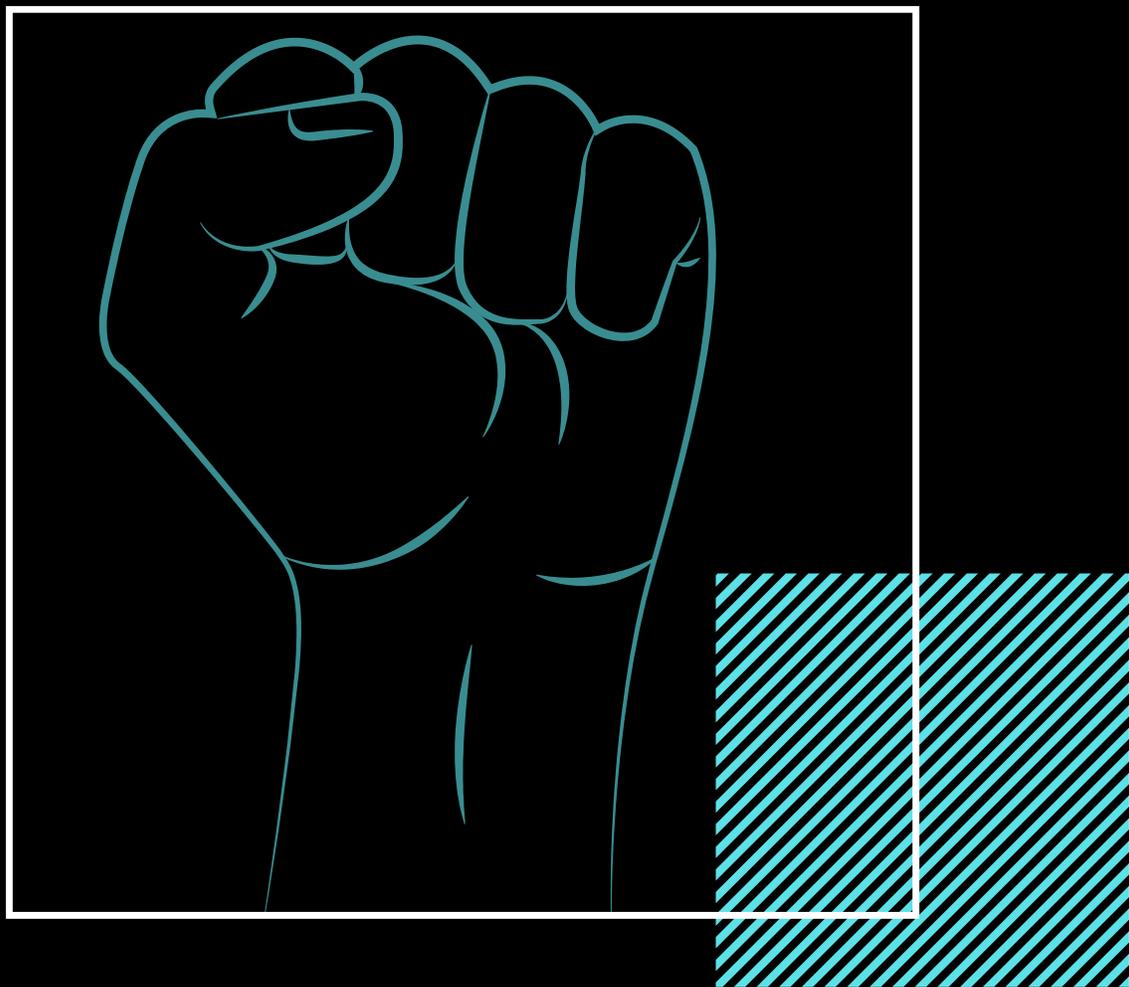
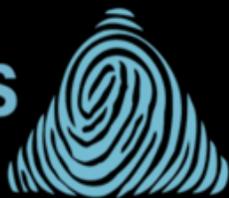


HISTORIC
BLACK 2SLGBTQIA+
COMMUNITY
IN TORONTO



REFLECTIONS

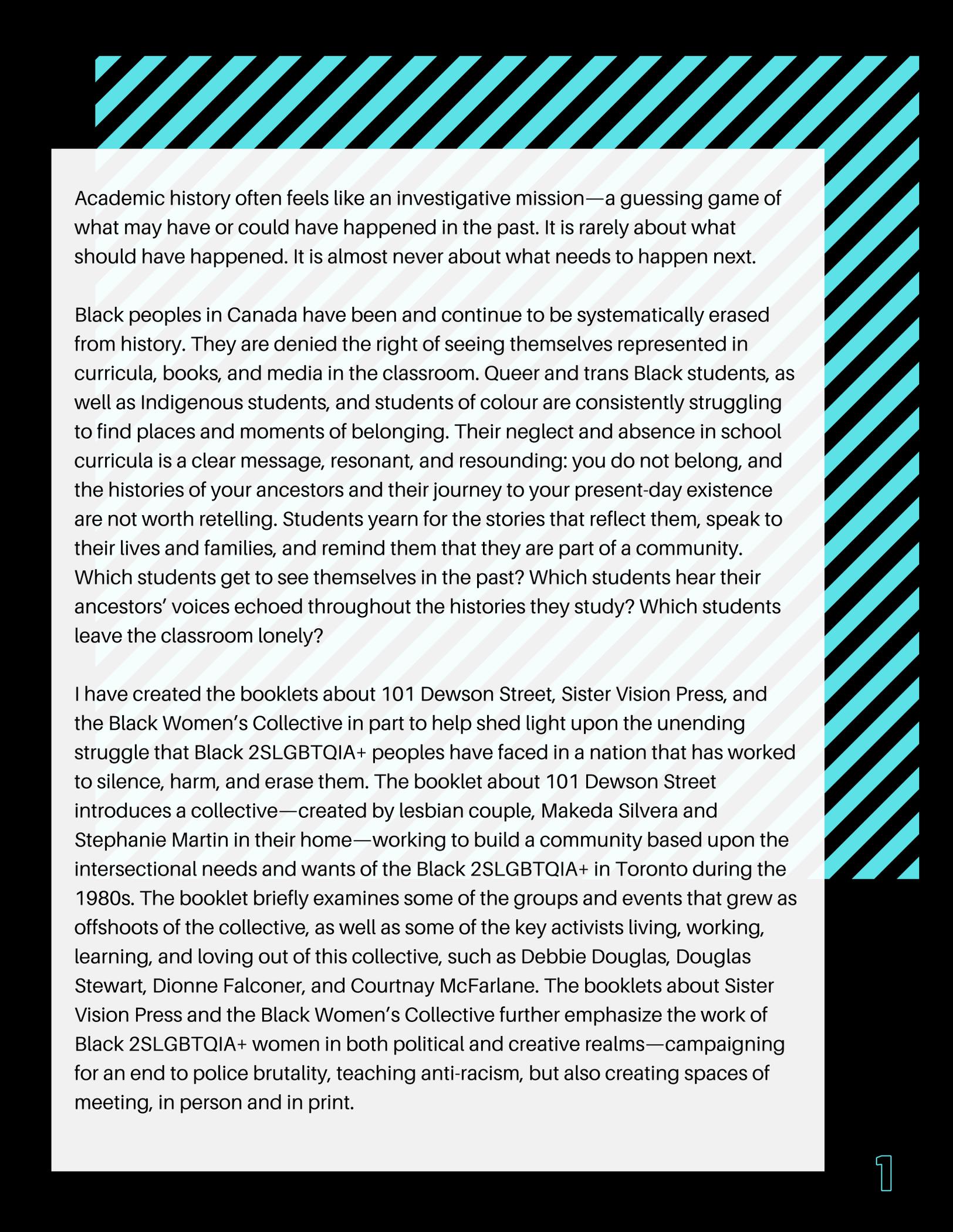
LE CENTRE CANADIEN DE LA
DIVERSITÉ DES GENRES
+ DE LA SEXUALITÉ



THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR
GENDER+SEXUAL
DIVERSITY

**DOCUMENT CREATED AND WRITTEN BY
EMMA N. AWE**

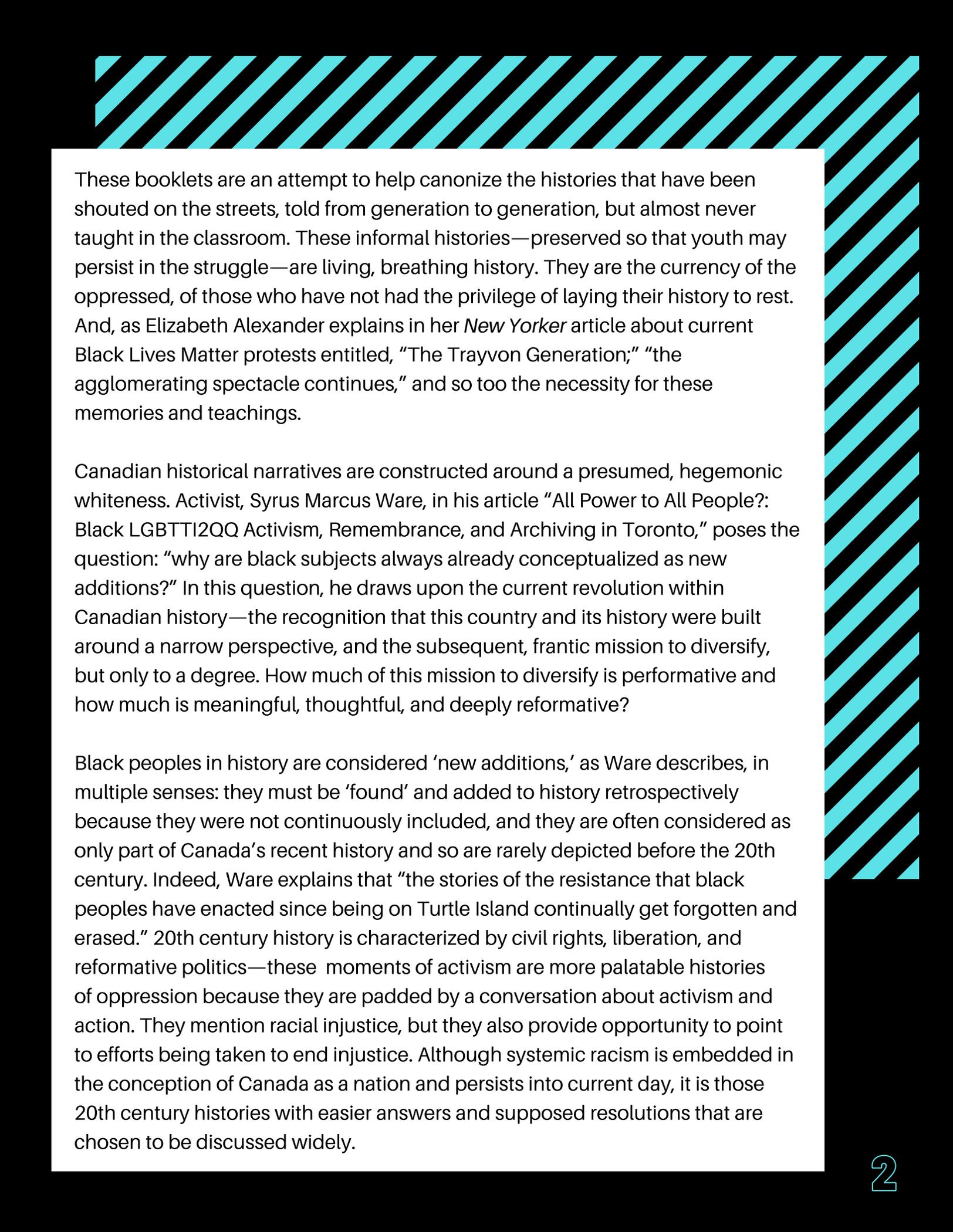
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Academic history often feels like an investigative mission—a guessing game of what may have or could have happened in the past. It is rarely about what should have happened. It is almost never about what needs to happen next.

Black peoples in Canada have been and continue to be systematically erased from history. They are denied the right of seeing themselves represented in curricula, books, and media in the classroom. Queer and trans Black students, as well as Indigenous students, and students of colour are consistently struggling to find places and moments of belonging. Their neglect and absence in school curricula is a clear message, resonant, and resounding: you do not belong, and the histories of your ancestors and their journey to your present-day existence are not worth retelling. Students yearn for the stories that reflect them, speak to their lives and families, and remind them that they are part of a community. Which students get to see themselves in the past? Which students hear their ancestors' voices echoed throughout the histories they study? Which students leave the classroom lonely?

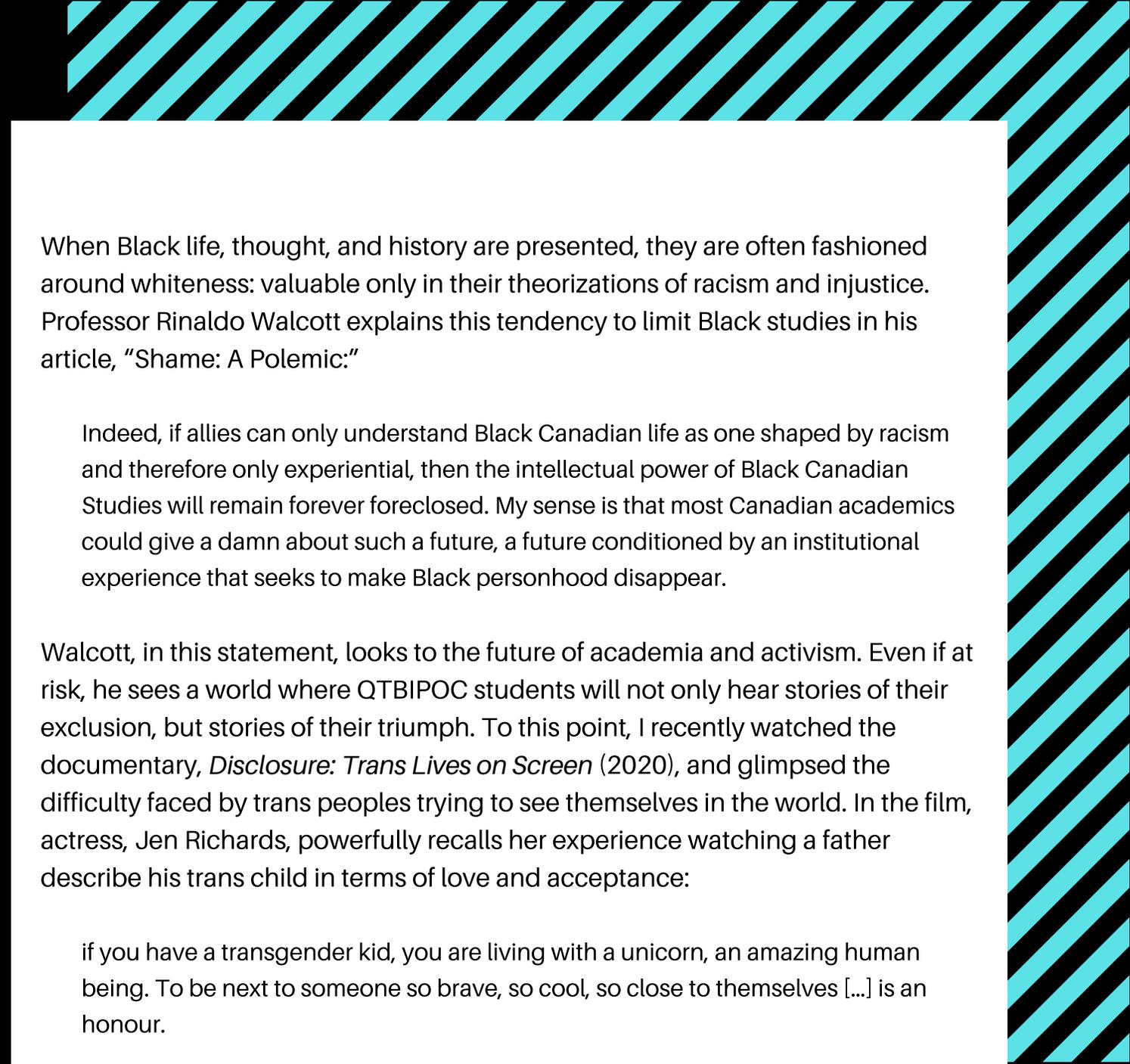
I have created the booklets about 101 Dewson Street, Sister Vision Press, and the Black Women's Collective in part to help shed light upon the unending struggle that Black 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples have faced in a nation that has worked to silence, harm, and erase them. The booklet about 101 Dewson Street introduces a collective—created by lesbian couple, Makeda Silvera and Stephanie Martin in their home—working to build a community based upon the intersectional needs and wants of the Black 2SLGBTQIA+ in Toronto during the 1980s. The booklet briefly examines some of the groups and events that grew as offshoots of the collective, as well as some of the key activists living, working, learning, and loving out of this collective, such as Debbie Douglas, Douglas Stewart, Dionne Falconer, and Courtnay McFarlane. The booklets about Sister Vision Press and the Black Women's Collective further emphasize the work of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ women in both political and creative realms—campaigning for an end to police brutality, teaching anti-racism, but also creating spaces of meeting, in person and in print.



These booklets are an attempt to help canonize the histories that have been shouted on the streets, told from generation to generation, but almost never taught in the classroom. These informal histories—preserved so that youth may persist in the struggle—are living, breathing history. They are the currency of the oppressed, of those who have not had the privilege of laying their history to rest. And, as Elizabeth Alexander explains in her *New Yorker* article about current Black Lives Matter protests entitled, “The Trayvon Generation;” “the agglomerating spectacle continues,” and so too the necessity for these memories and teachings.

Canadian historical narratives are constructed around a presumed, hegemonic whiteness. Activist, Syrus Marcus Ware, in his article “All Power to All People?: Black LGBTTI2QQ Activism, Remembrance, and Archiving in Toronto,” poses the question: “why are black subjects always already conceptualized as new additions?” In this question, he draws upon the current revolution within Canadian history—the recognition that this country and its history were built around a narrow perspective, and the subsequent, frantic mission to diversify, but only to a degree. How much of this mission to diversify is performative and how much is meaningful, thoughtful, and deeply reformative?

Black peoples in history are considered ‘new additions,’ as Ware describes, in multiple senses: they must be ‘found’ and added to history retrospectively because they were not continuously included, and they are often considered as only part of Canada’s recent history and so are rarely depicted before the 20th century. Indeed, Ware explains that “the stories of the resistance that black peoples have enacted since being on Turtle Island continually get forgotten and erased.” 20th century history is characterized by civil rights, liberation, and reformative politics—these moments of activism are more palatable histories of oppression because they are padded by a conversation about activism and action. They mention racial injustice, but they also provide opportunity to point to efforts being taken to end injustice. Although systemic racism is embedded in the conception of Canada as a nation and persists into current day, it is those 20th century histories with easier answers and supposed resolutions that are chosen to be discussed widely.



When Black life, thought, and history are presented, they are often fashioned around whiteness: valuable only in their theorizations of racism and injustice. Professor Rinaldo Walcott explains this tendency to limit Black studies in his article, "Shame: A Polemic:"

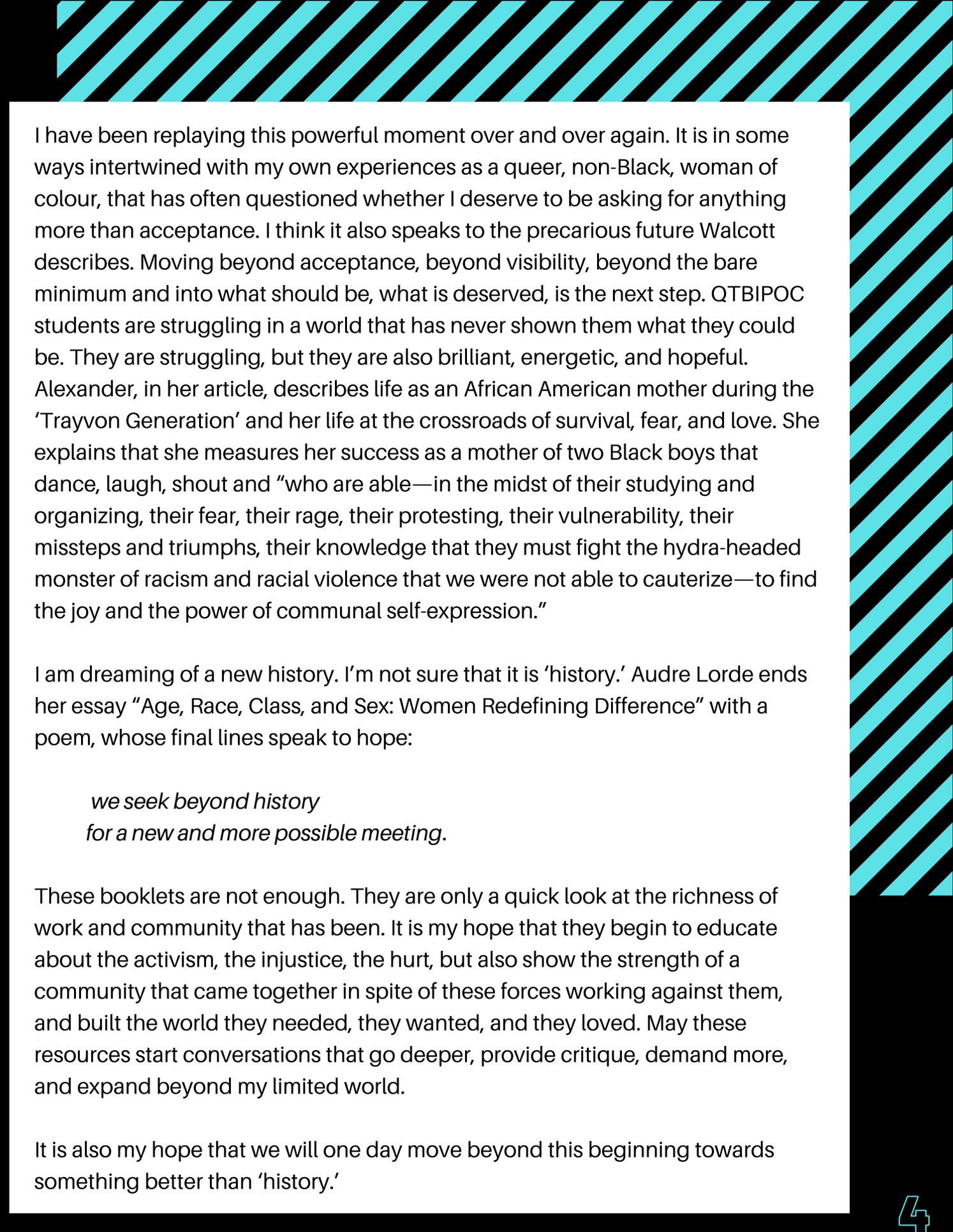
Indeed, if allies can only understand Black Canadian life as one shaped by racism and therefore only experiential, then the intellectual power of Black Canadian Studies will remain forever foreclosed. My sense is that most Canadian academics could give a damn about such a future, a future conditioned by an institutional experience that seeks to make Black personhood disappear.

Walcott, in this statement, looks to the future of academia and activism. Even if at risk, he sees a world where QTBIPOC students will not only hear stories of their exclusion, but stories of their triumph. To this point, I recently watched the documentary, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), and glimpsed the difficulty faced by trans peoples trying to see themselves in the world. In the film, actress, Jen Richards, powerfully recalls her experience watching a father describe his trans child in terms of love and acceptance:

if you have a transgender kid, you are living with a unicorn, an amazing human being. To be next to someone so brave, so cool, so close to themselves [...] is an honour.

Richards then reflects on this moment and explains how, as a trans woman, hearing this parent's words was actually hurtful, because it was a signal that she deserved more than acceptance:

the person who's most responsible for failing to have that kind of vision is me. I have never seen myself the way that father saw his own child. I'd never seen myself that way [...] I had to see it, and now that I have, I want that.



I have been replaying this powerful moment over and over again. It is in some ways intertwined with my own experiences as a queer, non-Black, woman of colour, that has often questioned whether I deserve to be asking for anything more than acceptance. I think it also speaks to the precarious future Walcott describes. Moving beyond acceptance, beyond visibility, beyond the bare minimum and into what should be, what is deserved, is the next step. QTBIPOC students are struggling in a world that has never shown them what they could be. They are struggling, but they are also brilliant, energetic, and hopeful. Alexander, in her article, describes life as an African American mother during the 'Trayvon Generation' and her life at the crossroads of survival, fear, and love. She explains that she measures her success as a mother of two Black boys that dance, laugh, shout and "who are able—in the midst of their studying and organizing, their fear, their rage, their protesting, their vulnerability, their missteps and triumphs, their knowledge that they must fight the hydra-headed monster of racism and racial violence that we were not able to cauterize—to find the joy and the power of communal self-expression."

I am dreaming of a new history. I'm not sure that it is 'history.' Audre Lorde ends her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" with a poem, whose final lines speak to hope:

*we seek beyond history
for a new and more possible meeting.*

These booklets are not enough. They are only a quick look at the richness of work and community that has been. It is my hope that they begin to educate about the activism, the injustice, the hurt, but also show the strength of a community that came together in spite of these forces working against them, and built the world they needed, they wanted, and they loved. May these resources start conversations that go deeper, provide critique, demand more, and expand beyond my limited world.

It is also my hope that we will one day move beyond this beginning towards something better than 'history.'



READ MORE ABOUT
BLACK 2SLGBTQIA+
ACTIVISM IN 1980S
TORONTO IN THE
101 DEWSON STREET,
SISTER VISION PRESS,
AND BLACK WOMEN'S
COLLECTIVE BOOKLETS

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