

EPILOGUE

So many LGBTQ2S young people who have experienced homelessness are finding ways to carve out safe and meaningful lives, despite the barriers placed before them. They are survivors, creators and educators. They are thoughtful and strong. Below are the stories of two such young people. Imagine what would be possible if they, and others like them, were affirmed by the individuals in their lives and supported by the institutions in their communities.

I Have Complete Creative Control

Christian Carmen Olivia Jane

I was unaware of programming and resources that could help me. Identity-based support networks are so few and far between, and once you find one, it's still a challenge, because they are not made one-size-fits-all. It's like shopping for a neighbourhood in which to raise your family: you don't go to just any suburb because it's a suburb; or if you're an urban-living person, you don't move onto just any block because it's in the city. You have to find a place that provides the right balance and fit for you. As a queer person, I can find a few resources that may help, but as a black trans woman, the margins are even more narrow. I don't enjoy playing the woman card or the black card, but the fact is, acknowledging my blackness and gender is relevant and important because my life is directly affected by those identities. "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman" (Malcolm X, 1962, as cited by Beyoncé, 2006). *The black trans woman is perhaps the most vulnerable human on the planet*. And now, as a 24-year-old woman, I must decipher whether an agency or organization is competent enough to understand my needs and oppression and provide me with adequate guidance. It's a difficult position to be in: young and inexperienced with minimal resources, but forced to grow up and understand the world so quickly and often so mercilessly.

The lack of resources and proper representation in my own life is the reason I created my blog, *The Cis Jungle* (thecisjungle.com). My blog is a near-completely unfiltered analysis of my life and many of the circumstances I navigate through in real time. It began as a surrogate for me to tell my story fully and unapologetically. For the first time in my life, I was able to tell my story the way I wanted it to be told. *I have complete creative control*.

I don't know how to navigate the world as an adult. I just know how to navigate the world as me—Christian Carmen Olivia Jane. And while there is no roadmap to adulthood for anyone, the experience is even more different—vastly more—for queer-and LGBTQ2S-identified youth. A friend and I often chat and kiki about the strategies and nuanced ways in which I navigate. She tells me regularly I taught her so much, and that listening to my stories and me thinking aloud about my experiences (which were often comical and unbelievable) caused her to reevaluate both her ways of navigating as a black trans woman herself and her privilege (a term she hated from the moment I threw it at her). She began to acknowledge her fortune in not having to experience what many black trans women, and queer youth in general, must experience. There is a need for specific programming and resources dedicated to LGBTQ2S youth navigating homelessness. Because their oppression is disproportionate in comparison to the rest of society, adequate and competent programming is necessary to accurately serve these marginalized communities.

Today My Life is Beautiful

Ryan

I remember hunching over the desk at the largest shelter in Toronto, weeping and defeated, trying to warm up from the freezing night outside. There were no more beds in the city, I didn't know what to do, and the staff told me I had to calm down. Although I didn't know it, I was becoming increasingly powerless to deal with the mental health crisis boiling up inside me. I didn't sleep that night.

Addiction and bipolar disorder came together in a fury, and pushed me down a path that I could never have imagined. It was swift, relentless and cruel. Seemingly, no one knew how to help me or where to put me. With my life in crisis, I found it impossible to follow the long list of rules at the shelter, the detox, the rehab. As a gay young man, it was easy to find the wrong kind of friends, inside the shelter and out. I found comfort in the night, in drugs, in selling my body, in stealing. If I wasn't privileged enough to have parents who didn't give up on me, I would be dead. I would never have ended up at CAMH [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health], where I finally got better.

I remember finally getting out of the shelter system and having my own key around my neck: the cold steel pressed against my chest wrapped my whole body in safety. It's coming up on 6 years since I got off the street, and the experience that we lived through still crosses my mind every day—I think especially about my friends who are left behind, sinking deeper into the cracks.

Today my life is beautiful—it has given me back everything I had and more. I'm living my dream. I can't say the same for the friends that I shared shelter rooms with. Some have died, others are still struggling to get housing and manage their substance abuse. Some days I pass them on the street and instinctively avert my eyes. What would I say to them? Who is looking out for *them*?

About the Contributors

Christian Carmen Olivia Jane

Christian is a self-identified trans woman of color, feminist, advocate and blogger and recent transplant to New York City. She created a blog in March of 2015, The Cis Jungle at www.thecisjungle.com, to talk about her experiences navigating a cis world at the intersections of race, class, gender, gender identity and religion.

Ryan

Ryan is a 26 year old film producer living in Toronto. He has two younger brothers, one lovey Husky, and an incredible boyfriend. He started his own production company in Toronto that aims to gather the best storytellers and imaginations from around the world.