. Alternate histories that—narratives, photographic narratives, that offer a documentation of, or a counter-narrative to, what maybe might be—you know, a certain embodiment of, let's say, various interconnected relationships that maybe people have theorized about but haven't seen actualized, particularly around queer people of color. The intersection between that, you know, formations of queer desire, but with a documentary impulse.

ALEX FIALHO: Great. The question—and I think to just sort of backtrack and be self-reflexive on the Smithsonian project itself, one thing I'm conscious of—honestly, frankly, disappointed in—is the lack of perspectives of people of color in this project.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: Whether that's the selection committee itself, the interviewers, the interviewees. That's just an honest opinion of mine. But that's why I feel like this oral history is also important. It shouldn't be particularly important, but actually feels particularly important. And I'm just curious to frame that question of race and historization and HIV/AIDS. It's been a major consideration for my work at Visual AIDS consistently, but in particular around this exhibition *Art AIDS America*, which was at the Tacoma Art Museum, a museum near Atlanta called the Kennesaw, and then the Bronx Museum, over a hundred artists—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The Kennesaw. Where's the Kennesaw?

ALEX FIALHO: Near Atlanta.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yes!

ALEX FIALHO: University.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: The show was there?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, it's a great museum. Did you go down?

ALEX FIALHO: I didn't go down.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, yes. I was in a show there.

ALEX FIALHO: The show went to the South, which was great. I think it was great to have this context in the South. But over a hundred artists, only five black artists. Major protests at Tacoma, the initial institution: a die-in by a group called the Tacoma Action Collection around the issue of #stoperasingblackpeople, the lack of representation, the lack of, you know, folks seeing themselves in the images shown—in particular, given the contemporary context in which, you know, nearly one in two seroconversions are black MSMs—in an American context.

All that to say that this historization project could have been—could have done something else, and I don't think will land in that way. It's going to be doing a lot of great work, but that's just background or a particular stake I'm trying to put down, and I'm also curious to hear what your response to that idea might even be?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Oh, well, several things. I mean, that's what I'm doing that—I'm doing this particular project. I mean, this is not my tendency to talk about this type of issues. For me to leap out, and for me to be able to speak even in the way that I have, for me, was something that—it's not like I haven't done interviews before, but it's something that—I was ambivalent about doing it, whether—how "out" did I want to somehow be, or how much do I really want to give? But, you know, because you had asked, because of your capacity to demonstrate your invested interest and your learned interest in the material and in me—so I sort of—the reason I'm doing it.

But, equally importantly, particularly in the last couple of years, in terms of reading these seminal, these new histories, if you will, whether that's, you know, as I mentioned before, the Martin Duberman or the Kevin Mumford or the book *How to Survive a Plague*, or the Crimps book, et cetera, I definitely—considering what I know and what I experienced, that it's absolutely paramount that more people actually, you know, speak out. But also I'm in total support of this new generation—I mean, deeply inspired—who are asking questions. And

rightly so.

And I feel it's criminal that an institution like the Smithsonian would not, let's say, see the importance, because that's part of the problem. I mean, that is how the thing reenacts a psychic violence over and over and over. That is part of—so I think it's very easy to somehow point to the problems, let's say, with the emergence of, let's say, the new Right, which has been developing over the last 25 years or in the last three decades, et cetera. But I definitely am one leaning towards a critical, you know, critique of, you know, like, the neo-liberals or the liberals in terms of, like, who still replicates those models [of] violence, systemic violence, by not really taking the issue of, let's say, representation into account. You know?

And it's multiple levels of violence, because at once they could point to, let's say, the shadowy cover, the MSM cover the *New York Times* did closer to two decades ago right now, but at the same time not include enough people of color in the representation. In the exhibition you're talking about, or the Smithsonian project. And that's a problem, you know. That's something that's constantly reproducing itself. It is a form of violence.

And the reason I'm doing it is because of the histories I actually know. I remember when Alice Walker came, when Marlon Riggs was in his bed and she came to the hospital, was visiting him in his last few weeks before he passed away. And she later said, you know, a few weeks later, she recounted the visiting of him and somehow saying, "What we could do for someone we care about is, you used to show up and rub their feet." And I feel in a way this is a very, I mean, it kind of is all in a day—you know, prior to, let's say, the ascendency and the election of Trump, and all of the hysteria about what had happened. I occupy multiple studios, from Provincetown to New York, in these very, you know, super-queer spaces, and that are highly, highly, highly segregated in the most liberal spaces. So you know, it's something that I have traversed multiple communities, et cetera. But just sort of seeing that as something that I might, you know, quote and quote, be there and present, but I'm always aware that that's an issue.

So I'm super-inspired by your generation, you know, seeing other questions that are being asked. And I'm seeing it in my students. I'm seeing in regards to, let's say, ethnicity or whatever; there is an urgency to make up for the generation before, because in a way they haven't—there's been a lack of, let's say, consciousness around ethical responsibility, as far as I'm concerned. So this has become like a major not only, you know, ethical question, but it's a question of tactical—let's say, the violence of the lack of inclusion. Period. And taking it seriously, and by any means necessary. So this is something we go—and I mean, speaking of AIDS, there was the premise of, let's say, the Black C.A.R.E. project. You know, that was a—I mean, GMAD, you know, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Isaac Julien. What did people not learn from these particular voices that they would have eschewed that would elicit that type of response. That is a question.

So I remember when a curator of education from one of the top three institutions of which I have had a long relationship, in different ways and which I'm sharing with right now, came to me in looking at some images from the *Black Male* show, and had not heard of the Black Popular Culture conference. And I had a hard time masking my contempt for a curator of education at a leading institution who had not heard of the Black Popular Culture conference. That's a travesty. And that's what we're dealing with in 2017.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely. And I would say it forks off in two senses. In relationship to this sort of systemic writing of history, and the systemic erasures, in a way. And it's both—the curators of the show *Art AIDS America* pointed towards the frame of the show around a sort of art-world canon, and that there were black artists in the show who were showing in galleries, and there wasn't as rich of a context for them to pull from for that particular show or exhibition. In that way, I think our conversation here makes—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I was not asked to be in that show.

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly, that's point A. It's like, your work, legibly and not, has addressed the crisis for decades, and you were a central figure in this conversation.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Not that it's about me—

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —but that has to do—

ALEX FIALHO: This is a case study—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —of the larger—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —that has to again—

ALEX FIALHO: Where are the blind spots?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Where are the blind spots? And I feel that's less about—for me, that's less about the inability to find examples of people who were fed that particular paradigm, as opposed to shoddy research.

ALEX FIALHO: Completely.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And the inability to be creative in constructing porous borders that would include those various manifestations of activity.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: So if one has to expand the purview of various manifestations of people exploring these issues—I mean, that's the thing about looking like someone like Kellie Jones or Kevin Mumford. I mean in terms of thinking about Martin Duberman's book, in terms of thinking about, well, just the range, and hearing about Callen, you know, and black gay men in GMAD, at early AIDS conferences, and grabbing the mic. There's so many different ways—I mean, is that not, let's say, 30 years of critical, I don't know, a certain critical framework to really expand and creatively think about ways in which to break, to crack open? I don't think people invest in that. I think it's shoddy and I think it's lazy.

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly, and I think it's—what are the stakes? They were trying to tell a different narrative, and as a result, those voices weren't represented, and that's shoddy and lazy. And I think—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And ultimately boring, really.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I mean, ultimately. And that's why I think, you know, some people may find it problematic—even, let's say, Gregg Bordowitz's *Blues for Smoke*. That was—being able to create that space in which to have—

ALEX FIALHO: His event at the Whitney.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: His event for *Blues For Smoke* to create an evening of black gay men's writing from the '80s, or '70s—or '70s and '80s to '80s and '90s. That itself is a step in the direction, well, not the denial of self, but your self is extended by the inclusion of the other. I mean, that was almost a model for a counter-narrative, you know.

ALEX FIALHO: Including the voices of someone like Pamela Sneed, the legacy of Donald Woods.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Donald Woods. Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: And that's the sort of second layer of the conversation. First is the framework around the art which they are bringing in shows, and how issues of disclosure or legibility are immediately legible in your work, but how that might not be framing your work—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well, I think in a way—

ALEX FIALHO: —to be included in the first place.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —there's different ways of reading, or to talk about the problematics of, let's say, the legibility of disclosure. Even going back to, let's say, a curated reading room around Joseph Beam. There's so many different strategies—

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —that one could think about, ways that, let's say, intellectual property or intellectual curiosity or performance, whatever it might actually be, that's up to the curator to somehow move beyond the myopic notion of what might be art, or misreading, or that that critique or that, somehow, premise that that will —that there is a lack of, let's say, disclosure, or there is a lack of readability that in itself is a way of exclusionary —an exclusionary excuse, when there are manifestations of people outside those prescribed canons who are forming ways of community, of speaking back—I mean, sorry, I'm sort of going on right now, but—yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: This is exactly where I wanted to end on it.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: It's really rich to me, especially given the context of the oral history project that we're immediately involved in at the moment.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: And this context around *Art AIDS America*. And I think, too, what you pointed to—you know, making the boundaries more porous—the result is an investment and stakes in telling the richer—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah and I think—

ALEX FIALHO: —fuller history.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —in a way that—I mean, I think that if you think about the history, how history gets told, even in terms of, let's say—I didn't see the new queer—even the way in which today, representations of queerness gets told through a particular—and that's shifting now. But one always has to be vigilant and challenge. So I'm very glad people did die-ins, asking those types of questions, you know?

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly. And the history—you pointed to a reading or thinking about the immensely rich history of —

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Well—

ALEX FIALHO: —Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and so many others—Assotto Saint.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: On and on and on—think about, prompt, I want to point people to the Ballroom scene. There are immensely rich, creative communities of color that have not been considered in an art context. You know, Kia LaBeija is an artist I work with every day now—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: It has to be through the lens of, let's say, Jennie Livingston—

ALEX FIALHO: Oh yes, exactly.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —as opposed to, let's say, how has the House of Latex—how those communities created space to talk about issues of HIV—

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: —and disclosure, et cetera. Now, I think the problem is maybe a lot of those spaces—maybe there's a class tree, but in a certain sense, how does your intellectual discourse open up and be porous, more expansive, to be able to think of new forms of, let's say, narrative? That would retrospectively look at those forms of alternative readings. Alternative ways of community. That did exist, clearly, and they do exist. But that entailed a certain—that entails a certain type of intellectual, you know, curiosity—

ALEX FIALHO: Investment.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: And bravery. An investment, an interest.

ALEX FIALHO: And it's more work. Because those stories haven't been told in the past, but it's where the work needs to go.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah, I mean, that is—yeah. That is work.

ALEX FIALHO: But we're preaching to the choir back and forth but hopefully—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —someone reading it will appreciate that context as well.

The last thing that I want to ask you is about legacy. And how you would like your art to be viewed? Or how you think your art might be viewed, but also how you would like your art to be framed and viewed moving forward? What might you think your contributions to something like the landscape of American art has been [which we've discussed in the last six hours of conversation –AF]?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I don't know. Legacy in what sense?

ALEX FIALHO: How do you want your work to be viewed in the future?

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: I think one of the things that was important for me is to have books and catalogues that frame the work and to give a context, having these types of conversations. I think it's important that even on the heels of this book coming out with Aperture in October, that there needs to be another book, where I actually narrate and actually tell another form of the story. I have been integrally, intimately involved in the rereading of all—you know, how the work gets framed, at least in the context of my books, et cetera. I mean, it's an interesting question. I really don't mean—it's a good question. I don't know really.

ALEX FIALHO: I've been thoroughly impressed in this dialogue about both the ways in which you think about your work and talk about your work with an investment in a footnote quality. I think every time we've talked about an issue, you've thrown out a text or three—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —to bring into the larger context. Any time I tried to get at a work, specifically, we went—zoomed out, zoomed in, zoomed around. And so I think that this document of an oral history has felt like a really rich frame for people looking to talk about your work going forward, to just reference.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: How do you think the work will be received? From your perspective? From a legacy standpoint?

ALEX FIALHO: I'm particularly impressed after this conversation in the many different perspectives that you have brought to this investigation. Investigation being so many things, but as you've articulated—the body, race, sexuality, queerness, discourse at that moment. But the frame from the early formal work—more or less formal—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —the portraiture moments, to the more experimental *Watering Hole*, to the social documentarian, into the archival impulse. I think that that consistent reimagining of the angle of approach—

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: —is what I'm really taking away from this conversation, amongst many, many other things.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you.

LYLE ASHTON HARRIS: Thank you. [Laughs.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]