



Work Book

Interdisciplinary Work in Relationships: A Conversation with Jaimes Mayhew and Lamont Stanley Bryant

Jaimes Mayhew is an artist and educator currently based in Baltimore, MD.

Lamont Stanley Bryant is community psychology graduate student at the University of Maryland and former sexual minority community programmer for a public health institution in Baltimore, MD.

JM: I wanted to talk about how our work intertwines, or even maybe some of the reasons that our work intertwines. It's not just because we spend a lot of time together, but it's also because we share some common values within our work that are important to both of us. Me being someone who has seen a breadth of the past 20 years of Social Practice art and what happens when artists fail to properly acknowledge the communities that they're working with or their collaborators. It often feels like an extension of colonialism. I've seen it happen and I've made my own mistakes, but I also really want to be really earnest about the work that I make and the way that I collaborate because it's important to me. For me, the collaboration and the relationship is just as important to me as the work that I'm making, and I see that in your work. We just got back from the SCRA (Society of Community Research and Action) conference in Chicago where you presented some of your research about people's experiences with micro-aggressions.

LSB: Yes, and more specifically how to develop a simulation exercise to address microaggressions in human service organizations. The origin of this project was trying to find a way to incorporate community because we believe that community involvement in research is important. If the community that you're "researching" is not actually asking the question, then we are being colonialists and imposing our question, and our concerns on to them. We're imposing our conceptualization of them onto them, and I think with marginalized folks, it is so easy

to not give a voice to. From religions, like I'm imposing Christianity on you, to ways of being and ways of speaking. I think incorporating community, ensuring that the voices of the community are being heard, is beautiful because it's research that was made about us, and for us.

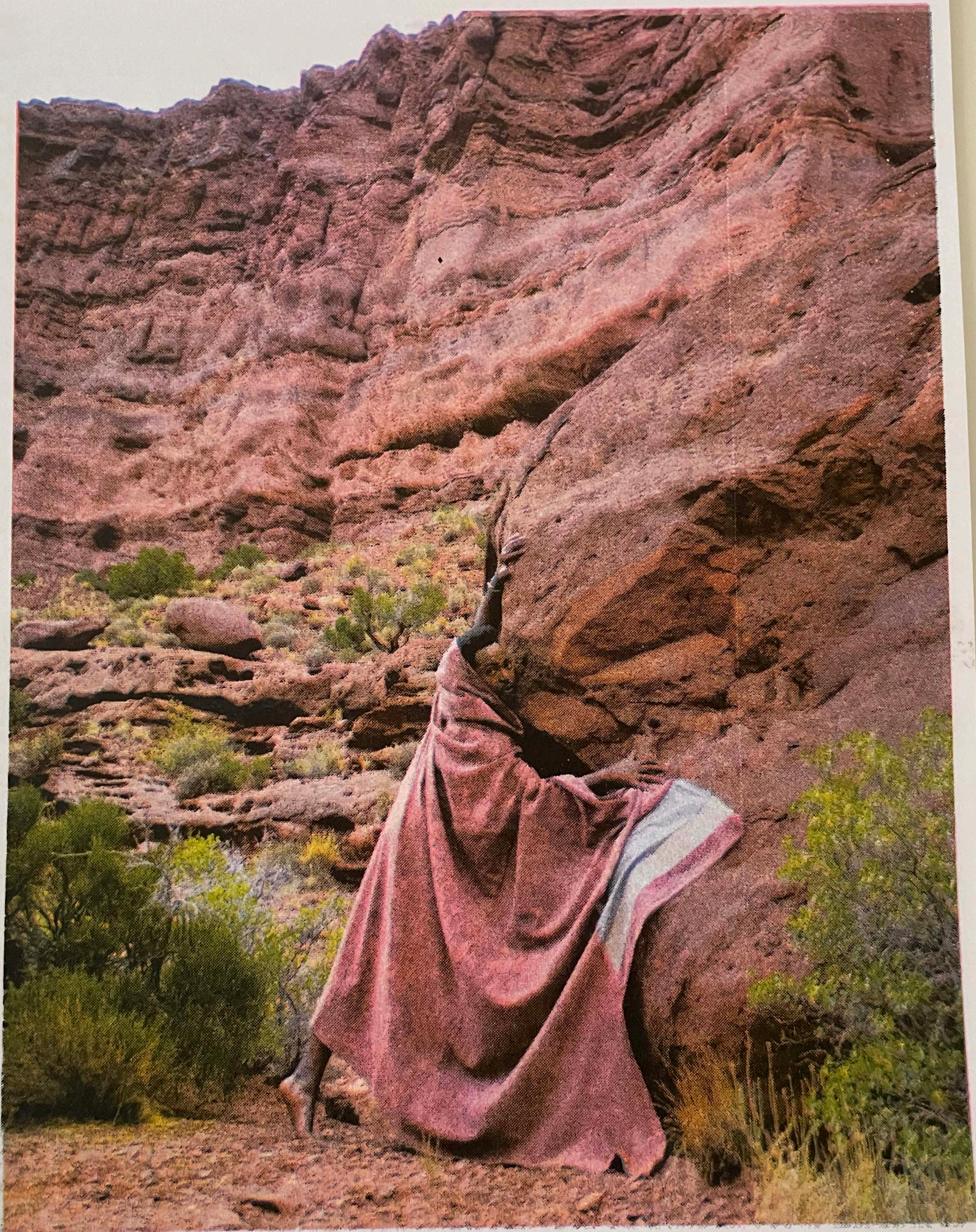
JM: ...and by...

LSB: Absolutely. You read so many of these studies and they're always pointing the finger towards the marginalized person, but we never actually point the finger to the system - to the bigger problem, the bigger issue. If research was coming from the community, it would probably point towards bigger systems.

JM: Yes.

LSB: We have to be able to flip that script, flip that lens, in order to understand how to appropriately address systems or issues because if we're not approaching or addressing systems, then we're only creating more issues or putting bandaids on issues and we're not trying to be systematic in how we deconstruct. Does that make sense?

JM: We've talked before about the congruent problems of representation between a research studies and camera or the Lens as being very similar. The camera always being an instrument of colonialism if you're not being careful with the way that you are presenting the things that are being documented.. The lens, and the structure of a research study, or the structure of a social practice or community art project all share



Lamont and Castle Valley, 2018, archival inkjet print, edition of 30

similar qualities. They are tools for gathering information, and they can be used to create results that tell an audience something that is presented as the truth, even if it is not. There's never going to be a perfect documentary, social practice or community art project because nothing is ever going to be exactly like our conception of reality- and we know that. I'm curious, do you think the same way about your research?

LSB: It would never be documentary because we can't boil down a person to such small factors. When you do your research, there's always that point, at least in my experience so far, towards the end of one study I'm already thinking about the next one and all the questions I want to ask now. In many ways a research study is kind of like a portrait. We are looking at it in a very specific light. We're looking at it by incorporating specific factors. It is impossible to present a research question and present it from all parts. That's why I think all forms of research from different perspectives and different disciplines are so important-- to look at it from a cognitive basis, from an artistic perspective, from a social justice framework, etc... That's how you create the 3D image, how we give it depth and breadth and width and length. If we are just looking at it from one perspective, and that's all we really can do when you're working on a study, you're confounded by specific parameters- it is just a perspective. It's a Monet at sunrise and then in the next study, you may be doing something that's a Monet at sunset. Um, it's the same object or a bale of Hay, but from different lights. I enjoy your input when I'm thinking about research because it is a perspective that is needed in order for us to think outside of the box. Sometimes we have to have someone outside looking in. For the IRB (Institutional Review Board), one of the components or factors in the IRB I believe is of the six people on the committee, one person has to be unrelated to research altogether. You know, to have someone who's completely detached and not a part of that system in order to get something approved is so important.

JM: Does every university have their own IRB committees?

LSB: Yes.

JM: Ah, ok. I like that we're able to really help each other in our processes, and that we're interested in each other's work. I think both of us love the break from our own disciplines, and to be able to work in a critical interdisciplinary way. I really appreciate being able to see the work that you do and the way that you are able to talk with people, or even just to be able to get the right people for a study.

I was thinking about working on the Hidden in Plain Sight project, which is a series of photographs that are like short collaborations with the subjects, where people are camouflaged costumed in different wilderness areas. The first one came about almost a year ago when we traveled to Moab, Utah, where I spent a lot of time growing up. I always wanted to make a piece about feeling disconnected from that landscape because as I became more and more obviously queer growing up, the less I felt like I was safe in that space. So, I made a cape with canvas that I dyed at the same color as the red rocks that are there. We took a series of photographs of each other in Castle Valley near a formation called The Priest and the Nuns. Going down into the valley to take the photos really only took a few hours, but being able to talk about it with you and kind of what each of the photographs meant was so meaningful because you are really thoughtful. Your experience with identity has been really, really different than mine, so wearing the cape in that context meant something really different. Hidden in Plain Site is about identity and your research work is all about identity too. We come from really different perspectives about the different ways that identity has affected our lives.

LSB: I really love that project a lot and the ongoing work that is there because there's something to be said about being receptive and then also being very clear. Knowing that there's so many photos that we took, and being able to articulate to each other, and communicate that what I'm seeing, one person's doing and articulate that to the person and ensuring that that is what they are conveying. Like yes, that's exactly what I'm trying to do. That photo, the last one that

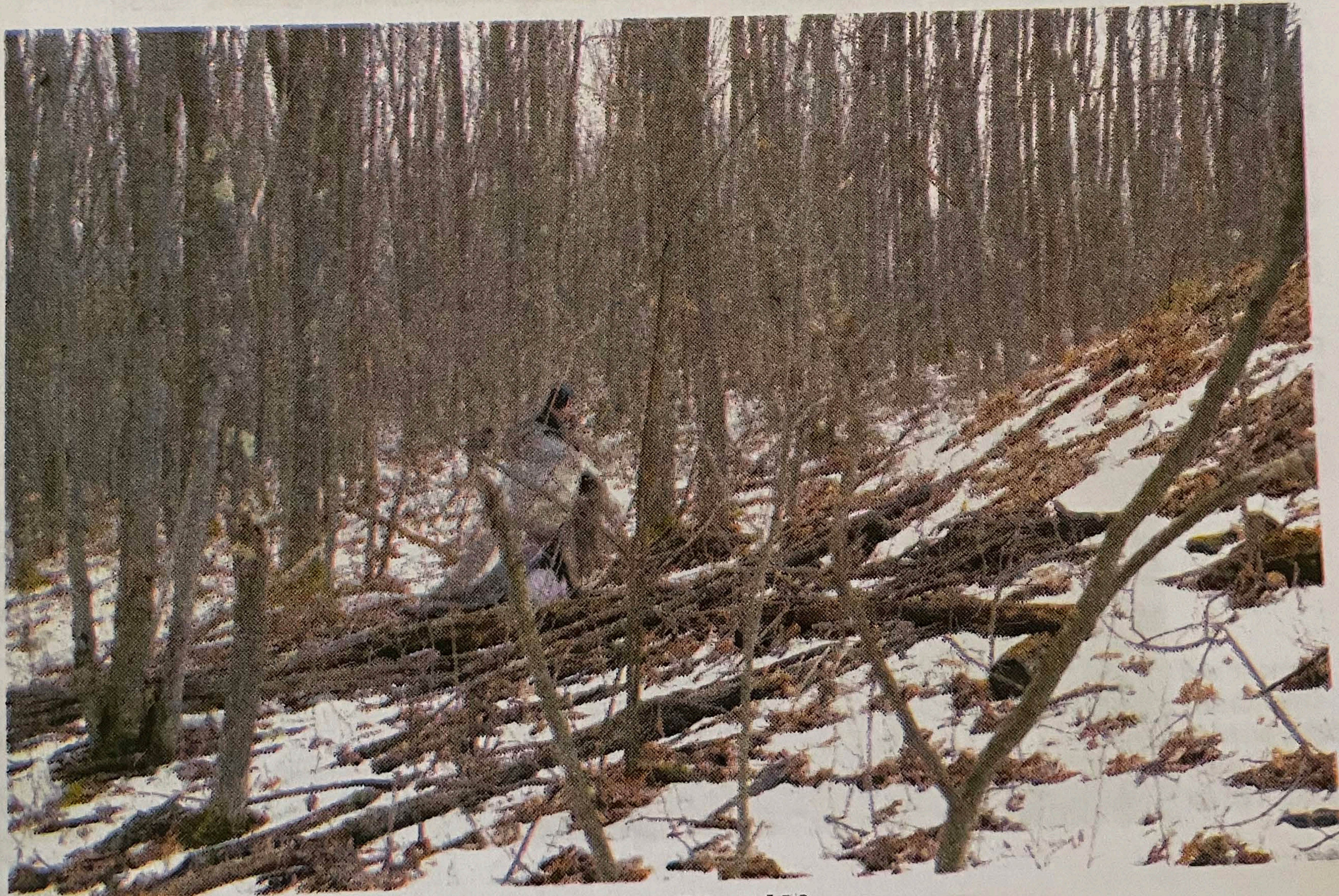
was selected, which I think is so beautiful and amazing- it's that photo of you turning around and it's kind of like lengths of you running away. It's this need to escape. There is something about the way you turn and look. It is real, it is honest. It conveys a feeling of desperation? And that constant sense of your parasympathetic system always going, you know. Asking yourself do I flee or fight? Do I run, do I freeze? Even throughout the series some folks are running, some folks are frozen, some people are moving. Like, what do you do? Do you fight it? I think we're so trained as marginalized folks not to fight, but to freeze or to run? And if you think about the pictures that were selected, they're mainly all folks who are frozen or running. To communicate in the process and watch the process, especially for parts that were unfamiliar like dying fabric or the wax that you used, I had no idea what you were doing, you know? I just thought that was pretty cool. But there's this level of "let's see what happens". To be open and to explore. That's what research

is. Good research is being open to explore--

JM: --but then having enough skills to know if you're way off base at the same time. When I made that cape, I didn't know if it was actually going to be the right color cause we were in a forest above the red rocks. But luckily it worked.

A few months later, we went to Western Maryland and took a series of photos just of you. The costuming for those was based off of going to the nearby Walmart and buying anything in the hunting aisle that was a textile. We made this really high femme outfit for you and you used camouflage makeup on your face that we found in the hunting aisle. It's like the only way that it's acceptable for a really butch cis guy to be using makeup is in that situation.

LSB: It reminded me of moving from Brooklyn, New York to Greenville, North Carolina. That was the first that I ever went to a Walmart. We didn't go to Walmart in New York. Like it wasn't a thing.



Kalima and Hunters Ridge, 2019, archival inkjet print, edition of 30



Jaimes and the Priest and the Nuns, 2018, archival inkjet print, edition of 30



Lamont and Deep Creek, 2018, archival inkjet print, edition of 30

JM: And how old were you?

LSB: Like, 13 or 14. Going to a Walmart was new. Like, oh, this is interesting. Going down that aisle was interesting...hunting gear and cammo...very foreign. And to use that as my femme garb it reminds me of the times when I would try hard when we'd go hunting with my stepdad and really wanted to connect with that, but it just not being me. I ended up just staying in the car reading and sleeping until they were finished deer hunting. It was a joy working with you on that because I think there is a way of communicating, being precise, allowing there to be errors, and allowing for the person to express their creativity. There's this level of trust there. There's moments where I know I need to just step back. You're the subject matter expert in many ways and at the same time you've also empowered me to speak up. So I feel okay saying "no, I don't think that's gonna work." But you also know what you want to look like.

JM: Exactly. And there was no way that I could have put that outfit together and made it look that good.

LSB: And to trust the subject, or to trust a person to emote as I saw like when you were running on the red rocks, or when I decided to squat and literally crossed my arms as if to protect myself and my heart, or Kalima deciding to walk and lean on that walking stick.

JM: Yes! We should talk about that photo with Dr. Kalima Young that we took because it was the first photo where neither of us were subjects, and she's also somebody who has been kind of a mentor to both of us in different capacities in our time in Baltimore.

LSB: Yeah, absolutely. I just thought it was interesting that it felt so natural and that we didn't try to manipulate what just felt natural. We were in a wind storm and the wind was howling.

JM: It also felt really perfect that it was winter and we were photographing her because she had just finished her dissertation about black trauma and it's representation in the media. She had to remain very strong in order to get through doing all of that work, and winter is a time when things get a break after growth.

I kept trying to get her to look at the camera because I thought for some reason that making eye contact with the camera was important. But, what I realized looking at the photographs was that Kalima, as a director herself, kept looking really tired and pulling her body up the hill. She was the one that really brought the...

LSB: ...transformation...at one point we just had to let her do what she was doing because it was natural...we couldn't have directed that. Sometimes we want that shot of the strong black woman, and I'm gonna own that a little bit, because that's not what she was conveying. She was like, "I'm tired. I'm tired of being tired". Winter is also enduring. You endure, but also right now I'm fucking tired and I need to stop. It was beautiful. And sometimes we have to stop pushing that, because you never know where your biases are coming from. If we're working with community, you have to be sensitive to those biases. Maybe you're not even aware of it at the time, but if someone's moving into a direction and to trust the process? Maybe that's why it's easy to work with you. We have to trust that movement, you know,

JM: And not to be afraid - or you have to trust that other people are also going to make good decisions and that you do not have to be in control.

LSB: And I think that something that we struggle within today's society is being able to be receptive and not just digging your heels. To, instead, say, "I see where he's coming from and you know what, I'm going to roll with that." It's nice because we do that back and forth with each other, and we're teaching each other that it's okay to do that.