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Testament Project. Volume 03

Kris Graves

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Citation

Graves, Kris, *The Testament Project. Volume 03*. Bryn Mawr, PA : Bryn Mawr College, 2016.

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THE TESTAMENT PROJECT
VOLUME 03

BRYN MAWR
COLLEGE

The Testament Project is an exploration and re-conception of the contemporary black experience in America. More often than not, black people are portrayed in the extreme—either as very rich or very poor, they are demonized, infantilized, ridiculed, idolized or hyper-sexualized; and within the art canon there is a noticeable scarcity of black representation.

In these glowing portraits, control of the colored lighting is given to my subjects, in order to create a space that is participatory and empowered. By including subjects in the creation of the scene and the altering of color, I seek to create photographs that portray individuality in addition to their blackness.

+ Kris Graves

But you're not like the other ones, you're different.





It was summer of 2005. I just moved from London to New York and settled into my first apartment in Harlem. My brother, who was then 19, came to visit me from Germany. We spent the summer going to the beach, movies, restaurants and galleries. I loved having him greet me after a day's work, except for that one evening.

My brother was unsettled, but didn't want to talk to me. I sensed that he felt ashamed of whatever happened. Once we sat alone on the stoop he could open up to me. He told me that while picking up the laundry from across the street, someone asked him to stop and show his ID. He kept on walking, not recognizing that these were police officers without uniform. Within a few moments, another unassuming car pulled up and he was surrounded by four men yelling and pointing guns at him.

With raised hands he explained to them that he didn't know they were police officers and that he was just picking up his laundry. Meanwhile, all of my neighbors and store owners came to see what was going on. The police officers shortly dismissed him, noticing his German accent and his confused, yet frightened state.

We both knew he could have died that very day for no reason at all.















Shining a Light

In his artist's statement for *The Testament Project*, Kris Graves contends with mass media portrayals of black people in America. He describes these portrayals as tending toward two extremes: they are either demonized as criminals or idolized as celebrities. But at least they are allowed to appear, unlike in the canon of art history, where they are scarce. As a photographer, Graves thinks about the space of representation every time he frames his shot. And as staff photographer at the Guggenheim Museum, he observes who gets to appear in the institution's photographs and who does not, as well as under what circumstances and in what light.

Graves shines a spectacular light on his subjects, one that gives over the space of representation to them. He recruits their participation in how they will be depicted, allowing his subjects to select the hues that will saturate their images—colors that powerfully complicate or disrupt assumptions about what blackness looks like. He also invites their testimony, letting his subjects give voice to their experiences of blackness in contemporary America, and then he interweaves that text with their portraits in both the gallery space and accompanying publications. Graves hopes the interventions of light and text make room for individuality in blackness, rather than its reduction to stereotypes.

Parts one and two of *The Testament Project* focus on representing black masculinity in contemporary America, and now part three invites female subjects to enter the frame. Promoting any opportunity for black female subjects to be represented is particularly significant at Bryn Mawr College, where we contend with our legacy of institutional racism. Although the College was established with the progressive and then-audacious mission to educate women to the highest level, it restricted this opportunity to white women for more than four decades. The college's second president, M. Carey Thomas, was a eugenicist, who believed that one's intellectual capacity was determined by and observable from physical traits, including skin color.¹ She openly avowed the supremacy of "white races" and used this belief to justify the education of white women, whose physical traits apparently did not decide *their* intellectual capacities.²

That we should use an exhibition of photographs to address and confront this history is surprisingly appropriate. Since its early history, the medium of photography and its truth effect have been insidiously marshalled as scientific evidence of race. Louis Agassiz, the biologist and founding director of Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology, used photographs in his efforts to prove his theory of racial polygenesis—the now discredited idea of the origin of the human species from several racially distinct sources. Eugenicists combined photographs of specific individuals into composite portraits in their attempt to codify criminal or racial "types" according to physical features. It was against such pseudo-scientific contentions that the sociologist and American civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois intervened, and he did so with an exhibition of photographs at the 1900 Paris World's Fair. This exhibition presented several albums of individual photographs under the typifying title, "The American Negro." But, instead of allowing these many portraits to cohere into a single abstract "type," Du Bois upended such essentialist logic by exhibiting the vast diversity of these individuals' physical appearances. His exhibition refused to be proof of the kind of "essential, physical racial identity sought by eugenicists and white supremacists."³

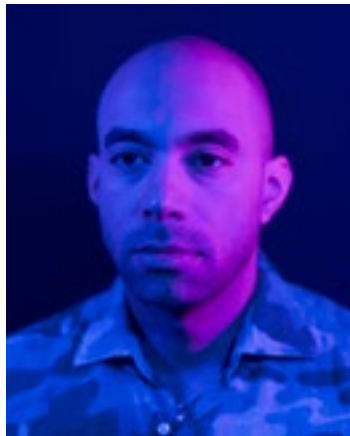
¹Florence Goff, "In Black & White: The history of African-American Women at Bryn Mawr traces a journey from exclusion to a celebration of diversity," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Bulletin* 97, no. 1 (August 2015): 16-19.

²"Address by President Thomas at the Opening of the College, October 4, 1916," *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Quarterly* X, no. 3 (November 1916). Thomas's address of the incoming freshman class included these remarks, "If the present intellectual supremacy of White races is maintained, and I hope that they will be for centuries to come, I believe it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women."

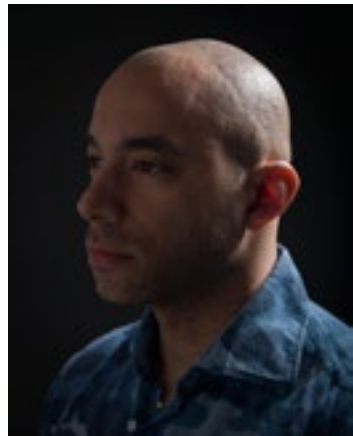
³Shawn Michelle Smith, "Photographing the 'American Negro': Nation, Race, and Photography at the Paris Exposition of 1900," in *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, ed. Lisa Bloom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 77.



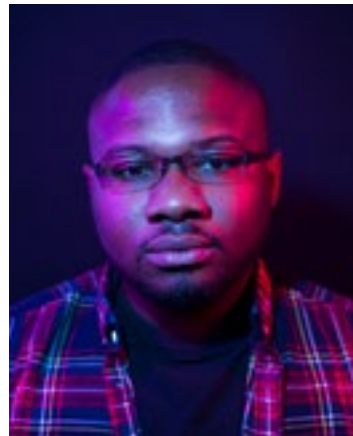
Corey



Clarence



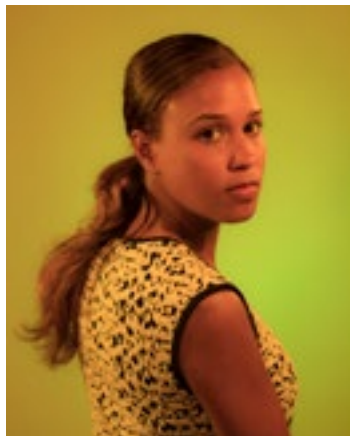
The Entrepreneur



Nnamdi



The Advertiser



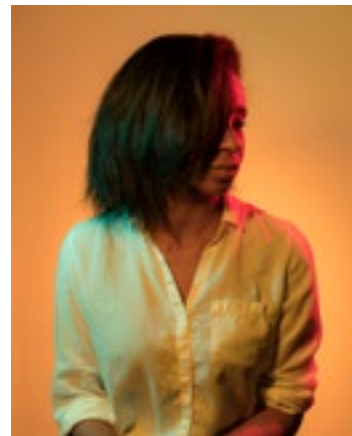
Tiffany



Tiffany



Lauren



Lauren



La Toya



Busola

The Testament Project has a similar motivation. Graves explores representations of black Americans not to essentialize blackness, but to portray individuals—individuals whose claimed or named blackness has interfered with their opportunities for more particularized representation. That this could be the case is heartbreakingly nonsensical to Graves. The people he photographs are his friends, his family. Each of them is a whole world, irreducible to a single generic identity, a single racialized image. But, Graves also knows the power of representation. So he shines a light and allows each to appear in his or her uniqueness.

When he lights his subjects, Graves does so by abandoning the conventions of three-point lighting—the technique used for most photographic portraiture—in favor of the more dramatic effects of stage lighting. Catching Corey between the red-orange spotlight that illuminates his face and the yellow-green tint that surrounds him has the effect of putting him on stage. As he looks out, past us, his eyes slightly raised, we await his performance. Could this be Hamlet about to speak his searching soliloquy? The deceptively simple, yet stunning device of the Day-Glo spotlight lets Graves remind us that posing for the camera is a performance—a performance of the self for the photographer. It is this collaboration that yields a portrait. And, while a portrait may aspire to represent its subject truthfully in the rich complexity of his or her unique identity, it simultaneously reduces the subject to surface appearances. An individual, this individual, contains many selves, and the theatricality of Graves’s portrait affirms that this image is but one representation of a lifelong performance. Throughout his series, Graves often returns to the same subject, as in his portraits of Clarence, Nnamdi, Tiffany, or Lauren, insinuating the impossibility of the task of total photographic representation. His is not the logic of the photo-ID, which operates according to faith in the self as singular and the photograph as accurate. Instead, Graves’s photographs underscore the futility of this desire for a truthful photograph or a singular authentic self.

In doing this, Graves joins a history of artists who combine photography with devices of the stage and screen to assert that the self is something we continuously perform, rather than something that exists apart from these performances. Whereas artists such as Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun used costumes and masks to destabilize gender categories and the criteria of sexual difference, Graves uses theatrical stage light to affirm the social construction of race, specifically blackness.

What is blackness? Does it correspond to skin color? Do we think we see it? What does it look like? Is it visible against the black backgrounds in Graves’s portraits of men? Do we name it, despite the overwhelming pink or intensely blue appearance of *La Toya’s* or *Busola’s* skin? When Graves bathes his subjects in vibrant washes of colorful light, he alters the appearance of their skin color—the very location of difference we use when we think we recognize race on bodies. Doing so relocates blackness from the realm of the visible—it is not recognizable as skin color in these portraits—to the domain of discourse. When we name his subjects in terms of race, we racialize them according to our own assumptions, and we participate in producing race as something that is socially, economically, and politically meaningful. When we think we recognize his subjects’ blackness despite the green, purple, or orange appearance of their skin, we see the subtlety with which the social construction of race operates to reinforce racial coherence, division, and hierarchy. As Patricia J. Williams writes, “Blackness is and isn’t a color. It’s kind of political—it changes. Sometimes it’s what the law says it is, sometimes it’s what other people think it is, sometimes it’s whatever you say it is.”⁴

⁴Patricia J. Williams, preface to *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art*, by Maurice Berger (Baltimore: University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2004), 16.

To affirm that race is not an unchanging objective essence but rather a mutable social construction is not to suggest that it doesn't matter. Our culture has made race meaningful and its meaning continues to change in ways that have real effects on our social organization, our identity formation, and our lived experiences. This summer's continued racially-motivated violence against black-appearing people, even by police, reminds us just how real the effects of race are in contemporary America. Reflecting on the role of images in this context, MoMA curator Thomas J. Lax writes, "At their best, pictures—on Instagram or at a museum—can offer a space of both meditation and change where anger, fear, and ambivalence can coexist."⁵ Accordingly, Graves's pictures are pictures at their best. They not only offer a space of representation to their subjects, shining a different kind of light on them, but they also provide a space of encounter, shining their light back at the viewer, who may experience a strange mixture of sympathy, fear, identification, or alienation, among other things. By using light to alter the appearance of his subject's skin color, Graves reminds us that race is produced, named, contested, and made meaningful in the encounter between viewer and viewed. We interpret race like we interpret photographs, according to our own beliefs, politics, desires, and experiences. In this way, despite Graves's best efforts, much like Du Bois's, whether we reduce these individuals to stereotypes, imagine the fullness of their personhood, or identify with them is up to each one of us.

Entering the Rare Book Room this fall at Bryn Mawr College means encountering the imposing portrait of M. Carey Thomas by John Singer Sargent amidst the photographed faces of 20 black-identifying subjects. As such, the exhibition offers its own testament, in at least two senses of the word—as evidence of the existence of something and as instruction forward in the wake of a death. *Kris Graves: The Testament Project* gives us an opportunity to bear witness to the trauma of institutional exclusion, to attend to the persistence of traditional privileges, and to imagine a path forward toward transcendence and transformation. Let this exhibition be an invitation for institutional reflection, self-examination, conversation, and change.

Carrie Robbins
Curator/Academic Liaison of Art & Artifacts
Bryn Mawr College

⁵Thomas J. Lax, "How Do Black Lives Matter in MoMA's Collection," *Inside/Out: A MoMA/PS1 Blog*, July 9, 2016, http://moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/07/09/how-do-black-lives-matter-in-momas-collection.







The black experience is one that is difficult to put into words.

There is a collectiveness to feel; a bond to the shared experience of being a minority here. However, due to outside forces, there is a box that we are forever confined to. There is the idea that because you check the box that says “black,” you must have experienced X, Y, and Z.

At some point it was forgotten that the black community is a community of individuals. We learn differently, we laugh differently, we love differently. We are diverse in every possible way. There is no box that defines us. Throughout my life I have been told, “You’re so different.” Who am I different from? Am I different from people I’ve never met, who were born in a different environment and raised by a different family? Well, then by all means, yes, I am different.

The most discouraging part is that it is almost always meant as a compliment.

That statement does not separate me from anything, it simply means I am an individual. I empathize with the struggles of the black community, and I believe that together we can create and motivate change. We are bonded together by the very notion of the black experience, but that does not mean we are not individually creative or intellectual.

Every one of us is different. I think that is the hardest part for some people to understand.







You're in Utah working for the summer. You and about twenty other black colleagues. Your white colleagues throw a costume party—they do this each summer. It's their tradition, and the entire small town you're in knows it. You figure it wouldn't hurt to go, you and your black friends in the sea of white. What could go wrong?

The party is silly and fun, you let your hair down, you let your guard down. "We're all just people having fun!" you think.

But after 11pm the party gets too rowdy. Too much noise, too much drinking, too much cross-dressing for the small town. The police are called. You and your friends unfortunately know that black people and police don't mix.

You run inside to your friends' nearby apartment and hide. This is slightly humorous to you. You've only seen this on television and read about it in the newspaper. Crazy white people and their parties in small towns, a slap on the wrist, a warning that they won't be so nice next time. Oh gee, those silly, fun-loving white people!

But you're not white and as soon as you see the squad cars pulling out, you and the three black women and one short black gay man walk quietly and calmly to your cars. Hands visible. Serenely smiling to show you're not looking for any trouble. It's all even more humorous to you now.

You get in the car and put on your seat belts. Man, what a story to tell your friends at home tomorrow. You watch the driver check her mirrors and put her signal on to pull out of the spot. There's a stop sign up ahead and she makes a full stop keeping in line with the laws of the road. You're all laughing at this. Everything is so incredibly funny.

You notice the police car behind you. You ask your friends, "there's no way he's coming for us... right?" Right.

Your friend, the driver, even waits for the police car to pass you by. But he sits behind you with flashers on. You see another cop car pull up in front of you. They have you surrounded. "Who are they looking for?" you wonder. The first police officer walks up to the driver side. The second to the passenger's side. The third is shining a light into the backseat where you are.

Your mouth is dry. You can hear your heart beating. You forget how to breathe.

"Did you know that you have a broken taillight?" the officer says. Your friend knows and tells him she backed into a pole earlier.

"Ma'am, have you been drinking?" he asks.

"No sir," she says.

"Ma'am, I need you to get out of the car. Out of the car, ma'am!" he demands.

She gets out.

You realize this isn't funny anymore. You can no longer breathe. Your parents told you to keep yourself safe and here you are, pulled over by the police for being black.

Your friend is back now, tears streaming down her face. You're all crying, silently. There is no defiance, there is only the reminder of what country you live in and how you got here.

"Listen, we know you just came from that party. You all have that party every year and we don't like it. You mess around making all that noise again, and we'll have to arrest you all."

"But...," your friend perks up. You squeeze her hand.

"We know you're real far away from your mommies and daddies so it's gonna take a long time for them to come bail you out. And we've got real nice big jails to throw you all in. Oh yes, they are real big and real, real nice."

You've never seen anyone sneer at you. Especially not a white police officer who has just threatened to put you in jail, in the middle of nowhere, with his hand on his gun.

He leans into the car to add before leaving, "Because we don't want you people here."

You are all silent for a while. United in a way that you never thought possible. A silent understanding. You are forever changed.





(in order of appearance)

Jessica (on cover)

Daina

Jennifer

Ayesha

Tigist

Susan

Porscha

Busola

Jessica

Francis (in stereo)

Bekah

Susan

Ayesha

Jennifer

Lauren

Tiffany

Katiana

Elsa

La Toya

Tiffany

Lauren

Busola

Bekah (on verso)

We are grateful to Kris Graves for agreeing to exhibit his compelling photographs at Bryn Mawr College. The exhibition helps continue the ongoing conversations about race that have taken place at Bryn Mawr over the last several years, punctuated by the opening of the Enid Cook '31 Center, the Community Days of Learning, and the series of *Black at Bryn Mawr* walking tours and discussions. It seems especially appropriate that Bryn Mawr is among the first to host the newest set of photographs in Graves's *The Testament Project* series, his photographs of black women. This catalogue, his third in *The Testament Project* series, shows only his photographs of women, whereas the exhibition at Bryn Mawr also includes photographs and a video of men from his earlier series.

The exhibition also connects to the series of programs on *Voice* that are being sponsored by the Provost's Office this year. Amid the other events in the series that explore aspects of voice, including the political voice, the public voice, the inner voice, voices raised in anger, voices of praise, voices silenced, Kris Graves's artistic voice and the transcribed voices of his subjects offer a moving and complex portrait of black lives in America.

The exhibition was organized and curated by Carrie Robbins, Bryn Mawr's Curator and Academic Liaison for Art and Artifacts, who has taught a History of Photography topics course on Race and Identity at both Bryn Mawr College and Temple University. She was inspired to invite Kris Graves to exhibit at Bryn Mawr after seeing the first volume of *The Testament Project* and meeting the artist at the 2016 Philadelphia Art Book Fair.

The exhibition and catalogue were made possible by generous support from the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Library. Additional support for the exhibition and programming came from Bryn Mawr's Department of Special Collections, The Center for Visual Culture, and the pilot program in Museum Studies.

Eric L. Pumroy
Associate Chief Information Officer and Seymour Adelman Director of Special Collections
Bryn Mawr College

On the occasion of an exhibition at Bryn Mawr College, September 21–December 18, 2016.

Kris Graves creates portraits and landscapes to preserve memory. The images' stillness causes the viewer to acknowledge the inevitability of change and the passage of time. He currently lives and works in Queens, New York.

All photographs are archival pigment prints, limited to an edition of 8. These works range in size from 16 x 20" to 30 x 37.5"

PHOTOGRAPHY

Kris Graves

ESSAY

Carrie Robbins, PhD

STORIES (in order of appearance)

Jennifer Graves, Tigist Schmidt, Lauren Drysdale, La Toya Lewis

SEQUENCE

Kris Graves

PRINTING

Printed in Canada by Quadriscan

PUBLISHED

Bryn Mawr College
101 N Merion Avenue
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania 19010
brynmawr.edu

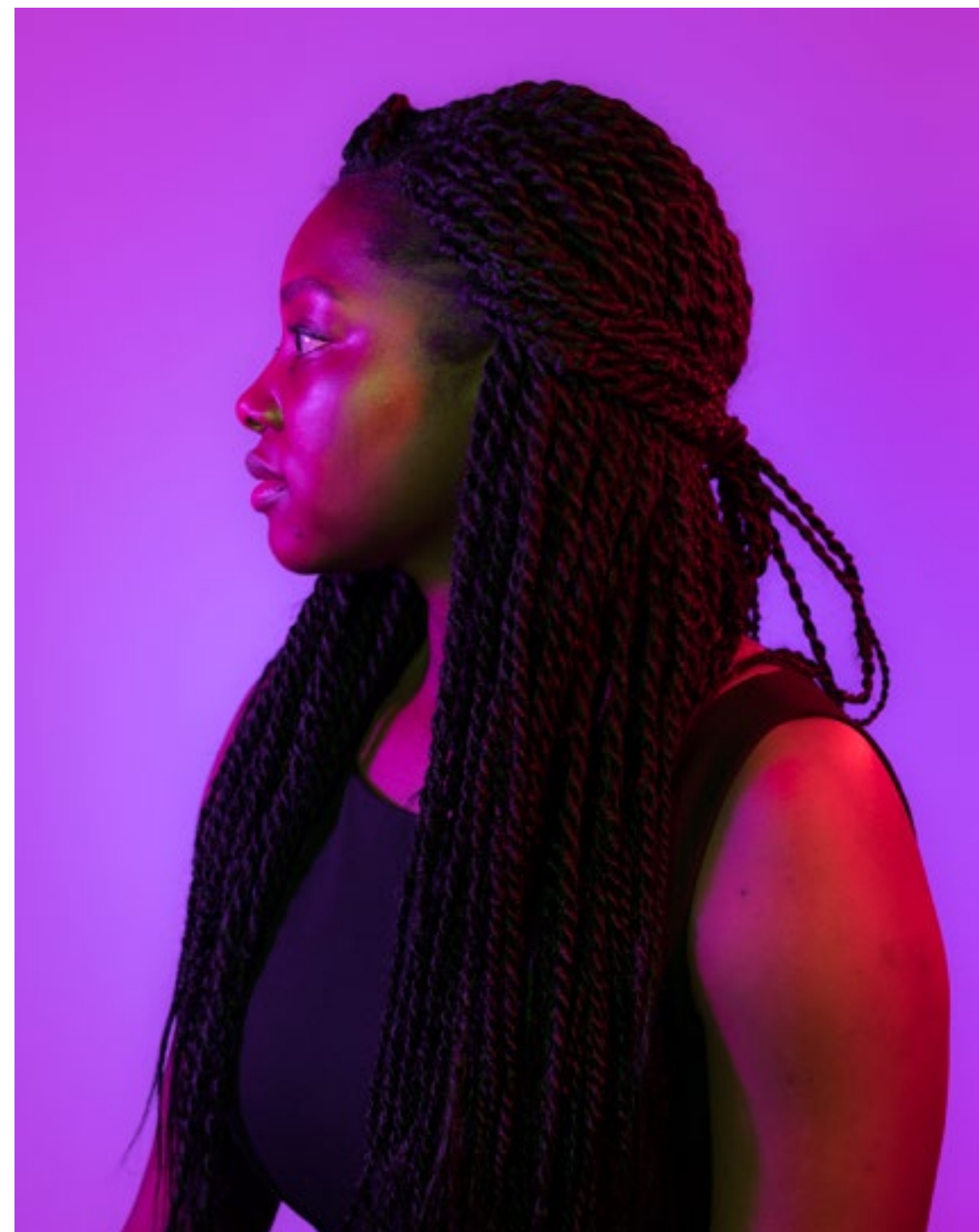
01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09

ISBN 978-0-9884183-8-7

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FIRST EDITION 2016



This project is dedicated to my mother and father for
giving our family the opportunity for a better life.
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