

# **Decolonizing “Greenspace” and the “Equitable City” Paradigm: Emphasizing ‘Subjectivity’ to Support Inclusionary Design Interventions and Health Justice for Black and Brown Bodies**



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# **Decolonizing “Greenspace” and the “Equitable City” Paradigm: Emphasizing ‘Subjectivity’ to Support Inclusionary Design Interventions and Health Justice For Black and Brown Bodies**

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## **Abstract**

In light of recent calls to action for substantial anti-racist public design and planning across and beyond the United States that seek to honour and commemorate the televised execution of George Floyd in a Minneapolis high-traffic bike lane, Toronto is in the midst of a unique time. As Canada’s largest hub containing Black groups, structural challenges to pursue these social justice agendas are presented in the consistent intensification of already increasingly urban settings. As such, existing trends of public health in public space vary dramatically on the bases of race and class, and, for those living in poorer neighbourhoods, resulting conditions of where you live and what resources are accessible can further exacerbate challenges to obtaining moderate-to-high quality of life. This paper aims to contribute to a growing critical, concerted, and transparent analysis about the complex role of multiple institutions of power in perpetuating a systemic and multidimensional practice of racism that sustains unprecedented levels of anxiety in our communities that have been historically informed - worse, those who need it most are routinely without access to resources that may improve health conditions, including greenspace. Drawing from interconnected trends of disparity and multidisciplinary frameworks, I explore the role of racism in influencing the perceptions and usage patterns of people who experience the gaps in “space” and “place” because of their black and brown bodies. By including lived experiences as a fundamental substantiation of disparity, the importance of quality over quantity in public spaces is emphasized, particularly those which are purpose-built and collaboratively designed by communities themselves to address the complex problems of these groups. This research proves significant to planners designing our post-COVID urban environments who hope to avoid the many mistakes of the past that have proven to worsen health and wellbeing conditions for vulnerable people during the pandemic, where untapped potential is claimed to be manifest in greenspace.

## **Keywords**

Urban greenspace; spatial disparity; public health; participatory planning; equitable urbanism.

## Foreword

The role of this research is to extend the accessibility of the conceptualizing of greenspace in research and advocacy to include black and brown perspectives that are uniquely shaped through their subjective lived experience. This paper intends to disrupt complacency among decision makers who remain unclear about the urgency of the ongoing problems which undermine the critical health conditions of vulnerable urban dwellers and their interconnectedness to other longstanding by-products of institutional racism. The imagined outcome of this multidisciplinary research is a clearer and more concerted course of action to effective policy that is community-oriented and equally representative of more “informal” experiences with the longstanding discrepancies within urban planning and neighbourhood design.

In order to fulfill the requirements of the MES Degree, I used this paper to explore previously discussed topics of environmental justice, urban design, public health, particularly in pondering the following questions: How can the paradigms of “greenspace” and “equitable city” achieve greater design and health justice?; What is the role of ‘subjectivity’ in the mainstream conceptualizing of greenspace?; How are greenspace in Toronto neighbourhoods of North St. James Town and Jane and Finch conceived to meet (or not) residents’ health and quality of life?; How do residents transform their spaces?; What specific actions or interventions could be taken by community leaders, city staff, and elected officials to improve greenspace experiences of black and brown bodies within these neighbourhoods?

By consolidating and centring the findings outlined in cross disciplinary research, we are granted a clearer understanding of underlying themes to discern what is failing across systems and what are potential paths in which coordinated anti-racist programming would improve the likelihood of success among policy.

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# 1. Introduction

As our societies plan their imminent and elaborate departures from the taxing times of COVID-19, it has become clear that, once we return to everyday routines and move away from this consistent survival mode group mentality that has allowed us to cope with the chaos, we must each designate time to process the important structural gaps and reconciliatory realizations that were identified throughout the 2020 year and continued into 2021. In particular, I refer to the differential set of natural resources and coping strategies that were made available to specific groups on the basis of race, class, gender identity, and ableism or lack thereof. What's more, I refer to the varying usage patterns of these natural resources, including public space and greenspace, and the accompanying perceptions, connotations, fears, and internal policing that vulnerable groups contended and continue to contend with, which, in turn, reinforce the positive (and exclusionary) correlation between the ideal and actual users of these spaces, and the quality of life and wellbeing outcomes that are distributed to these varied groups.

The systemic issues I speak of in this research are neither new, nor unique to cities such as Toronto or communities such as St. James Town and Jane and Finch. Systemic issues founded in white supremacy and colonial dogma, reinforced by hundreds of years and ancestors-long oppression, systematic dehumanization and pathologization and physical and psychological violence and policing, as well as insufficient delivery of health care and the constant presence of overcrowded services, food deserts, and outdated or incompatible zoning (and other land use instruments) have run rampant in the diverse communities that so many black and brown bodies reside, claim, and represent. These issues have run rampant for long enough that their multifaceted and compounded negative impacts have been so deeply engrained into our collective conscience and existence that we cannot imagine life without this "double-consciousness" to bear and unpack. Coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 publication of the "Soul of Black Folks", "the veil" is introduced as a term to describe the seemingly invisible, yet all-consuming consciousness of Black folks who must operate in a white world in complete awareness of the insufficient and systemic conditions to which they are subjected (life behind the veil), the mechanisms and the cause by which these conditions are produced and reinforced (the functioning of the veil), and what it means to be white, remaining unaware of both this secondary consciousness and never having to concern oneself with the "operations of the veil". With a more modern application, this same consciousness can be applied to non-Black groups who are subject to differing forms of marginalization and oppression due to their race and/or ethnicity.

As such, since the year of 1903 (and well before then), black and brown bodies have come to advance this consciousness in ways that impose colonial influences and therefore, restrictions on their existence both with or without the physical presence of authority to enforce and carry out punishments for rule breakers, through self-policing. This learned and habitual activity of "self-policing" can be argued as an evolutionary and efficient extension of police intimidation. Within racialized communities, I argue that it is the by-product of an intergenerational "double-consciousness" that is, often, informally socialized through interactions with institutional racism or at the family or community level during adolescence (Wood, 2003). These considerations have implications for the overall perception of safety when our racialized and targeted bodies are in public; for instance, we must always be considering who

to trust, which signs and rules apply to us, and which activities, which routes, and which course of action will yield the least harmful and least threatening path back to momentary safety (or rather, brief occurrences of safety because, for many of us, the only lengthy periods of safety we can afford or look forward to are generally only within our own places of residence).

By reflecting on this weighty colonial and racist history and its implications on the present, it becomes apparent why the socialization process by which individuals come to understand their surrounding environment (including public space and greenspace) in relation to their respective body and experience is, in fact, subjective. If there have been psychological constraints placed on racialized groups who are also public space users that are colonially determined, historically informed, fatally upheld, and generationally diffused - with race and ethnicity as the mutual rationale - it is no wonder why the perception of public space (specifically greenspace), its useability, and the level of social access attributed to these amenities might vary from user to user. This research is interested in how the perception of greenspace may be culturally informed through informal educational experiences, socialization at the community level, and, of course, the compounded historical and present violent acts of racism taking place in and outside of public space, to bring about differential accounts of the “healing” or restorative power of greenspace.

In this research, I contend that racialized groups - particularly members of the Black community - have encountered many communal (and televised) experiences with trauma since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic; for many of us, this has exacerbated conditions of mental health and yielded a moderate-to-low quality of life (Snowden and Snowden, 2021; Liu and Modir, 2020; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). According to an online resource guide provided by the Department of Psychology at the University of Georgia on their website (2020), the rate of “racial stressors” (or verbal, behavioural or environmental stressors that individuals experience because of their race) have been intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic - specifically, with the systematic killing of members of our community dually through acts of targeted racism and the lethal encounters with the disease. These instances of trauma have been exacerbated by conditions that are brought on as a consumer in the age of technology. For instance, being more “connected” to people, products, and news occurring across the globe through social media than ever before has presented an increased rate of anxiety due to the pressure to continue consuming “Black trauma porn” and to refrain from “unplugging” to prove one’s solidarity or commitment to such issues (D.K., Cherwell Journal, 2020; The Mighty Journal, 2020; Black Youth Project, 2018). Additionally, the rigorous COVID-19 restrictions that were enacted in cities such as Toronto to physically distance, stay at home, and pause all forms of daily routine that might otherwise distract us from the social chaos on our streets - restrictions that are upheld at the hands of law enforcement who operate under a century-long colonial bias - have only exacerbated collective feelings of isolation and helplessness.

This trauma that has been evoked through public instances of violence requires a form of rectification that supersedes any one policy or legislation founded in equitable governance or regulation being passed, mandated, and enforced by the state - the reparations I speak of are backlogged by several centuries. Instead, I argue that what is needed for real-time results is the critical evaluation and reform of existing city and neighbourhood planning, design, engagement and regulatory mechanisms and strategies. These interventions are needed in order to adopt more feasible and accessible opportunities for change and, in doing so, systemically strengthen established structures and resources in order to improve the public conditions and quality of life for racialized groups.

It is no secret that the practice of city planning is founded in colonial, exclusionary, and classist ideology - so this research does not intend to uncover new findings on this injustice. However, what is missing is pragmatic programming to create moderate changes - a course of action that falls somewhere between the revolutionary policy and structural reform that our black and brown bodies march for in protest across the very public streets in which we are routinely dehumanized and the minute changes to policy we see being made that are more focused on appeasing all parties. In order to rectify the many institutions of power that reinforce the oppression of marginalized and racialized groups, we must be strategic, systematic, analytical, and explicit in our programming. Examples of these institutions include:

- **the legal system** which secures paradigms of inequity such as the school-to-prison pipeline, rescinded rights to fair trial, inflated bail costs, and other standards that exemplify the exploitation of power by judicial officials;
- **law enforcement** which empowers officers to conduct countless instances of intimidation, extortion and other forms of abuses of power, criminalization and brutality on the basis of bias, bigotry and xenophobia;
- **public health** which functions to cyclically protect and advance the interests or welfare of white and wealthy groups despite the disproportionate presence of immigrant, racialized and/or black and brown care aids and nurses (Cornelissen, Statistics Canada, 2021); and
- **municipal planning** which has historically regulated, restricted, and reinforced who obtains which type and quality of service, who can accrue what sum of wealth, in addition to enforcing restrictions on accommodation, employment, facilities and amenities - and thus the quality of one's life - since its creation.

Despite these truths that continue to undermine the opportunities afforded to marginalized groups and produce intergenerational challenges in the lives of many, the method by which we execute the planning practices - specifically, components of public consultation, realizing urban and neighbourhood design, and the exclusionary, antiquated legislation and policies from which they draw - have not been subject to a collective redaction or reiteration to represent the lessons we have learned from the past, and the ethics and ethos of today's dominant workforce culture (in which considerations such as "diversity" and "inclusion" are not only acceptable, but compulsory in the public eye).

In reflecting on this paradoxical behavior of the recent past and deliberating our newly appointed municipal directions for the future, it also becomes apparent why and how the restrictions and coping mechanisms publically extended by the Province of Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic were neither physically nor psychologically manageable and accessible to all of us in equal ways. The stay-at-home orders mandated and empowered the already watchful eyes of law enforcement to interrogate and intimidate promenading residents back into their households. For those of us with darker complexions who were able to reflect on similar conditions and accounts imposed on our communities throughout history, it became apparent that we would be forced to live out these orders in something of a provisional cell when compared to our white counterparts (who, with these liberties may have found this time relatively easier) (The Pigeon, 2021; Draaisma, 2021). For instance, a study by Pouso et al. (2021) reveals that contact with blue-greenspaces during COVID-19 proved significantly beneficial for mental health outcomes. The authors contend that interventions and orders that were established in response to



emergency conditions including physical distancing, limitations and restrictions on mobility and travel, as well as state-wide lockdowns, inadvertently triggered a host of unforeseen social and psychological challenges through heightened levels of social isolation. Building off the research of Cartwright et al. (2018), Pouso et al. (2021) emulate other studies that have revealed the myriad of benefits that are presented by contact with nature, particularly the negative effects of social distancing that were triggered by the pandemic.

These benefits are not just conditions that can be achieved or must be sought through outdoor activities during adulthood - it starts much earlier. Researchers have concluded that residential greenspace in childhood is connected to lower risks of mental health and psychiatric disorders into adolescence and, further, into adulthood (Engermann et al., 2019). These findings emphasize the importance of environmental conditions during childhood and suggest that inherited exposure to privilege and early socialization procedures can be exceedingly influential indicators of one's future health and wellbeing. As a result, the presence of meaningful interventions to support improved urban conditions at the neighbourhood and community level are equally meaningful for protecting the health outcomes of young children as well as disrupting the increasing rate of health disparity that exists between black and brown groups and their white counterparts and continues to grow. Additionally, by undertaking an environmental scan of studies that have focused on the causal relationship between health and nature in urban settings, Kondo et al. (2018) found that most studies were situated within regions in the United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Canada, Japan, and Australia (in order of quantity), and only 8 studies were conducted in lower-income "deprived" neighbourhoods with lower-income participants or completed by examining study participants based on income.

My research primarily focuses on the disparities that are uniquely experienced across interrelated systems of power by black and brown bodies in public spaces and facilities located in urban settings that are believed to help improve the quality of life and conditions for users. Inversely, it must be noted that the routine absence of these markers would therefore influence and restrict the distribution of conditions related to strong quality of life across neighbourhoods. To explore the topic of spatial disparity as well as public space and public health inequities exhaustively, I am drawing from:

- **academic peer-reviewed research studies and articles** which provide the theoretical foundation and evidential statistics to guide my research,
- **grey literature** to draw from findings that are community-directed and rights-oriented, as well as
- **opinion and op-ed pieces** from black and brown professionals, everyday urbanists, and residents, which present opportunities for emphasizing the significance of urban expertise that is derived from one's lived experience with the structural gaps that exist in urban settings.

To identify a nuanced point of entry into the association of racialized groups and greenspace, I openly explore and critique the controversial narrative that "Black people don't care about the environment" or, rather, we remain inherently disconnected from nature, that is prevalent within and

outside of our community. Two online opinion articles that are based on usage trends in the United Kingdom discuss the topic.

First, in an online deliberation entitled “Black absence in greenspaces”, Beth Collier (2019) reports that People of Colour spend less time in nature in the U.K. than white people, albeit, for those who identify as having African heritage and can trace their roots, being closely connected to nature in their countries of heritage. She asserts that “For many people of colour there is a sense of shame in being connected to nature, through our experience of colonialism and slavery which stigmatised us as having an inferior and primitive way of life, close to nature. Our poor, under-developed villages are contrasted to the west's superior affluent technological cities. These racist stigmas become internalized, and some people of colour may want to distance themselves from being perceived as 'backward', often by perpetuating self-limiting myths about nature and our place in it: black people don't 'do' camping/hiking/skiing/swimming.” Collier, Director of *Wild in the City* and a nature-allied psychotherapist and anthropologist, contends that for many of us who have grown up living in urban areas, journeying into the countryside means navigating a new environment - one that is not just a deterrent because of the relationship between people of color and greenspace, but also our relationship with other people and how we (or our bodies) are received by more “ideal” users in natural settings. Therefore, the historical branding and marketing of “belonging” in greenspace does not feel as applicable or representative of our respective experiences in these settings. Collier also points out that there is an internalized narrative that is passed through oral storytelling and communally shared that is inclusive of family members’ histories with colonialism, slavery and the creation of culturally informed attitudes that reject greenspace. For Collier (2019), “[e]xperiences of hostility are hard enough to bear when you are surrounded by other people of colour, but they're more intimidating when you are isolated. Racism is a big part of why people of colour are less present in nature. Many people of colour feel an apprehension about stepping into nature, especially in more remote and open spaces... A sense of vulnerability increases with increased visibility.”

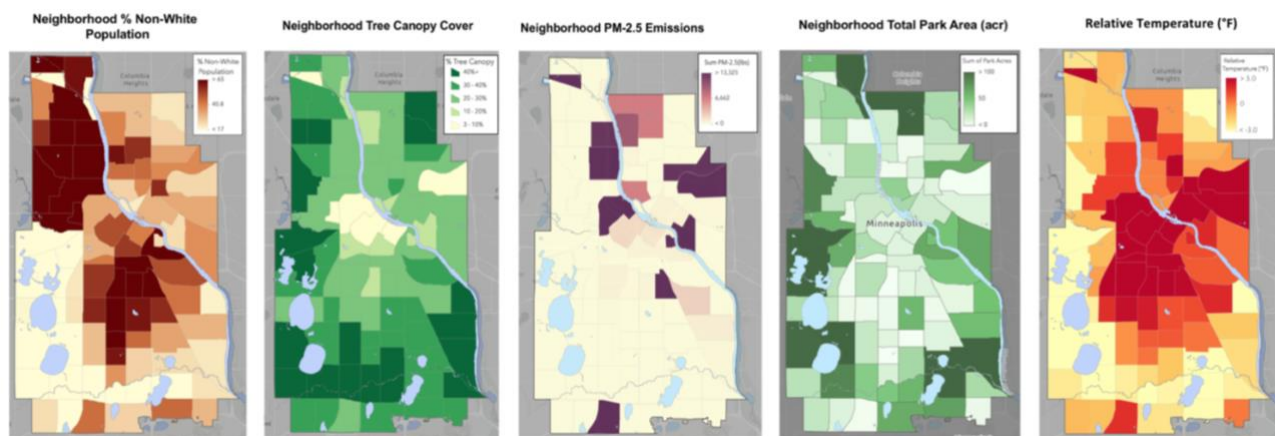
Conversely, in an online opinion piece by U.K. based community outreach officer, Sage Anifowoshe (2020) rooted in intersectional feminist theory, this “anti-environment” rhetoric is dismantled through the following discussion:

The ripping of Black people from their roots and role as caretakers of the land has been detrimental to their livelihoods and the planet. Black women have been at the forefront of sustainable farming practices, herbalism, and healing rituals... Urban life means Black people are disproportionately exposed to pollution and have higher living costs despite being paid less. Black women bear the brunt of this as we've been assigned domestic roles, stationed in kitchens, nurseries, holding down multiple jobs as breadwinners of their households [so] we aren't afforded the time to rest and relax... Black women have been pushed out of safe and natural places and subjected to environmental racism in order for white society to have a better quality of life. Banned from swimming pools, parks, and countrysides which were designated as white spaces, how could we enjoy the outdoors? The construction of the environment was always meant to exclude us - nature functions as a material and spiritual resource - and having access to nature gives you access to direct production outside capitalist production, which is something Black women aren't afforded.

In consideration of both these relevant and pervasive stances that are commonly heard and shared among folks (respectively), this research aims to gather anecdotal and substantiated evidence to determine whether there is a connection between colonial ideologies that have been embedded into all existing systems of power in urban settings and the subjective and cultural perceptions of greenspace among our communities as racialized people. To do so, I suggest that the inconspicuous manners in which these systems' established histories of operation present complex challenges to identifying a clear course of action that can dismantle and disempower the overwhelming bias that obstructs the sociopolitical advancement of racialized groups - challenges that often become exempted or unaccounted for due to regulatory oversight.

My work also echoes the findings and opinions of many activists and researchers who have expressed a need to address the overwhelmingly “white” culture of greenspace and its discourse (Walker et al., 2021; Snaith, 2015; Scott and Tennen, 2021). In an online geospatial analysis research project undertaken by Rebecca Walker in collaboration with organizations Mapping Prejudice and CREATE Initiative (2021), rates of unequal distribution of greenspace, spatial inequity and income vulnerability across Minneapolis were examined and reported as follow:

During the summer of 2020, in the northeastern corner of the Brackett Field, the same land originally transferred to the Park Board from Mary Greer, sat 25 tents, serving as a home and sanctuary for unsheltered women and children. That corner of the park was transformed from a space of recreation to a space of refuge as organizers reclaimed the space as a Sanctuary for nearly 40 unhoused women and children in the midst of a global pandemic and national racial uprisings and a police abolition movement in which Minneapolis was the epicenter. Many of the residents of the Brackett Field Park Sanctuary were Black or Indigenous, reclaiming the space as their home that a century prior had been legally designated as White space.



**Figure 1: Geospatial results of environmental privilege and racism in Minneapolis neighborhoods,** in which, for many residents who are white, it is more likely that their neighbourhoods will contain higher tree cover, lower air pollution, more park acreage, and less exposure to extreme heat.  
(White Space, Greenspace, 2021; Walker, n.d.)

The practice of “whitewashing” greenspaces - especially historically Black spaces - not only perpetuates a culture of exclusion but reinforces the systemic displacement and dispossession of black and brown bodies. Additionally, the negative impacts associated with this historical exclusion become exacerbated, particularly as recent findings have emerged that reveal that a higher proportion of greenspace in urban settings within U.S. states are significantly associated with reduced rates of Black-white disparity in reported COVID cases (Lu et al., 2021). In Lu et al.’s (2021) study, combined markers of socioeconomic, demographic, and cases of preceding chronic disease accounted for approximately 11 percent of variance, where racial disparity and greenspaces accounted for another 18 percent of the variance.

In an online article published by Columbia University’s Climate School in August 2020, author Victoria Bortfeld (2020) contends that “[j]ust as environmental racism discriminately excludes people of color from access to clean water, clean air, and other aspects of the natural world that can determine health outcomes, the professional sphere of environmental studies and sciences often excludes people of color on numerous levels, including in research, job opportunities, and work/university culture”. It is important that the interconnectedness of this “web” of structural inequity is aptly interpreted as a complex variable when considering potential barriers to entry that may yield improved health conditions in racialized neighbourhoods, particularly as our cities continue to make plans and design policies for our post-COVID streetscapes which aim to address mistakes of the past.

As my research is concerned with greenspace and spatial disparity, I am particularly interested in exploring the conditions and inconsistencies in which perceived benefits that are often associated with outdoor activities and proximity to nature. I am also interested in extending the imagined solutions that are presented in this type of natural resource with the aim of deciphering whether increased access to greenspace and the development of green infrastructure alone can improve the quality of life for *all* users regardless of racial bias and cultural difference. I am curious if subjective and intricate experiences of “Othering” that are routinized may influence users’ respective perceptions of these spaces and whether negative experiences in public spaces may interfere with supposed benefits on the basis of accessibility and relevance. Studies reveal that, while income and education are extremely strong indicators of the distribution of urban vegetation, several other variables may influence resulting conditions, where residents with higher income and education levels were more likely to have access to more varied typologies of greenspace including parks, and mixed and woody urban vegetation when compared to their low-income and racialized counterparts, particularly in large and dense urban regions (Nesbitt et al., 2019).

With data collected across the United States in urbanized areas such as Chicago, Houston, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New York, Portland, and St. Louis, the same research by Nesbitt et al. (2019) has suggested that programming to improve green equity in urban settings should aim to place an emphasis on the tactics such as street tree planting and generally increasing residential and private vegetation in areas that are historically conditioned to present greater rates of green inequity. Nesbitt et al. (2019, p. 64) claim “[u]rban green inequity must be improved if cities wish to foster the development of healthy, resilient urban communities that experience a high level of well-being. However, resolving the challenge of urban green inequity will require an in-depth understanding of the local issues that shape it.”

The objective of this research is to test these findings by pursuing an in-depth understanding of local issues, expand and contribute to ongoing discussions about the existing interdisciplinary barriers to

achieving this, and escalate the need to address the institutional barriers that render this lack of access to greenspace and greenspace discourse a public health issue and an urban policy and design concern.

## **2. Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review**

This research is founded in theoretical approaches of environmental justice theory, public health theory and intersectional feminist theory. In recent years, significant connections have been made between historically informed sociopolitical conditions, intersectional feminist frameworks of “positionality”, privilege, systemic oppression, and the multidimensional facets of health and wellbeing that act as holistic social determinants or outputs of this privilege. As such, it is important that we begin to restructure the concepts of our discrete disciplines and their foci to be more inclusive and reflective of their interconnectedness. These intertwined by-products present very differential results among residents depending on who you are. In this research, the theories of environmental justice, public health and intersectional feminism function as interconnected pillars that present opportunities for more holistic understandings of the lingering and detrimental effects of our colonial city planning and programming practices.

One of the driving factors and objectives of environmental justice theory is to make connections through transformative opportunities and models that clearly associate the disproportionate concentration of health disparities with the oversaturated presence of dangerous chemicals that tend to be most commonly found in low-income neighbourhoods, and the poor support of medical infrastructure to respond to these resulting poorer health outcomes (to which these residents are subjected as a result of certain conditions imposed by their social determinants) (Pearce, 2013). Environmental justice theory, an extension of spatial justice, has developed in response to the widespread and overwhelming presence of disproportionate outcomes of environmental racism. The primary objectives of environmental justice theory that guide this research are its commitment to extending unbiased and inclusionary protection from environmental deprivation and negative health outcomes. Additionally, Pearce (2013) contends that the delivery (or lack thereof) of high-quality greenspace, water quality, and noise environments are important considerations for achieving environmental justice. This is because racialized individuals are most exposed to poorer conditions and resources when compared to non-racialized residents. The unequitable distribution of healthy conditions and resources are believed to undermine coping and response efforts, resulting in a double discrimination that can be found in the presence of high-risk conditions without the tools to help manage them, and the absence of healthy greenspaces.

According to the Canadian Public Health Association (2017), the three foundations that guide public health action include social justice, health equity, and the social and ecological determinants of health. A pertinent branch of public health theory, the ‘social determinants of health framework’ serves as both the guiding force and the impetus for this research. In linking social and economic factors to broader health and wellness outcomes, racialization is not directly delineated a contributing factor; however, in borrowing from feminist theory, the principles of intersectional feminism present a more inclusive approach as they find interconnections between social categories such as race, class, gender and

sexual orientation in yielding converging or compounded experiences with discrimination or oppression for members of these groups.

While my research seeks to include cases and statistical evidence about non-Black racialized people, it must be noted that this topic was selected in response to violence occurring in the Black community. As a dark-skinned Black woman, I am very much concerned with and unabashed about my belief that, in order to make changes to the multifaceted forms of disparity that impact us and reflect our unique and powerful differences, as racialized folks, we must unite, learn from, and stop further discrimination occurring within our groups (e.g., occurrences of “shadism” and anti-Black racism occurring in Muslim-Canadian communities (Rahmat, 2020) and Chinese-Canadian communities (Zhou, 2020)). It is important to avoid working in silo and to apply and accredit, where possible, the anti-racist frameworks that black and brown people have developed. However, as a Black female researcher and as the daughter of immigrants who have shared many stories about enjoying greenspace back in Kenya, and yet refrained from expressing much desire to spend time at parks individually or as a family during my adolescence - and, in light of recent events’ reinforcement that violence historically has targeted Black youth, Black adults, and Black seniors, I am very interested in exposing a horrifying reality: that violence against Black people does not discriminate and thus, no one is safe. To explore this urgent topic exhaustively, it is imperative that this research remain focused predominantly on black bodies in greenspace. By way of this focus, it is not my intention to exclude, to perpetuate a divisive discussion of spatial discrimination, nor to minimize the very real experiences with violence that are burdened by my non-Black counterparts; rather, I aim to contribute an effective and thorough examination of the interconnectedness of racism and its connections to the holistic outcomes of health, specifically through the unpopular lens of Black people.

While I am interested in the manners in which public space design and planning can be cross-examined with a critical approach in order to improve trends of equitable and safe access of these facilities for racialized users, the focus of my research is to explore and expand discourse on the conceptualized “spatial segregation of greenspace” across multicultural and multiethnic municipal hubs existing in cities such as Toronto. I aim to substantiate the need to consider this concept through a lens that is inclusive of the dual meanings that occur in this research: the palpable or physical conditions that cause a distancing from greenspace, as well as informed perceptions and subjective experiences that repeatedly condition one’s mental psyche to conceptualize greenspace in a manner that shapes or determines their respective usage patterns. In this way, the topic of spatial segregation must extend beyond the limiting conceptualizing of the physical location of sites containing greenspace and aim to be inclusive of problems of social access that are related to users’ levels of comfort and safety in relation to these spaces that are the result of historical social- and class-related distancing (I explore “social access” in greater detail later).

It is well known that some of the most renowned interpretations of the intent of large park space systems within the context of greenspace discourse is drawn from Frederick Law Olmsted, who believed that parks were fundamental settings for realizing a temperate, good natured and healthy state of mind and good levels of public health (Olmsted, 1870). Most renowned for his prominent role in realizing the concepts of various infamous parks that ranged from cities of Boston to San Francisco (which remain widely celebrated today), his legacy in the profession of landscape architecture proceeds him. For nearly 40 years, during the time of his peak genius that began in 1857 and ended with his retirement, his team of associates and staff realized approximately 500 commissions from theory to final product (Beveridge

et al., 2009). Lesser known to the public was his competing devotion to his career as a journalist and abolitionist prior to his longstanding work in city design, whereby he was appointed to undertake a survey and contribute an interpretation of the southern states he was asked to travel. Upon these visits, Olmsted became compelled to write and publish 75 letters, 3 volumes, and a book entitled *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861) as he witnessed the multifaceted injustices of capital, market competition and the harmful impacts to black and brown groups that were posed by the accruing and consolidation of white Southern wealth. Coining the term “communitiveness” to convey the devotion of all community members to serving and honouring the needs of one another, Olmsted (1861) advanced the agendas of institutions of science, art, and culture that would be available to all people, regardless of their race. In Chapter 1 of *The Cotton Kingdom*, Olmsted (1861, p. 4) outlines the “present crisis” of slavery and states “[p]eace is now not possible until the people of the South are well convinced that the form of society, to fortify which is the ostensible purpose of the war into which they have been plunged, is not worth fighting for, or until we think the sovereignty of our convictions for Justice, Freedom, Law and the conditions of Civilization in this land to be of less worth than the lives and property of our generation.” With this in mind, Olmsted (1861, p. 6) began a career in landscape architecture, committed to ensuring that park systems would function as the “great equalizer” of metropolitan public spaces: common ground and commonly owned and accessible space that all groups in the city could share and enjoy, away from the divisive social constructs and the inevitable competition that emerged.

### **Previous Research**

An impetus of this paper was drawn from findings outlined by Matthew H. Browning and Alessandro Rigolon in their 2018 study, which examine three significant considerations of greenspace theory and intervention through a human health lens: what components define and indicate “greenspace”; which moderators and mediators are included; what are types of health outcomes are measured. The study presents a unique approach to the greenspace-health relationship in contending that it varies on the basis of these three components in an attempt to contribute to discourse on major health equity issues in the United States and the exclusionary, singular and, therefore problematic lens that has largely guided scholarly research as well as the competitive intercity programming and funding allotted to greenspace improvement initiatives that is commonly distributed to more affluent cities. This is particularly relevant because many cities across the United States have scaled back on their property taxes which has disrupted the operation of urban greenspaces that are now in need of external funding and support. At the lesser studied city-scale, Browning and Rigolon (2018) explore the socially constructed variables of income, race and ethnicity, age, sex, physical inactivity, median age of housing stock, total population, and sprawl. In observing and evaluating the impacts of greenspace through measures of greenness and tree canopy cover on negative health outcomes of obesity and poor mental health, the study builds upon the call to action initiated by multidisciplinary organizations across the United States which recommend the formation of large amounts of greenspace in neighbourhoods as a method to improve both human health and environmental sustainability. Simultaneously, these recommendations are critical of the bold argument that insists of the capacity of greenspace to cure almost all ills occurring in urban settings and on bridging the gap existing in other research to poorly represent predominantly disadvantaged neighbourhoods situated in densely populated urban regions.

Previous limitations to considerations of greenspace are revealed in the manner to which general “greenness” has served as a standard measurement of greenspace, influenced the findings of many prominent research studies covering the topic, and proven more likely to be linked to health outcomes when presented in neighbourhoods of predominantly low socioeconomic status without consideration of the implications of race as a moderating variable (when compared to neighbourhoods of predominantly high socioeconomic status). For instance, Browning and Rigolon (2018) state that oversight presents a large and obvious gap, particularly given the known health disparities and barriers that People of Color must contend with in efforts to receive proper care. Within the study, 496 U.S. cities - which present a total of over 97,000,000 residents - are surveyed, and their median income and membership to groups associated with whiteness are considered in order to reinforce the anecdotal relationship between structural racism imposed on racialized and ethicized groups and health disparities or biased interventions to address uneven greenspace distribution that exclusively benefit so-called “non-Hispanic whites”. To acknowledge and account for the variances that exist between cities as it concerns racial-ethnic composition, Browning and Rigolon (2018) assess groups that were designated the “majority” population and found that 349 of 496 cities held a non-Hispanic white majority, an additional 103 cities held a Hispanic or Latino majority, and the remaining 44 cities held a non-Hispanic Black population majority. As well, it was concluded that the outcome of obesity was most pertinent (less than 45 percent) in cities within Indiana and Michigan and the outcome of poor mental health was most pertinent (greater than 18 percent of the population) in both New Bedford, Massachusetts and Fall River, Massachusetts. These results could indicate that obesity is predominantly rampant in central-eastern states and poor mental health commonly occurs in southeastern states. Although there was no presenting link between greenspace and obesity at large or tree cover and mental health, it was revealed that greener cities statistically presented stronger health outcomes than lesser green cities, particularly in predominantly white cities (where whiteness appeared to yield lower obesity outcomes through either greenness or tree canopy cover). Similar trends were present in non-Hispanic Black cities, however, as made clear in the case of Atlanta, Georgia - a city with a considerably high tree canopy cover and higher rates of obesity - this trend occurs on a case-by-case basis and demonstrates clear discrepancies within subsamples.

Browning and Rigolon (2018) also found evidence that supported their theories regarding higher greenness levels and improved mental health outcomes and higher tree cover and reduced levels of obesity, however the link was between greater tree cover and better health outcomes (as opposed to overall “greenness”). While many non-Hispanic Black cities emulated this same trend, it was found that cities with a higher concentration of white population (who also reported larger park coverage and parks with better programming than their non-white counterparts) demonstrated more “defensive behavior” and interventions that served to preserve their greenspace when compared to their non-white counterparts; it was reported that this trend led to stronger “activation” and participation by those local residents, and therefore, increased health benefits. Browning and Rigolon (2018) also account for the respective conditions of the geographical regions in which each of these predominantly non-white groups resided (e.g., many predominantly non-Hispanic Black were largely situated in southeastern and eastern Atlantic states) as well as the effects of race and ethnicity in informing their relationships to higher tree cover and accessing greenspace for exercise. Browning and Rigolon’s (2018) uniquely suggest that there are individual connections between tree cover and lower obesity outcomes as well as overall greenness and mental health, where the role of greenspace in predicting obesity rates varies in accordance with



race, ethnicity, and the type of metric (e.g., measurements of “quantity”) used to measure greenspace exposure. Yet it was found that residents of lower socioeconomic status are often more dependent on greenspace in their neighbourhoods than their affluent counterparts (who present greater mobility outside of their neighbourhood); it should be noted, this finding revealing a dependence on and need for neighbourhood greenspace - particularly as it has been determined through research which examines the specific usage and access patterns of Black folks - has partly inspired my research, which takes place during a unique time when we face a myriad of sociopolitical anxieties related to racism and increased access to greenspace may (or may not) prove helpful in improving health conditions holistically. Lastly, Browning and Rigolon (2018) reveal that a neighbourhood-scope analysis would better capture these nuances and discrepancies when compared to a city-scope evaluation.

In general, the findings of Browning and Rigolon (2018) raise questions about the use of tree coverage to incentivize healthier activities within residential neighbourhoods of predominantly non-white - and thus, systemically disadvantaged - groups. Additionally, Browning and Rigolon’s findings suggest that there is an opportunity for design interventions that increase overall “greenness” to improve mental health outcomes for communities who are subjected to greater threats of anxiety, trauma, violence, and other activities that undermine strong mental health behaviours, where it is known that cities can be stress-inducing settings in general (notwithstanding specific systemic challenges that are faced by marginalized residents and specific groups). As such, the unique set of variables selected to be considered in this research of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status beg the question: Do Black Americans - or Black people in general and other racialized people - face unique psychological barriers in their respective process of effectively acknowledging, utilizing, and benefiting from the presence of greenspace where available? Further, is this a behavioral response to a rhetoric concerning “greenspace” and its ideal users that is pervasive in the intergenerational knowledge that has been preserved in our communities? Is this impacted by the distinct cultural difference of conceptualizing “nature” and proximity to nature that is present in West-East and/or U.S.-Canadian dichotomies (where western cities are believed to prioritize “greenness” and healthier lifestyles more than eastern cities)? Most importantly, is this discrepancy related to our respective experiences with colonial practices and systemic racism as marginalized users of urban public spaces?

This research topic is also important because several research findings have suggested that there is a direct correlation between the quality of public spaces and contributors to quality of life including levels of self-efficacy, creativity, and general life outlook. This is particularly relevant for groups who do not have access to spacious, well-ventilated homes, calming and private backyards and gardens, or exposure to natural sunlight, where the presence of any of these features may help to alleviate conditions of respiratory and cardiac illnesses or mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression (Sangmoo, 2015). In our rapidly intensifying urban landscapes, now more than ever, access to “high-quality” and useable greenspace is most commonly distributed in accordance with high socioeconomic status. It is the colonial practice of social stratification that supports the prioritizing of private yards and lawns, golf courses, and the presence of mature trees and vegetation in upper-class neighbourhoods with good morale and high foot traffic. These models of sustainable urban design and green infrastructure are pervasive in wealthy neighbourhoods today. Further, many of these amenities are commonly located in social circles where racialized and other non-normative groups are deterred, prohibited, or condemned for entering as a result of institutional racism (e.g., lack of social capital).

My research draws from the findings of Browning and Rigolon, while contesting, contextualizing, and transcending their (arguably) oversimplified claims that there is an oversaturation of research on the topic of greenspace as it pertains to income, race/ethnicity, and physical and mental health outcomes from both the neighbourhood scope and individual scope. I contend that the geographical context matters: the diverse cultural components brought on by a broader racialized/ethnicized composition that characterizes the United States and its cities' population demographics reveal a larger concentration of non-white groups in predominantly white cities as well as an increased presence (if any) of predominantly non-white cities - a trend that is notably different in a Canadian context. Equally important is the critical evaluation of the type of resources in question and refraining from conducting research that considers and yields unequal comparisons due to structural gaps that influence social conditions.

Because Canada contains significantly fewer cities - where these cities are comprised of less diverse cultural groups and fewer residents who identify as members of racialized/ethnicized subgroups - I argue that an entirely different approach can and must be applied to studies on this topic when considering Canadian cities because of the sizable impacts of these discrepancies. Further, my research paper contends that future socio-spatial analyses of the sort that seek to create connections between and consider the impact and potential of greenspace, overall greenness, and general health-centred public space design interventions occurring in diverse Canadian cultural hubs and cities such as Toronto employ an approach that adopts a hyperlocal neighbourhood scope. This purpose of applying a hyperlocal lens is that a case-by-case framework can be realized, whereby the understanding that different neighbourhoods and their demographics deeply shape the usage trends and habits of greenspace and public space as a result of considerations that are exceptionally social and historical.

In drawing from other works of literature to support the need for my research, the research of Wen et al. (2013) argues that place-based race and poverty conditions function as influences for determining access to parks and greenspace. The authors apply an environmental justice framework in discussing spatial disparity (or, in this case, the spatial stratification of open space) and contend that spatial analysis research must be inclusive of race and class, the leading causes of health disparity, in order to address these existing structural gaps. The conceptualizing of greenspaces as "environmental goods" is rendered significant for strengthening quality of life indicators and conditions for racialized residents while limitations are identified in varying results according to a city's urbanization rates.

In a study by Cutts et al. (2009) about city configuration, obesity, environmental justice and greenspace access, support for existing research findings linking high crime rates to the neighbourhoods of racialized groups is presented; however, this is not done to undermine the importance of considering the structural gaps that impact these conditions. Cutts et al. (2009) present the need for the formation of a more complex and nimble set of strategies and intervention programming that are intended to reduce these inequities experienced by black and brown groups. In their study of neighbourhoods in Phoenix, Arizona, the authors found that demographics that had consistently reported higher rates of exposure to obesity and other negative health outcomes of environmental injustice (i.e., Latinx and Black communities) were in fact, more likely to reside in walkable neighbourhoods with access to so-called 'neighbourhood parks'. However, the authors also contended that it was the quality of the parks and the conditions of the residents' surroundings (e.g., neighbourhood violence, demonstrations of antisocial behavior, and facilities that had been taped off) that posed resulting accessibility issues and poor usage patterns. Crime was also reportedly higher in these multicultural areas where park space was found to be

smaller. Their final conclusions suggest that anticipated benefits of the built environment may be more heavily influenced by social attributes more than objective evidence, and that the development of purpose-built and specific design interventions might better support the unique interests and cultural activities of these groups and yield improved usage patterns within these spaces.

Habarth et al. (2009) discuss the correlation between the role of stress, coping strategies (i.e., active, emotion-focused, and avoidant) and distributed community resources (both institutional resources and natural resources) in a manner that is inclusive of systemic barriers that present themselves based on race. Situated in the State of Michigan, Habarth et al.'s research identifies the role of stress in low-income families as a leading condition that increases the likely presence of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. Here, it was found that single mothers and African American women face an increased risk of experiences with chronic poverty. These types of systemic barriers present challenges as they undermine these groups' capacity to respond effectively to high-stress circumstances with low-income mothers presenting a very limited range of non-institutional strategies and resources to choose from. Increased rates of access to community resources such as police protection and childcare were correlated to a greater use of active coping mechanisms and less avoidance, which presented problems of access for low-income and African American mothers who routinely contended with discrimination, racism and poverty and other institutional barriers that were otherwise distributed in accordance with one's lack of privilege.

Kardan et al. (2015) correlate the outcomes of tree canopy greenspace on health outcomes of residents living in the City of Toronto and discuss how poor patterns of distributing these benefits present an important impetus for improving health outcomes. The authors found that, in general, respondents who lived along streets with greater tree density indicated considerably higher perceptions of health and decreased negative health conditions such as obesity, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. Their findings also revealed that the impacts of planting 10 additional trees per city block was comparable to the impacts of increasing the median household income of all residents on that city block by \$10,000 or more (where the latter understandably proved more costly than the former). Kardan et al. also discuss circumstances that are unique to Canadian residents, whereby usage patterns of healthcare services vary according to income, class, and level of education: the study found that Canadian residents with lower income and lower levels of education reported fewer visits to healthcare specialists than their upper-class counterparts.

### **3. Greenspaces in Toronto: St James Town and Jane and Finch Neighborhoods**

It is the goal of my research to necessitate an evaluation of existing greenspace interventions in neighbourhood planning. I have sought to do this by conducting a comparative analysis between the Toronto neighbourhoods that are formally known as North St. James Town (St. James Town) and Black Creek (Jane and Finch). The unprecedented growth occurring in the city of Toronto (along with many other municipalities which serve as major hubs for settlement) - particularly among international newcomers who are in search of improved conditions including housing, employment, and quality of life - pushes forward the need for agendas that are widely inclusive and meet the demands of its rising population of

vulnerable groups. Upon reviewing the Tree Canopy Study (2018) published by the City of Toronto in an effort to better situate myself with Toronto (in having moved from the Pacific Northwest), I found that the findings presented a limited and restrictive evaluation of greenspace distribution across Toronto - or rather what *constituted* as “greenspace”. As there is very little research on the discussion of emphasizing quality in greenspace design (and even fewer research studies that seek to apply an approach that is rooted in anti-racist, intersectional feminist and resilience- or solution-based policy), my intention with this paper is to validate this gap in the contexts of St. James Town and Jane and Finch. The following section details important information to orient readers with the two respective neighbourhoods and illustrates the perceptions of the community on this topic through a variety of literary mediums including media/news coverage, academic articles, and creative projects from local residents, as well as photos I have taken on site visits to reveal the existing conditions of green resources and infrastructure.

I have selected these two neighbourhoods for my research because of their similar population compositions and yet divergent surrounding environmental features. The predominant demographics within these neighbourhoods include immigrants and refugees, racialized groups such as South American, African, Afro-Caribbean, and South Asian and Asian residents, single-income households, residents who report English as their second language, and multigenerational families. As a result of systemic racism, these characteristics are often key indicators that contribute to the low-income character of a neighbourhood.

### **Neighbourhood Context: St. James Town**

According to the City of Toronto’s Tree Canopy Study (2018), the landscape of the St. James Town presents insufficient provisions of greenspace - less than 20 percent of the total city’s tree canopy. Additionally, the neighbourhood is home to a diverse population and is considered increasingly low-income. Nearly 35 percent of its population reports an annual income of \$20,000 - \$49,000 and approximately 93 percent of its population resides in apartments that are greater than 5 storeys compared to 44 percent of the municipality’s average of apartment tower dwellers (City of Toronto, 2016). St. James Town is located in Ward 28 (Toronto Centre-Rosedale) of the city of Toronto.



**Figure 2: Street trees bordering a park and complimenting the residential streetscape in St. James Town**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

The neighbourhood is bordered by Sherbourne Street to the west, Bloor Street East to the north, Parliament Street to the east, and Wellesley Street East to the south. St. James Town originally developed as a semi-suburban and middle-class neighbourhood in the late 1800s. As a result of rezoning efforts proposed by the City of Toronto in the 1950s to adapt and expand the downtown area, apartment towers were developed in place of so-called 'attractive' Victorian homes which had historically characterized the neighborhood. The erection of more high-rise buildings to house new immigrants to this area, a result of affordable housing and location convenience, transformed the neighbourhood and contributed to the reduction of available greenspace (St. James Town, n.d.).



**Figures 3 and 4: Moderate amount of tree canopy coverage in this densely populated street filled with various residents of adjacent apartment buildings in St James Town**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)



With a population of nearly 19,000 residents and a population density that is the equivalent of over 44,000 people per square kilometre, the City of Toronto's 2016 Neighbourhood Profile indicates that the area contains a predominantly-immigrant demographic, many of whom are either non-English speakers or report English as their second language. The most common places of origin among the immigrant population residing in St. James Town are the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia. Its so-called 'visible minority' population (in order of group size) consists of South Asian, Chinese, Black, and Filipino residents, where its South Asian population is more than half of the number of those who do not identify as a visible minority. The overwhelming presence of high tower residences produces challenges to everyday encounters with urban greenspace (which is minimal as a result of the neighbourhood's high density living accommodations and, when present, often privatized (see Figure 5)).



**Figure 5: Greenspace has undergone privatization and residents aim to protect these resources from the potential misuse of others in the neighbourhood of St. James Town**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

According to an updated report by the United Way Toronto that documents poverty by postal code (2011), the presence of many apartment towers in these neighbourhoods also presents challenges. These findings reveal that poverty is positively correlated to building type, where densely populated high-rise buildings result in more concentrated experiences of poverty. Without the use of strategic city-led measures, residing in these types of towers is known to present challenges to achieving placemaking objectives such as securing a "sense of community" and place-attachment among residents - many of whom immigrated to North America in search of these feelings. According to the same report, living in low-income apartment buildings is also proven to challenge residents' access to sufficient greenspace, time spent in nature, or realizing the benefits of urban tree canopy presence.



**Figure 6: Mature trees offering plenty of shading and cooling features for nearby users in St. James Town**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

As 40 percent of the population lives in poverty, the constant expansion of new condominium development towers in the area has presented even greater challenges for residents to access resources. Data from the Wellesley Institute's St. James Town Initiative (2009) reveal that the neighbourhood is characterized by its overcrowding, lack of green and public spaces, poor building and neighbourhood maintenance, and its shortage of resources suitable to serve the area's large and diverse population. The same research stresses the importance of resolving these challenges in order to improve residents' health and wellbeing, particularly infrastructural maintenance issues as many apartment buildings remain in critical condition and remain in need of serious repairs (Wellesley Institute, 2009). Improvements to public infrastructures in the neighbourhood may enhance quality of life for residents who experience adverse living conditions such as poor access to ventilation and sunlight - both of which often increase the risk of heart and respiratory problems among others. The Wellesley Institute's study also revealed that St. James Town residents reported unemployment, underemployment and precarious employment which result in long working hours, lost and sacrificed family time, in addition to frustration and increased stress. As well, immigrants reported experiencing major systemic barriers towards entry into the Canadian job market (e.g., poor English, occupational-specific skills, and policies which require Canadian credentials and work experience).





**Figure 7: Unkept vegetation growing at the bottom of a wooden gate in St. James Town**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

### *Neighbourhood Improvement Initiatives*

A community improvement plan for North St. James Town was approved by City Council in September 1989 which called for the improvement of public and community spaces, and various infrastructural enhancements. The St. James Town 2000: A Community Action Plan was approved by City Council in 1997. This plan proposed several measures including the development of a multi-use community centre, parkland improvements, and the rehabilitation of deteriorating buildings. In 2004, a new Community Improvement Plan project area was approved by City Council that aimed to realize holistic neighbourhood improvements in across St. James Town. The resulting project was St. James Town Connects, a strategic framework which prioritizes placemaking and community development through the realizing of safer and more accessible open spaces for pedestrians.

In 2019, St. James Town residents gained media attention when they collectively called for City Council to designate the neighbourhood a Neighbourhood Improvement Area (NIA). In response to the repeated neglect by the City of Toronto to undertake renovations and infrastructural improvements, a petition was circulated by community leaders. Considering the (then) recent 650 Parliament Street electrical fire and additional power outages which emphasized the neighbourhood's poor facility conditions, residents were demanding for better conditions. In a CBC article by Elsayed (2019), several residents who were interviewed stated that major problems such as shortage of food banks in this low-income neighbourhood, as well as the shortage of air conditioning among senior residents living alone should have been enough to designate St. James Town as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area by the City's standards. However, to the dismay of the community, in the 2014 proposal for newly identified low-



income priority neighbourhoods entitled “Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy 2020”, the neighbourhood was left out of the scope.

More recently, COVID-19 has exacerbated conditions for residents to engage in stress-relieving activities in St. James Town. As the disease is highly transmittable, feelings of isolation experienced by community members (i.e., residents of apartment towers), overcrowding in public spaces, insufficient public facilities and programs that are culturally suitable, and shortages of existing greenspace, park space and other amenities have all been reported as contributors of unstable mental wellness among groups during this time. As well, Elsayed (2019) contends that financial and health anxieties have become especially heightened for residents who are exposed to frontline work or precarious conditions, which often is associated with people who identify as low-income and live in poverty.



**Figure 8: As healthy indicators, more trees offer shade opportunities near this tower than others in St. James Town**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

St. James Town is a neighbourhood that has experienced extreme cases of overcrowding as a result of its disproportionate ratio of greenspace to building infrastructure. The combined dominance of high-rise towers and shortage of available topography within this urban landscape leaves many to wonder what other parts of the neighbourhood might have otherwise presented ideal sites for greenspace opportunities. These trends also reveal a need for more strategic considerations by which the City of Toronto can successfully meet the needs of this densely populated neighbourhood. Existing natural greenspace such as Rosedale Ravine Lands Park provides residents with great access to trail paths and

high trees. However, according to a recent article by the Toronto Star, over the years, it has informally functioned as an encampment for people experiencing homelessness, which has challenged the perceived sense of safety, desirability and resulting usage patterns of local residents, many of whom are families with young children or seniors, and subsequently piqued the interest of City officials to initiate contentious “cleanup” activities (DiManno, 2020). Unfortunately, these measures are rooted in a classism that has also been made evident in the local politics that emerged when a Toronto carpenter, Khaleel Seivwright, voluntarily built tiny shelters for people experiencing homelessness in February 2021.

In conducting research and a site visit to the neighbourhood of St. James Town, I argue that Toronto’s City Council must consider the potential of developing a mandate for future developments in the area to incorporate privately-owned public spaces into their plans that are strictly reserved for natural amenity space. The development of compact greenspace in these privately-owned public spaces presents opportunities for public squares and plazas, community gardens, or space for additional and accessible seating with tree coverage. This measure could help to improve the existing landscape with more healthy, dynamic, vibrant, and community-oriented settings that support the use and secure higher quality of life for residents. Plans have been announced for the development of park space and the conversion of an open space above a public housing facility in St. James Town. However, the standard procedures of providing the approval and construction of condominium developments in the area undermine these same initiatives and activities that encourage the creation of considerable and usable greenspace. Mandating the construction of privately-owned public spaces that support these community-oriented specifications could function as a robust mechanism to successfully meet the financial priorities and vision for this neighbourhood through more real estate development which also supports the physical and mental needs of this community of increasingly vulnerable people.

### **Neighbourhood Context: Jane and Finch**

The landscape of Jane and Finch presents low-to-moderate “greenspace” (between 21-25 percent of city tree canopy) - however, it is important to note, this proportion does not distinguish the usability of accredited ecological features. Similar to St. James Town, Jane and Finch contains a diverse and predominantly low-income population. Known also as Black Creek or University Heights, Jane and Finch is an inner-suburban community located in Toronto’s northwest quarter. According to the 2016 Neighbourhood Profile, Jane and Finch has a median household income of \$46,580, nearly 34 percent of its population in poverty (by the market-based measure system), 55 percent of its population living in tower apartments, and only about 12 percent of its population having obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher (compared to 44 percent of the city average). According to the City of Toronto 2016 Neighbourhood Profile, the Black Creek neighbourhood borders the southwest perimeter of the York University campus. Directly south of this is Glenfield-Jane Heights, which borders the Highway 400 and sits south of Finch Avenue. The community of Jane and Finch includes the Toronto neighbourhoods of Black Creek and Glenfield-Jane Heights, which surround the Jane Street and Finch Avenue West intersection. This intersection is located north of Sheppard Avenue West, east of Highway 400, south of Steeles Avenue West, and west of Keele Street.



**Figure 9: Infrastructure threatens the quality of existing greenspace along the main road in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

Jane and Finch is characterized by its diverse community which has developed because of its history of accommodating the city's newcomers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, although locally, the neighbourhood context is informally (and unfairly) recognized by the rest of the city for its deteriorating infrastructure and poor access to resources - a trend which commonly results in low-income status and high crime rates (Jane-Finch TSNS Task Force, 2015). Historically, until around the 1400s, the Jane and Finch area was inhabited by Indigenous peoples who were living in large longhouses even as this land began to present insufficiencies within soil (poor fertility) and forestry (thinning trees and disappearing wildlife), as colonizers exploited the land and worked to eradicate Indigenous presence (which continued rapidly until the close of World War II) (Downsview Weston Action Community, 1986).





**Figure 10: Trees sparsely planted outside a high-traffic apartment building in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

Throughout the 19th century, the Jane and Finch area experienced intensification of institutional and commercial use with the development of churches, schools, and transportation facilities such as the railway in 1853 (Richardson, 2014). In addition to the immigrants from England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and the United States that travelled and settled in this area during the 19th century, several enslaved African Americans moved to Canada around this time as abolishment was already underway. For instance, Mary Ann Shadd Carry was among one of these individuals and went on to become an entrepreneur, an anti-slavery activist, an advocate for women's rights, and a lawyer. She pioneered early grassroots and community-led activism around Toronto, and across Canada and the United States as she worked to advance social and racial equity for marginalized groups. These efforts are believed to have shaped multicultural neighbourhoods such as Jane and Finch.



**Figure 11: Healthy appearance of trees along a residential street in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

During the 20th century, affordable public housing opportunities and expansions into the downtown core were initiated, identifying Jane and Finch and other lower-income neighbourhoods as ideal settings for newcomers, where more and more immigrants were drawn to the city by way of Ontario Housing Commission's development projects (United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004). During the 1960s, immigrants were predominantly from the West Indies, Asia, Africa, South America, as well as South Asia (including Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan), which ultimately resulted in a community of low-income, racialized minorities (Eizadirad, 2018). In a community-led website, residents report that, due to the influx of new settlers and youths in the area, the neighbourhood faced major challenges when accessing recreational, educational, and social services (Jane-Finch.com, n.d.). A City of Toronto's staff report released in February 2020 explains that the transformation of the area was largely influenced by the opening of Highway 400 in 1952 and the new development of Metropolitan's planning regulations and standards in 1953 (City of Toronto, 2020).





**Figure 12: A couple (far left) on an afternoon stroll in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)



**Figure 13: A residential street with predominantly 1-storey bungalows reveals minimal green infrastructure or tree canopy protection for residents of Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

In 1962, a district Master Plan was developed with the intent to develop a “modern” suburban community. This community would support a combination of low, medium, and high-density housing, and employment, commercial and social services. The primary framework of the District Plan was “a residential strip bisected by a ravine and bounded by industrial employment zones. According to an online website by a non-profit that is focused on research, advocacy, and demonstration for transitioning post-war towers into healthy and engaged sites for community gathering, commercial areas were kept to major arterial intersections, with schools, community centres and park space at the interior of new communities (Tower Renewal Partnership, 2008). The project and its units were constructed swiftly to respond to rising population rates across the city. However, it seems minimal consideration was given to ensure the long-term durability of the internal infrastructure or the need for services that would go on to accommodate the growing community. Following World War II, the Canadian government took the opportunity to develop a unique national identity by making changes to immigration policy which strengthened migration patterns from outside of Europe. Between 1969 and 1973, the population rose from just under 30,000 to nearly 45,000, rapidly increasing throughout the 1970s and 1980s.



**Figure 14: Unkept grass surrounding a field beside “danger” signage and construction around the Jane and Finch intersection**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

According to the findings of a Master student’s thesis research, the Jane and Finch area is categorized as a “Priority Neighbourhood” according to the City of Toronto. Its concentrated presence unemployment rates, single-parent families, and a high-percentage of racialized people has resulted in a negative association of Jane and Finch as though “deserving” of the poor media portrayal it receives (Slobodian, 2019). However, several residents and community leaders have



urged that the perpetuated cycle of negatively framing the neighbourhood is increasingly harmful for its members. A CBC Radio (2019) report highlights the dangers of perceiving and characterizing Jane and Finch as a neighbourhood full of “bad people” and “crime” because this tends to magnify each incident of violence that takes place and reinforces its reputation as a “bad” neighbourhood. Further, young girls and boys experience structural barriers when pursuing ambitions and goals because of these connotations whereby their goals are perceived as “unattainable”, and expectations of their success are lowered.



**Figure 15: Sparsely planted trees outside a high-traffic apartment building in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

Even though structural issues that tend to present themselves in low-income communities such as Jane and Finch have often been blamed on their residents rather than the systematic and structural powers that have influenced the neighbourhood’s conditions, there remains a strong sense of community which is expressed through murals and grassroots mobilization by residents. Urban problems such as gentrification have inspired residents such as community activist Winston La Rose, who immigrated to Toronto from Guyana in the 1930s. Through a strong platform that was supported through his early experience growing up in the “independence generation” when African and Caribbean countries used political power to fight back against colonial dominance., La Rose has gone on to push back against the idea of increasing police presence in the neighbourhood and scrutinize standard City-led initiatives for addressing crime (CBC, 2019).





**Figure 16: Young tree planted along residential street in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

Tasan-Kok and Ozogul (2017) explore the manners in which concerns of an increased wealth gap between mixed-income neighbourhoods in the city's downtown core and surrounding peripheral low-income neighbourhoods have been posed as result of considerable investments being funnelled into the former; the city's downtown core is characterized as an ideal location for intensification because it is anticipated that trends of a strong market demand will occur. Ultimately, this investment plays a role in shaping the conditions in which community members of all ages must live and work to thrive. In a 2008 report by McMurtry and Curling, the major contributors of immediate risk factors for youth violence included a sense of alienation and lack of hope, as well as conditions that increased exposure to poverty, experiences with racism, poor community design, and the gaps in the education system that often reinforce the 'school to prison pipeline' paradigm (e.g., excessive or unsuitable punitive measures, poor representation of students of color's respective ancestries, lack of support for students with more complex circumstances (domestic or otherwise), and poor employment opportunities and unstable prospects for youth).



**Figure 17: Overgrown vegetation along Finch Avenue in Jane and Finch**  
(Charlotte Wayara, May 2021)

Historically a farming district and settlement for European immigrants for over 150 years, though modernist planning efforts intended to accommodate population growth in the city, the unanticipated rate of intensification experienced in this neighbourhood was not successfully contained. Conditions of overcrowding, poor facilities, and geographical isolation from the city's centre yielded an overwhelming presence of low-income households and a consistently declining reputation by the public's standards. The accommodating of cheap and accessible housing as an archetype of this neighbourhood helped in securing a residential complex model similar to the "projects" that were pervasive across cities in the United States during this time. Today, the area is characterized by its predominantly flat and treeless landscape and believed by residents and activists to have received negligent spatial planning consideration.

#### **4. Greenspace and Health**

For many years, standard city planning theory and practice have established and reinforced land use regulations and spatial interventions that support a myriad of advantageous urbanization agendas that seek to ameliorate prevailing governmental concerns (of the time). These concerns may include strategies that accommodate the anticipated growth in population for the city, robust strategies for strengthening its patterns of foreign investment and municipal reputation through industries such as tourism and real estate, or ensuring the stability of the municipal tax base by way of initiating employment opportunities for job seekers and balancing unemployment rates. Regional and provincial decision makers and

policymakers must contend with these capitalist components, commodifying concepts of “space” and “place” through branding and design schemes in order to achieve their goals. This is undertaken while the municipality and elected governmental officials dually work to address the dynamic and primary concerns of citizens and constituents through the introduction of new legislation, programs, and procedures. In light of this, two concepts must be noted. As the world witnessed with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020, municipal capital and operational budgets are, in fact, capped and further, they are susceptible to destabilization. Along with this fixed budget comes a limited number of realizable, practical, and concrete projects that can be devoted to equitable community improvement and social programming efforts. Such projects can contribute to the resolve of concrete, discrete and clearly identifiable urban issues (and often present a favorable and dominant base of supporters who may wield statistical data on the issue in order to push it forward) and are more likely to be prioritized by decision-makers in contrast to the interconnected, convoluted, subjective and overwhelmingly anecdotal problems faced by few.

For instance, when we consider the urban challenges that are specific to municipalities with a history of human geography and social stratification patterns similar to the City of Toronto, it becomes apparent why historical conditions such as discriminatory housing policies that forced black and brown groups to settle and remain in the city’s urban core are very relevant to this research. By this, I refer to the systematic denial of mortgages and bank loans, rebates and other state-issued incentives, the refusal to sell properties to racialized residents and the integration of residential security maps (i.e., geospatial maps marking the valuation of neighbourhoods based on their access to the best goods, services, and resources and general desirability by white folks) which confined black and brown residents to accommodation and livelihood beginning in the 1930s; this programming was an extension of a more insidious racism, systemic segregation, and the prevalent ideologies of the Jim Crow era. The practice was a derivative of the former President Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” programming during the Great Depression as an attempt to incentivize Americans to purchase houses by increasing affordability and stabilizing the growing middle class. This scheme forced the adherence of a set of criteria (e.g., geographic placement) in order for residents to secure a loan by the bank and used a binary categorization system of “green areas” and “red areas” to differentiate regions (and thus, people) that qualified for these financial subsidies and loans from those that did not.

This pervasive history of redlining across the United States and Canada is important for several reasons: its operation progressively (albeit, inadvertently) discredits the myth of the “American Dream”, or the narrative pitched and sold to many hopeful emigrants in which the Global North was a land filled with only opportunity that yields a life without the corrupt governmental schemes these newcomers were used to. I am referring to the types of schemes that routinely secure intergenerational paradigms of income insecurity and housing vulnerability to reach a pinnacle of mass poverty across its nation - much of which is often ascribed to countries situated in the Global South (Villavicencio, 2021; Silva, 2021). The appalling history of redlining serves as a powerful testament that disempowers the ideal that there is (and should be) a superpower nation, superior to the condemnation, accountability, or regulation of other “inferior” countries. Additionally, this practice of subtle and outright denial of services that became undertaken by banking institutions - one that is based on bigotry and xenophobia - soon became entrenched in the growing businesses of real estate speculation, and the financialization or commodification of housing and land acquisition. Redlining as a practice was advanced through the exploitation of undocumented and insidious (at the time) systemic gaps that presented further

opportunities for the routine standard of increased barriers, inflated rates, and other structural forms of discrimination that are conspicuous (or, sometimes inconspicuous) in the present day.

Through the creation of a four-class system that measured perceived “investment risk”, African American residents, black and brown people, and others who lived in poorer households, were systematically assigned the “fourth” or lowest grade as well as a “hazardous” identification that was associated with the color red (Hillier, 2003, p. 395). This becomes increasingly significant considering that research has uncovered that approximately 74 percent of neighbourhoods across North America that were assigned a “hazardous” evaluation during the time of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s continue to be characterized as low-to-moderate income areas, where 64 percent of these neighbourhoods are dually neighbourhoods in which minority groups predominantly reside (Mitchell et al., 2018, p. 4). The research of Mitchell et al. bases its findings on the results of a regional analysis that indicated that states in the South and the West presented the highest rates of Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) “hazardous” scores and municipal hubs of predominantly racialized residents, and the South and Midwest states revealed the greatest and most consistent trends of income disparity. The connection between climate change and racism is linked here with research that centres on uncovering and substantiating if areas that historically were prone to targeting through systematic disinvestment founded in racial and ethnic bias are dually exposed to extreme heat trends (known as, “heat vulnerability”) in the present context, and, further, how geospatial data that reflects these cyclical trends of housing injustice can support equitable and sustainable climate adaptation and city planning activities for these vulnerable groups (Wilson, 2020, p. 444). Wilson (2020) finds that the legacy of redlining has been imprinted and etched into the archival distribution of land surface temperatures within cities such as Baltimore, Dallas, and Kansas City, and, while poverty levels functions as a significant indicator of heat vulnerability, widescale changes in mobility patterns over the past four decades disrupt its credibility and accuracy to act as the sole moderator (Wilson, 2020, p. 445). In these cities, it was demonstrated that ecosystem services and their benefits align with standing systemic patterns of public goods that are disproportionately allocated to residents in accordance with class and race, through residential segregation or, inversely, physical proximity to parks and greenspace.

In recent years, as complex health challenges of climate change and rapid urbanization of cities have differentially impacted our communities, “greenspace” has been rebranded as a nimble, transformational, and co-beneficial solution. For instance, increasing the presence of greenspaces has been conclusively linked to improving urban challenges presented by climate change and global warming such as curbing the urban heat island effect, ameliorating infrastructure to prevent flooding, and sustaining wildlife and biodiverse species. Simultaneously, greenspaces act as sites for respite, demonstrate curative functions for people with chronic illnesses, and provide natural resources for facilitating healthy coping mechanisms, physical activity and social connection and interdependency for improved overall health outcomes (Cerbu, 2019; Morrison, 2017). Greenspaces also offer flexibility in serving as sites for the delivery of cultural activities, particularly for newcomers who may be acclimatizing to the new urban landscape and are in search of activities and experiences that will reinforce their efforts to form place-attachments (Ono, 2020). However, the problem lies in the capacity to realize responsive and purpose-built interventions complex enough that they may holistically recognize and address these increasingly institutional issues, yet simple enough that garnering “buy in” for the application of these interventions remains accessible.

This is important when we take into consideration the prevailing Westernized and mainstream conceptualizations of greenspace, which have contributed to, what I argue, is the “Disneyfication” of greenspace - a sociological term used to describe the commercial transformation of a real (in this case, living and wild) environment or entity into a more controlled, simplified, and “safe” (or, in this case, marketable) iteration. Under the guise of the Western perception of greenspace, rising public interest for increased park space over the last decade has occurred, alongside the commodification of trends such as veganism, the “green city”, healthy living, and environmental consciousness - particularly during a time when we are far more connected and susceptible to marketing and branding schemes through technology than ever before. Interestingly, this mainstream ideal of “greenspace” is not always inclusive or reflective of other (less manufactured, and, arguably, more natural) greenspace typologies - particularly, those that appear less “kept” and “manicured” that commonly characterize many landscapes across Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. For example, the “wildscape” of Mombasa discussed by Kitha and Lyth (2011), would presumably be less commonly accessed by users in search of hiking, nature walks or hosting a picnic in the park - which are symbolic of many Western trends, rituals, and activities that are culturally relevant and distinctive. Rather, the impetus and vision for this “wildscape” might serve a broader and more functional role, perhaps posing a pragmatic solution to problems ranging from contributing to the state’s economy to considering the future harmful impacts of decades long extraction patterns in an increasingly barren area.

Because of the urgent danger that climate change poses to our planet and its communities, a resulting imagined competition ensues between different complex and urban challenges for the public’s full devotion and resolve (McKibben, 2020; Tuana, 2019). While the crisis of climate change - and the underlying structures that position some groups in better odds than others - must continue to be emphasized and tackled by the upmost innovative thinkers, the crisis of racism in public space and the repeated history of violence against black and brown bodies in these so called “restorative” and “communitive” spaces must not be drowned out. At first thought, it seems as though a choice must be made and a cause must be chosen. Yet, many researchers and writers have presented the opposing argument - that climate change *is*, in fact, a racial justice problem and that the two fights, must be united (or coordinated) in order for the full potential of the respective resolutions to be realized. An article by Gardiner (2020) published with *the Yale Environment 360*, a journal publication by the Yale School of the Environment, features the thoughts of Elizabeth Yeampierre, a decades-long activist for environmental justice and climate change. Yeampierre draws important connections from the unjust historic conditions of slavery and resource exploitation to make sense of our present context. She states:

“Climate change is the result of a legacy of extraction, of colonialism, of slavery [...] [Think] about the slave quarters, [think] about the people who got the worst food, the worst health care, the [worst] treatment, and then, when freed, were given lands that were eventually surrounded by things like petrochemical industries. The idea of killing black people or indigenous people, all of that has a long, long history that is centered on capitalism and the extraction of our land and our labor in this country [...] The truth is that [with] the climate justice movement, people of colour, indigenous people, have always worked multidimensionally because we have to be able to fight on so many different planes [...] In our communities, people are suffering from asthma and upper

respiratory disease, and we've been fighting for the right to breathe for generations [...] [T]he signs you're seeing in these protests - 'I can't breathe' [...] w]hen the police are using chokeholds, literally people who suffer from a history of asthma and respiratory disease, their breath is taken away...[and it becomes] an environmental justice issue."

Other articles emphasize and support the same connections posed by Yeampierre, many of them referencing the research findings and professional counsel of climate change scientists who claim that racism is inextricably tied to climate change; this claim is contested on the basis that privilege (or lack thereof) determines who will either benefit or, inversely, suffer most from activities that omit gases and chemicals that warm and destabilize the natural state of our planet (Tessum et al., 2019; Hsiang et al., 2017, p. 6).

The intent of this paper is to investigate the role of social determinants of health and assert that "health" must be prioritized to first assess and acknowledge systemic issues of community neglect. For one, we must ask the question, what is a "healthy city"? According to an online newsletter published by the World Health Organization (WHO) (n.d.) on "Creating Healthy Cities", a healthy city works "to create a health-supportive environment, to achieve a good quality of life, to provide basic sanitation and hygiene needs, [and] to supply access to health care." In consideration of the sustained demonstration of exclusion and the barriers imposed on black and brown residents in accessing adequate health care and uncrowded health-related services, in exercising their right to protection and fair judgement by the courts and law enforcement, in successfully obtaining a livable wage, employment security and good socioeconomic status and standing, and in accessing the physical and psychosocial benefits of utilizing public and greenspace resources, it is clear that "health" (and the paradigm of the "healthy city") must be revised collectively to tackle barriers to realizing goals of equitable urbanism.

For instance, according to a short publication released by the World Health Organization, Health and Welfare Canada, and the Canadian Public Health Association for the first International Conference on Health Promotion held in November 1986 in Ottawa, "health is created and lived by people within their settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play, and love". Yet, current interpretations and models of this perception of health in urbanism do not acknowledge that health is not distributed nor accessed equally and, as such, intentional and effective strategies to build foundational and sustainable systems for communities, who are structurally unable to access health as such a luxury, to invest in, operate, and facilitate their own health development, must be made a priority. Additionally, these interpretations of "health" and the "healthy city" model do not actively work to transcend the formal disciplinary boundaries of health, ecology, and education - where the latter routinely presents audiences with new insight or confirmation through findings that remain wholly uninterpretable and physically inaccessible to the broader public who are without access to scholarly training and/or academic affiliation. As a result of these symbolic "barriers to entry" and the absence of mandated race-based data collection at the provincial or federal levels, there is a poor presence of statistical research findings that substantiate the role of systemic racism in resulting health disparities such as chronic illness, mental health issues, and most of all, risk of public violence or brutality. In addition to these conditions, little acknowledgement is granted of the structural barriers presented when obtaining health, education, employment, leisure, and sense of community and pursuing love and happiness as the "learn, work, play and love" model suggests.

## Representation Barriers

It must be acknowledged that the decision- and policy-making process takes place within the exclusive hands of a predominantly white group of authorities; therein lies a multifaceted problem of representation (Arnesen and Peters, 2017; Burgess, 2018). This problem is presented in the operations of decision-makers, who, even after engaging equity groups and liaising with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) consultants, must design strategies and policies that, ultimately require a comprehensive understanding of the extremely nuanced and sensitive issues at hand in order to make informed decisions that will produce effective results - from inception to execution.

An online article by Ely and Thomas (2020) published in the Harvard Business Review contends that what remains both uninterrogated and unaddressed within recent institutional policy changes that adopt “diversity within the workforce” is the standardized manner in which the executives, the chief strategists and the public engagement facilitators of our planning and governance systems of power remain wholly unchanged in their physical appearance and visual representation of the communities they serve. As I will discuss, the problem of representation has been outlined by a broad collection of multidisciplinary literature and experts.

For instance, in his work *The Representation of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Parliament* published by the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) and the Interparliamentary Union, Dr. Oleh Protsyk (2010) unveils the foundational role of the parliamentary representation of minorities and Indigenous peoples in contributing to their effective participation in public affairs. Deriving his results from an international questionnaire which involved the participation of 91 countries, Protsyk (2010, p. 3) states that “[w]hile a number of international legal and political documents guarantee the rights of minorities and [I]ndigenous peoples to political participation, implementation of these mechanisms has proved challenging.” Based on his research findings, Protsyk reports that the parliamentary representation of racialized minorities and Indigenous peoples is largely impacted by rules and regulations which encompass electoral rules and procedures, political party laws, general parliamentary rules, special parliamentary bodies, and procedures for dealing with minority or Indigenous issues. Protsyk discusses the systemic barriers that are presented within candidacy requirements and fulfillments that remain exclusionary and lacking critical analysis, and that nation states could benefit from initiating legislative special measures to ensure the presence of government figures and parliamentarians who are of minority and/or Indigenous identity and background. Among the countries involved in the study, it was also found that these sorts of affirmative action measures (e.g., options to exercise veto power on particular bills, allocation of parliamentary budget ration towards specific programs or issues, etc.) did not face strong opposition within the country and that garnering support was easier when evidence substantiated the long-term benefits of the participation of marginalized groups (a finding that emphasizes the historical limitations faced by black and brown bodies who must tirelessly work to prove their lived experiences with structural discrimination without race-based data). Protsyk highlights the efforts of Romania to secure one seat in its lower chamber of parliament for each minority group that has not previously obtained representation through standard electoral procedures. In turn, this type of programming is believed to shape indicators of these groups’ participation in decision making as it relates to “whether minorities and [I]ndigenous peoples are actually present in legislatures, whether their voices are heard, and whether their interests are taken into account”, and works to facilitate greater consideration and acceptance for marginalized cultural groups’ rights, languages, and customs into parliamentary

regulations and procedures (Protsyk, 2010, p. 3). Here, the strategic planning and application of equitable and legislative models that became developed through an intensive qualitative environmental scan of internal drawbacks and external best practices found in Protsyk's research present opportunities to localize and integrate similar affirmative action programming into our own provincial structures of governance (particularly made effective when realized through the presence of diverse policy makers).

Although complex and systemic problems that are faced by racialized groups and People of Colour (POC) act as shared experiences with oppression among members, it must be noted that, regardless of these similarities, the lived experience is not a monolithic one - there are many individual components that influence the socially constructed groups that one is assigned to according to race, sex/gender, sexual orientation, age, creed/religion, experiences with disability and more, and how one experiences membership to these groups through the treatment of others. These factors work in tandem to shape one's holistic lived experience and, further, frame their perspective and determine their needs. However, the benefit of implementing equitable hiring and leadership appointment strategies to increase diverse representation in any given decision-making environment is that in doing so, we may increase representation opportunities for individuals with each of these unique affiliations and perspectives. In turn, this may better inform policy and speak to less recognized experiences with marginalization and the respective positionality or intersectional identity of unpopular voices.

In her 1984 publication, *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde's collection of essays contains one piece, entitled "The Master's Tools" from which I will draw. Lorde, a self-described "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet" candidly reflects about her experience on being tokenized at a conference within an exceedingly "white" discussion of topics related to differential experiences of race, sexuality, class, and age among women in the United States. Lorde (1984, p. 1) aptly states,

It is of particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians...To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about... the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two Black women who did present [at this conference] were literally found at the last hour? **What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable."**

Lorde (1984, p. 2) continues on to state, "[f]or the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." When we consider the known benefits of collaboration throughout a project or program development process, we understand the need to integrate and incorporate key multidisciplinary knowledge to strengthen the 'end product' and to ensure that there is no oversight of foundational components that would otherwise hinder its success. Audre Lorde's moving prose can be applicable across time, space and spheres as it pertains to this organizational oversight across systems of power.



## **Review of Greenspace and Related Policies**

The findings of Browning and Rigolon (2018), as well as the colloquial trope that “Black people do not like the environment” (aforementioned) are suggestive of a variety of trends and deliberations. While I have mentioned them earlier in my paper, I repeat the questions I have kept at the forefront of this research to emphasize their significance: Do some Black people and other racialized people face unique psychological barriers in their respective process of effectively acknowledging, utilizing, and benefiting from the presence of greenspace where available? Is this trope rooted in any historical conditions or at all grounded in reality? Is it possible that this behavior is a response to the interconnectedness of greenspace and class, in which “greenspace” has then been rendered socially inaccessible? Is this trope impacted by the distinct cultural difference of conceptualizing “nature” and proximity to nature that is present in West-East and/or U.S.-Canadian dichotomies? Is this discrepancy related to our respective experiences with colonial practices and systemic racism as marginalized users of urban public spaces?

This section of research is focused on undertaking a critical analysis of policy produced by cities, resulting critiques and other literature about cities’ policy on promoting greenspace equity. Through this, I hope to better determine the extent to which seemingly “progressive” municipalities and their political views (given their diverse populations) have successfully created comprehensive and multipronged strategies to tackle public health issues through responsive designs, partnerships, and projects. For the purpose of exploring if there is a discrepancy based on geographical location as I have mentioned above (both by identified “coasts” and nation-wide perspectives that are prevalent in the U.S. and in Canada, respectively), I have assessed the “east coast” cities and “west coast” cities of Montréal and San Francisco. I survey these two cities in addition to evaluating the design objectives and policies of Toronto, which aims to provide context for this paper. Montréal has been selected for its diverse population of immigrants, refugees, and other black and brown folks who mostly occupy increasingly separated spaces when compared to white residents of the city (Driedger, 1999). San Francisco has been selected for its progressive leadership in promoting healthier public space behaviours and interventions. Through this analysis, I intend to interrogate potential discrepancies in public perception about greenspace based on accessibility and proximity to greenspace in residents’ surrounding environment (e.g., west coast cities) and the resulting sense of culture that emerges around this natural amenity.

### **Case 1: Toronto**

Specifically in Toronto, policies have been outlined in Chapter 3: Building a Successful City of the City of Toronto Official Plan (2021) that emphasize strategies for the following:

#### **1. Policy 3.2.2.1**

“Adequate and equitable access to community services and local institutions will be encouraged by:

- a) providing and preserving local community service facilities and local institutions across the city dedicated to this purpose;**
- b) improving and expanding local community service facilities and local institutions in established neighbourhoods that are under or poorly served; and**

- c) ensuring that an appropriate range of community services and facilities and local institutions are provided in areas of major or incremental physical growth.”

2. Policy 3.2.2.5

**“Strategies for providing new social infrastructure or improving existing community service facilities will be developed for areas that are inadequately serviced or experiencing major growth or change and will be informed through the preparation of a community services strategy, which will include:**

- a) a demographic profile of area residents;
- b) an inventory of existing services within the area, or readily accessible to area residents;
- c) identification of existing capacity and service gaps in local facilities;
- d) identification of local priorities;
- e) recommended range of services and co-location opportunities; and
- f) identification of funding strategies including, but not limited to, funds secured through the development approval process, the City’s capital and operating budgets and public/private partnerships.”

3. Policy 3.1.1.6:

**“City streets are significant public open spaces which connect people and places and support the development of sustainable, economically vibrant and complete communities.** New and existing City streets will incorporate a Complete Streets approach and be designed to perform their diverse roles by:

- 1. Balancing the needs and priorities of the various users and uses within the right-of-way, including provision for:
  - i. **the safe and efficient movement of pedestrians of all ages and abilities, cyclists, transit vehicles and users, goods and services vehicles, emergency vehicles, and motorists across the network;**
  - ii. **space for trees, landscaping and green infrastructure;**
  - iii. **space for other street elements, such as utilities and services, snow and stormwater management, wayfinding, boulevard cafes, marketing and vending, and street furniture; and**
  - iv. **ensuring the safety of users of all ages and abilities.”**

4. Policy 3.1.1.13:

**“Sidewalks and boulevards will be designed to provide safe, attractive, interesting and comfortable spaces for users of all ages and abilities by:**

- a) providing well designed and co-ordinated tree planting, landscaping, amenity spaces, setbacks, green infrastructure, pedestrian-scale lighting, street furnishings and decorative paving as part of street improvements;

- b) locating and designing utilities within streets, within buildings or underground, in a manner that will minimize negative impacts on the natural, pedestrian and visual environment and enable the planting and growth of trees to maturity; and
- c) providing unobstructed, direct and continuous paths of travel in all seasons with an appropriate width to serve existing and anticipated pedestrian volumes.”

5. Policy 3.1.1.19:

“Innovative energy producing options, sustainable design and construction practices and green industry will be supported and encouraged in new development and building renovation through:

**a) the use of innovative greenspaces such as green roofs and designs that reduce the urban heat island effect and enhance urban ecology...”**






As my research is based in Toronto, I have uniquely included a critical analysis of the policy that guides the City to provide more context (which is not provided for the other two cases). While these policies are exceedingly progressive and ambitious, particularly when compared to other municipalities that present similar historical trends of unaffordable housing, poor maintenance of social housing units, inequitable tenant relocation plans, and overcrowded or inaccessible community infrastructure, there are marked absences of:

- specific strategies that are publically-accessible in order to ensure the accountability of the City to realize these policies for its residents who are marginalized and have been historically exploited in spite of their compliance and participation in city-led engagement strategies;
- an identified criteria that takes into consideration the measurement of the quality of these envisioned services, facilities and amenities;
- estimated timelines in which residents can expect changes will be made: this might prove advantageous in building trust and rapport between residents and elected officials whereby residents can be reassured that these matters are being taken seriously, particularly where the conditions of some prove to be more urgent than others such as health-threatening circumstances (e.g., food insecurity and precarious housing).

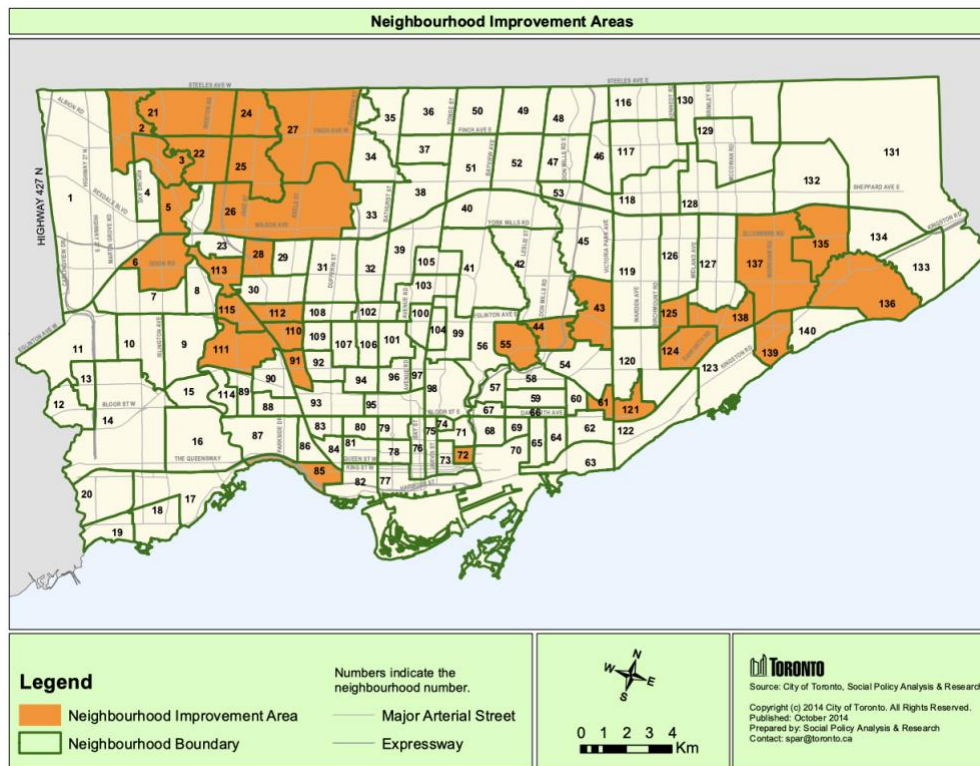
In the case of Toronto, the establishment of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy Report in 2020 (TSNS 2020) has helped to provide answers to some of these questions. Originally established in 2005 by the United Way Toronto, TSNS 2020 utilizes over 10 years of place-based work and engagement occurring in Toronto and is attributed for the realizing of many new community facilities and services to improve health conditions in priority and low-income neighbourhoods. TSNS 2020 (2020, p. 10) was created with the vision of undertaking open dialogue with residents, City Councillors and City staff, community groups and investors to successfully “activate people, activate resources, and activate neighbourhood-friendly policies” that include and connect local people, relevant policies and procedures, and suitable investment strategies in order to create a strong system of neighbourhoods. Among its stock of equitable, collaborative, and sustainable schemes, the following are emphasized:

**Strategy 1 - Neighbourhood Planning Tables:** Multidisciplinary and diverse participants will meet regularly to determine relevant and local priorities, a course of action, and key partners that will contribute to the success of the identified neighbourhood. The creation of four district teams (east, west, north and south) will help to facilitate consistent liaison and mediation between the City and local residents. Additionally, a City Directors Table will be established to chair the TSNS 2020 and will represent a broad variety of governmental and non-profit services.

**Strategy 2 - Neighbourhood Action Plans:** It is identified that the standardizing of design and policy programs does not contribute to the success or “strength” of neighbourhood; rather, to be ‘strong’, investment and service delivery strategies must take into account local history, local priorities and local conditions. These Neighbourhood Action Plans intend to serve as guiding documents for a unique and purpose-built course of action that focuses on meeting the identified criteria for a “strong neighborhood” including the advancement of physical surroundings, economic opportunities, healthy lives, social development, and participation in civic decision-making. These action plans consist of key guidelines such as equity, demand (i.e., identified support from residents), participation, focused/universal deliverables, prevention (of crime, illness, poverty, etc.), collective impact, measurability, and economical benefits in priority neighbourhoods or NIAs (see Figures 18 and 19).

THE VISION	<i>"No matter what neighbourhood Torontonians call home, there are equitable opportunities for wellbeing."</i>					
THE GOAL	<i>The Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy 2020 supports healthy communities across Toronto by partnering with residents, businesses and agencies to invest in people, services, programs and facilities in specific neighbourhoods.</i>					
NIA(s)#	CDO:					
DOMAINS	LOCAL ACTION(S)	DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE OF ACTION/PROJECT	YEAR 1 MILESTONE	LEAD ORGANIZATION/CITY DIVISION	PARTNERS	RESOURCES NEEDED
 HEALTHY LIVES						
 ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES						
 PHYSICAL SURROUNDINGS						
 SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT						
 PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING						
Planning template completed on:						
Start/End Date:						

**Figure 18: TSNS 2020 Planning Template**  
(Toronto Strong Neighborhood 2020: 19)



**Figure 19: City-Identified Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIA)**  
(City of Toronto Social Policy Analysis & Research, 2014)

In considering the approach that has been adopted in the development of the Toronto Strong Neighborhood Strategy 2020 project - to involve diverse parties in order to produce activities and strategies that are community-specific - from an objective perspective, the goals and vision listed in Figure 18 appear both equitable and attainable. As I have mentioned, the St. James Town neighbourhood was not selected to be included in the project (which comprised a total of 31 NIAs). This exclusion hinders the capacity for this community to equally benefit from the collaborative and concerted cross-sectoral efforts that became imagined through this plan, calling into question the TSNS selection criteria and neighbourhood qualifications.

In a major research paper by D'Souza (2019) in completion of his Master in City Planning degree at MIT, the mishaps of Kingsview neighbourhood during TSNS programming are explored, where it was reported that there was a significant reduction in attendance and participation rates soon after the start of the project. Through D'Souza's research, the cause of this trend became identified through subsequent interviews with residents of Kingsview, whereby declining rates occurred, in large part, because of misconceptions and judgements made by civil servants and City officials about the supposed "lives of poor people". In addition to this, residents asserted that there was an absence of financial incentive or aid to supplement the time (and money) sacrificed by community members who had previously been sold on the vision of the TSNS 2020 that they would be exposed to educational resources and job opportunities in the municipal administration sector - many of which relied on wage-based jobs (D'Souza, 2019, p. 57).

D'Souza argues that, in order to ensure long-term success, the TSNS 2020 must provide the public with clarity of the structural and established crime problems that are concentrated in this neighbourhood and various other low-income areas in and outside of Toronto that can only be alleviated through continuous localized investment and community-oriented public safety protocols and programs. D'Souza urges that a continuous review of best practices by the TSNS 2020 will support the project's evolution and resulting capacity to ensure the needs of these communities are realized.

### **Case 2: Montréal**

In the Ville de Montréal *Plan Urbanisme* (Montréal Official Master Plan) (2004), the following relevant actions are listed in "Section 2.5: High-quality architecture and urban landscapes" of Chapter 2: Planning Goals:

1. Under Action 11.3 - *The Major Parks Network*:  
"The *projet de réseau des grands parcs* (major parks network project), resulting from the Montréal Summit, aims to create physical connections between the large parks using bikeways, public transportation routes and directional road signs. However, the project is more extensive and also seeks to:
  - a) **Improve accessibility so that residents can benefit from existing infrastructure;**
  - b) **Ensure a better integration of the network into the urban fabric...**"
2. Under Action 11.3 - *Implementation Measures*:  
"Ensure the greening of living environments through:
  - c) **An increase in the planting of trees on public and private land, particularly in areas lacking in this regard and those that are extensively paved;**
  - d) **Regulatory measures favouring greenspaces and the planting of trees as part of new real estate developments, in front yards, backyards, courtyards, rooftops, etc.;**
  - e) **Support for green alley initiatives."**
3. Under Action 13.2 - *Promote Pedestrian Travel Through Improved Public Space Design*  
"Many areas of Montréal that are designed on a human scale have exemplary characteristics that make walking safe, comfortable, efficient and stimulating. In contrast, certain areas that are designed to facilitate automobile traffic are unappealing and often hazardous for pedestrians. These areas usually have the following characteristics:
  - f) **Lack or excess of street furniture;**
  - g) **Lack of vegetation;**
  - h) **Sidewalks that are too narrow, in poor condition or nonexistent;**
  - i) **Excessively wide roadways;**
  - j) **Pedestrian routes that cross areas designed for cars (overpasses, interchanges, large parking lots, etc.).**
  - k) **Certain practices, such as permitting right turns on red lights (currently illegal throughout the City), can aggravate the pedestrian's feeling of discomfort and lack of safety."**

4. Under Action 13.2 - *Design Principles for the Public Realm*:

**“Ensure the comfort and safety of public plaza, square and park users by controlling the height of the surrounding buildings and integrating special landscaping criteria into their design particularly with regard to lighting, visibility and accessibility as well as wind and sun conditions.”**

Additionally, the City of Montréal’s *Policy on Social Development* and the resulting local social development action plan (below) by the Ville-Marie “arrondissement” (borough) in the centre of the City expands on realizing key principles such as inclusion, adaptability, accessibility, addressing needs, and increased support for the most vulnerable groups. This document has been built to reflect the desire of the City to act rigorously when establishing strategies and interventions that will contribute to the improvement of the public’s quality of life and strengthen collective potential. After a series of intensive consultations with the public and involved organizations, the identified commitments outlined in this document consist of:

1. Promoting the dynamism of living environments and developing adaptable and welcoming spaces for all citizens to enjoy;
2. Reducing social inequalities and prioritizing the needs of vulnerable people;
3. Realizing solidarity and social cohesion in the neighborhoods;
4. Advancing harmonious cohabitation among residents, tourists and visitors experiencing any given neighbourhood;
5. Supporting the socio-economic collaboration and growth of diverse citizens (p. 6).

Additionally, key areas of intervention are defined as: the development of neighborhoods in human scale, promoting social cohesion, diversity, and various forms of long- and short-term cohabitation occurring in the area, and supporting the participation activities of the public in shaping these spaces. According to the Plan D’Action En Développement Social 2020-2021 (2019), the following are distinctive equitable strategies that have been incorporated into Montréal’s master plan and programs in order to address the needs of its increasingly diverse and growing population:

1. ADS+ (*Analyse différenciée selon les sexes et intersectionnelle*) or Intersectional Gender Analysis):

In this pilot project (established in 2018), the City has committed to conducting a gender-differentiated and intersectional analysis of policies, services, and programmes whereby data is collected to strengthen existing knowledge of structural gaps and discriminations experienced between women and their male counterparts in relation to the impacts of policies and the delivery of services. In order to ensure accountability and systematic design and enforcement of equitable strategies, this analysis intends to be inclusive of the following intersections: class, ethnocultural origin, disability, socio-economic situation, sexual orientation and gender identity.

## 2. Recent Programming for Specific Vulnerable Groups:

- a. **General:** Broad evaluation of City-led programming registration practices and protocols in order to ensure they are accessible, safe, respectful, and inclusive.
- b. **LGBTQ Groups:** The City has committed to the development of an LGBTQ + community center.
- c. **Indigenous Groups:** The City has proposed a Sustainability of the Resilience Montréal Center for Indigenous peoples.
- d. **People Experiencing Homelessness:** The City has introduced a new vision that includes the establishment of a "wet services" resource for people experiencing homelessness.
- e. **Newcomers:** Increased and focused strategies have been developed that will facilitate the holistic integration and inclusion of newcomers and residents.
- f. **People with Disabilities:** An evaluation of present levels of accessibility has been undertaken that will help to develop more opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in cultural, sporting and leisure activities.

Lastly, in order to demonstrate the City of Montréal's strategies to increasing transparency and accountability on the City's behalf, the following has been proposed in terms of citizen participation and social commitment:

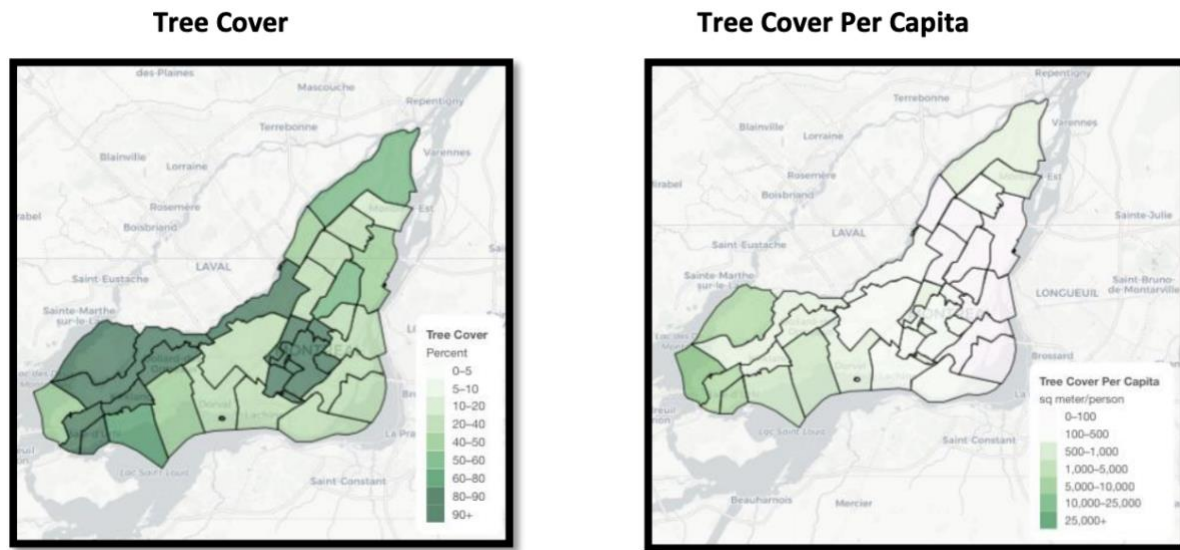
1. Consultation and co-creation with the population and organizations in development projects;
2. Outreach and promotion of work community and citizen action;
3. Follow-up of consultation on the future Chinatown; and
4. Direct communication channels with elected officials.

In a 2019 article centred on the discussion of equity and greenspace in Montréal, Geneviève Westgate (Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness) extends and evaluates policy actions listed in the *City's Policy on Social Development* and discusses findings after undertaking an analysis of the distribution of greenspace across the city. Westgate does so by using data produced by Data-Driven Yale at the establishment of their "Urban Environment and Social Inclusion Index (UESI)" which spatially maps the environmental performance of 30 pilot cities including Montréal. Westgate claims that the results of the UESI make evident an inequity in distribution of greenspace between neighbourhoods. Her research finds that greenspace may not have the intended effects on health and wellbeing if there are structural barriers presented among users (see Figure 20). Among these barriers are the greenspace deficit, disparities in distribution and access to greenspace, and disparities in greenspace facilities and conditions.

Additionally, Westgate draws from the City's existing policy framework to reveal the major gaps to explicitly address existing social inequalities in health among individuals and across neighbourhoods. Additionally, Westgate (2019) discusses the absence of a clear course of action by the City for decreasing and ameliorating these disparities within this framework, which echoes existing trends of regulatory oversight and lack of accountability that might otherwise effectively help to realize the goals that are outlined in such policy plans by municipalities. Westgate (2019) urges that "[e]very neighbourhood is different and while this bring forth a certain richness and openness to others, it can also lead to



discrimination and social exclusion”, where, drawing from other schemes, her findings suggest that there are various ways in which neighbourhoods can address the issue of social exclusion. This is particularly made possible through interventions of public places that accommodate the needs of all groups to support socializing, integration, and place attachment activities in settings such as greenspaces (p. 17).



**Figure 20: Tree Cover and Tree Cover per Capital in Montréal**  
(Westgate, 2019: 7)

Westgate (2019) offers six policy recommendations that are believed to support the redistributing of access to greenspace for priority groups in the City of Montréal:

1. Include health equity as a priority in the Social Development Plan of Montréal. Highlight greenspace interventions as a means of achieving this goal;
2. Create opportunities for vulnerable or priority populations to participate in planning and decision-making processes during greenspace interventions;
3. Create partnerships and collaboration with various stakeholders, and agree on a unified vision;
4. Create greenspaces in underused and underserved areas, specifically in those with more prominent health issues. Focus on small-scale interventions to avoid eco-gentrification;
5. Improve amenities and aesthetics of greenspaces, and create programs and activities that engages citizens within this space;
6. Think long-term: evaluate effectiveness, and impact; ensure continuous funding and maintenance.

### **Case 3: San Francisco**

The San Francisco Planning Commission has successfully realized a broad variety of pedestrian-oriented public space initiatives and projects including the Better Market Street, Castro Street Design, Chinatown Broadway Street Plan, Civic Centre Public Realm Plan, and Market Octavia Living Alleys. The common

identified objective across all programming by the City is to provide healthy settings for people to live, work, play, learn, celebrate, inspire and support one another. The Planning Commission believes that creating good public space is a collaborative process that is community led.

The Urban Design Guidelines of San Francisco (2018) present policies that are driven by progressive approaches to design more inclusive streets such as the following under the Public Realm section:

Under “1. Design Public Open Spaces to Connect with and Complement the Streetscape”

- a) **Avoid designs that appear to privatize public open space or elements;**
- b) **Connect interior public spaces to the sidewalk as directly and overtly as possible without security or other design elements that promote exclusivity;**
- c) **While public open space may be closed at off hours, design security barriers to be invisible and unobtrusive when the space is open and comfortable and visually contributory when closed; and**
- d) **Integrate windows, courtyards, balconies, and wind breaks adjacent to plazas and gathering spaces to provide more opportunity for human interaction and connection between inside and outside uses.**

Under “2. Locate and Design Open Spaces to Maximize Physical Comfort and Visual Access”

- a) **Orient and design publicly accessible open space to maximize physical comfort;**
- b) **Consider solar orientation, exposure, shading, shadowing, noise, and wind; and**
- c) **Consider how orientation and visual connection may support an individual's perception of personal safety.**

Under “3. Express Neighborhood Character in Open Space Designs”

- a) **The public realm of every neighborhood should serve and express its unique character and culture. Open spaces should be inclusive, interactive, and accessible;**
- b) **Consider neighborhood needs in programming and arranging spaces and amenities that support distinct and neighborhood activities and events;**
- c) **Find specific qualities of open space or landscape that express the culture or history of the community;**
- d) **Engage local residents, businesses, and cultural leaders to design and program activities and events; and**
- e) **Respect neighborhood patterns of materials and public space.**

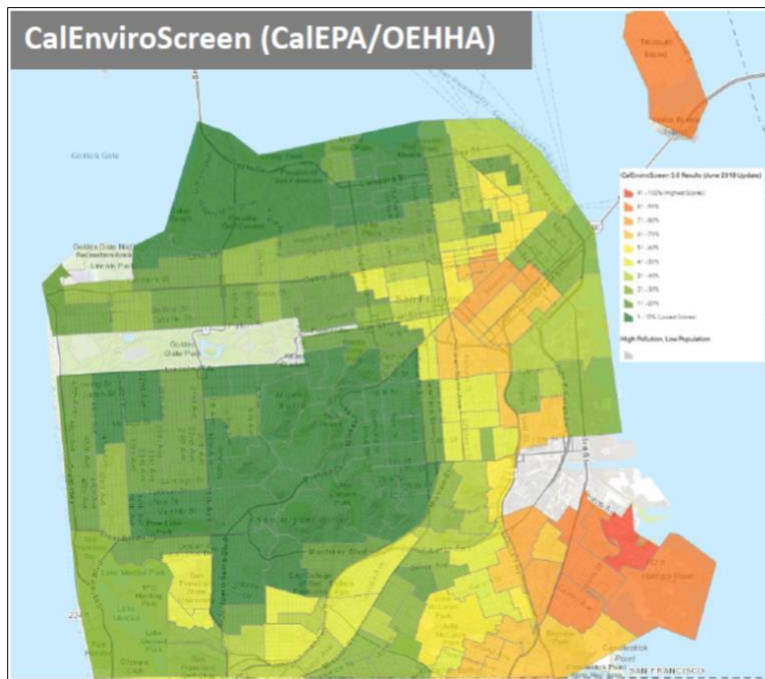
Under “6. Design Public Open Spaces to Encourage Social Activity, Play, And Rest”

- a) **Design spaces for specific and flexible uses. Programming and design should be considered in the context of neighborhood uses;**
- b) **Include spaces for programmed events and performance where appropriate;**
- c) **Use planters, ledges, and low walls to provide places for people to view, socialize, and rest;**

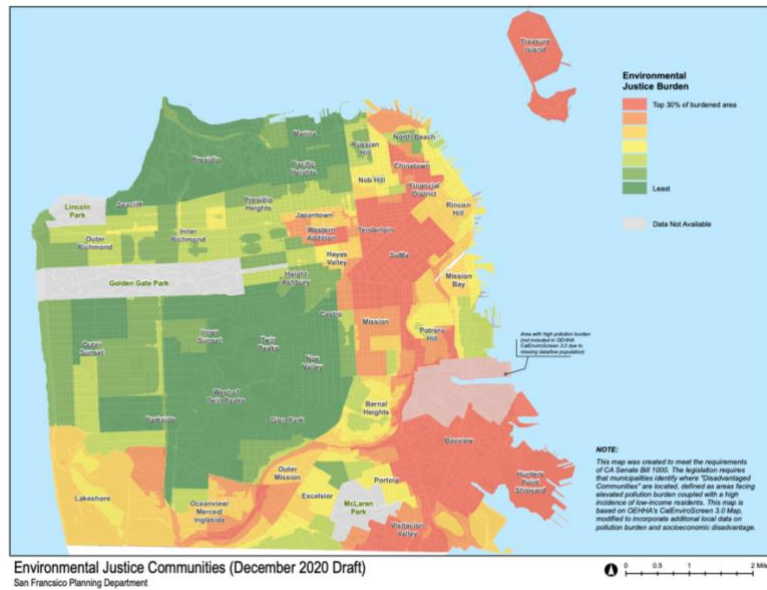
- d) Provide individual and group recreational amenities to encourage physical activity, including courts or game boards. Consult with neighbors for area-specific options; and
- e) Provide play areas for a variety of ages and groups. Design landscape with opportunities for immersive experiences of nature and varied, challenging, and stimulating play elements.

**Strategy 1 - Environmental Justice and General Plan Policies:** The San Francisco Planning Commission's *Environmental Justice and General Plan Policies* (n.d.) is an extension of the California Senate Bill 1000, which mandates the identifying of key goals and priorities that cities and counties must emphasize in order to address the multilayered negative outcomes of environmental racism. The City of San Francisco has undertaken the development of policies related to the following facets of environmental racism (see Figures 21 and 22):

- clean and healthy environments (pollution reduction)
- healthy food access
- physical activity
- safe, healthy and affordable housing
- equitable and green jobs
- healthy public facilities
- climate resilience and justice
- empowered neighborhoods (civic engagement and prioritizing environmental justice communities)



**Figure 21: Draft of Environmental Justice Communities Map**  
(San Francisco Planning Commission, n.d.)



**Figure 22: Draft of Environmental Justice Communities Map that demonstrate higher pollution levels in lower income San Francisco neighbourhoods.**  
(San Francisco Planning Commission, n.d.)

**Strategy 2 - Environmental Justice Working Group:** Since the establishment of an Environmental Justice Working Group under the San Francisco Planning Commission, a meeting was held on March 31, 2021, to answer questions and answers about the vision and mission of the Environmental Justice and General Plan Policies. A draft of the project timeline schedules the policy implementation phase for Fall 2021 (see Figure 23).

Projected Date	Deliverable
Winter 2021 - Spring 2021	EJ Communities Map & Story Map Community Engagement: Balboa High School Community Engagement: Open House Community Engagement: Listening Sessions & Surveys
Spring 2021 - Summer 2021	EJ Framework & Policies Community Engagement: EJ Working Group Sessions
Fall 2021	Policy Adoption

**Figure 23: San Francisco Environmental Justice Working Group Timeline**  
(San Francisco Planning Commission, 2021)

**Strategy 3 - Safety and Resilience Element Update:** The Community Safety Element within the City of San Francisco's General Plan (2012) is currently undergoing updates to include policies that address the pervasive issues presented by the climate crisis and

to ensure local resilience that safeguards the assets and people of San Francisco, particularly communities of color who face exceptional vulnerability to environmental hazards and natural disasters. In addition, the new and retitled “Safety and Resilience Element Update” seeks to compliment the directions of California Senate Bill 1000 in achieving environmental justice while aligning with updates to the Climate Action Plan of San Francisco. The objective of incorporating these updates is to integrate more comprehensive understandings of equitable community safety and climate resilience into existing disaster adaptation policies. It is the Planning Commission’s hope that the design of robust strategies will yield co-benefits of racial and social equity, environmental justice, and resilience to multiple hazards that also minimizes greenhouse gas emissions (City of San Francisco Planning Commission, Safety and Resilience Element, n.d.).

**Strategy 4 - Green Connections:** In 2014, The City of San Francisco initiated *Green Connections*, a project that aims to improve accessibility issues to parks, open spaces, and the waterfront through the creation of “green connectors” - which are city streets that have been designated as important thoroughfares for various forms of transportation and must be continuously improved with renovations to strengthen experiences for cyclists, pedestrians, and other users of active transportation over the course of 20 years. The initiative is created with the principle of designing “healthy, sustainable and livable” features such as pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, street trees, and community stewardship.



**Figure 24: San Francisco’s local initiatives to create unique places and foster stewardship**  
(San Francisco Planning Commission, 2018, p. 61)





**Figure 24: San Francisco's planting initiative in public space, otherwise unused**  
(San Francisco Planning Commission, 2018, p. 69)

## 5. Greenspace and Race

As mentioned previously, I have been compelled to explore this topic in response to the compounded suffering and fatigue of racialized groups during 2020 and beyond. By this, I am referring to the way in which Black and racialized groups have dually been disproportionately exposed to the COVID-19 pandemic and have remained without access or support to the same quality of healthcare treatment as their white and upper-class counterparts despite their increased presence in frontline (e.g., nurses, care-aids, and other essential workers) because of income and social class disparities. As well, I refer to the shared sense of grief that has been experienced (and, at times, forced upon) the Black community as a result of the overwhelmingly broadcasted demonstration of a deliberate act of police brutality against a Black man that occurred in a bike lane - a foundational prototype of public infrastructure. This tragedy represented a fresh pinnacle of racism and dehumanization that exacerbated the known conditions endured by black and brown bodies amidst past decades of structural brutality. The execution of George Floyd also openly confirmed to our increasingly connected world what our communities have already known to be true: the envisioned integrity of law enforcement to protect and regulate the safety of residents in public space is only relevant when it concerns our white counterparts; worse, as the system is founded in colonial dogma, those who have been entrusted to enforce these laws have also been empowered to use their judgement on when to evoke the very violence they are sworn to purge.

The vulnerable groups who have experienced the disadvantages of COVID-19 protocols with consideration to social access to public space and health-related conditions (be it, contraction of the disease itself or obstructed access to government-issued resources and mechanisms to assist with the coping process) are the same vulnerable groups who have experienced the historical disadvantages of these routine systemic gaps. These gaps are orchestrated at the hands of the decision-makers who

inadvertently reinforce them through standard protocols and others who benefit from these longstanding exploitative paradigms (Dalla Lana School of Public Health, 2020; Abboud, 2020). In the supposed “discrete” spheres of city planning, public health and safety regulations, and open space modifications and interventions, the interconnected nature of the previous oversights and shortcomings that combined to increasingly disadvantage racialized, people of color and vulnerable groups came to a very publicized and collective pinnacle on May 22, 2020. As I have mentioned, George Floyd was publicly executed in a local high-traffic bike lane in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the hands of a known police officer (who will not be named in this research for the purpose of intercepting and disempowering his legacy). During this time, and in the weeks and months that followed this distinctive (yet systematic) tragedy, many Black political leaders, youths, activists and revolutionaries, personalities and urbanists publically reported experiencing a range of emotions including shock, grief, rage, decompression, outrage, and desperation for peace - a trend which was unanimously shared by the Black community. At this time, Black folks galvanized, mobilized, and took necessary action to cope with yet another act of murder against an innocent Black man. In doing so, an impenetrable and resolute spotlight was shone on the fatal dangers of many systemic realities that so commonly and intricately endanger the safety of racialized bodies - one of which is conceptualized as “colorblind” politics and urbanism (Saito, 2015; Mele, 2012).

In response to this pinnacle, several members of the Black community embarked on a collective mission to prioritize the advancement of “healing” programs across cities and communities or to cultivate new ones in their own communities by way of designing healing sites out of existing local public spaces. For instance, *Safe Black Space*, a Sacramento-based not-for-profit organization, and its renowned “Community Healing Circles” were founded in April 2018 with the goal of creating a site of respite for community members after the murder of an unarmed 22-year-old, Stephon Clark by local police. *Safe Black Space* (2021) frames the Community Healing Circles Program as a “chance for Black people to deal with the rage, shock, fear, and sadness that so many of us were (and are) feeling.” Further, they emphasize the importance of this type of programming because “the absence of trauma-informed, culturally competent mental health care in Black communities means we are not being properly served... *Safe Black Space* provides culturally specific strategies and resources to help Black people heal from historical and current wounds, both individually and collectively.” Here, *Safe Black Space* and many other grassroots-led and community-oriented organizations play a fundamental role to communities who have been identified by predominantly white cities as so-called ‘priority groups’ as these interventions model a radical, transformative and visibly effective type of programming that successfully serves the needs and improves the conditions of the community. *Safe Black Space* identifies pertinent issues and strategies that are deliberated by and manifest in very lives and lived experiences of the founders and facilitators and, as such, the design process is structured from within and slowly works its way outward. The lesser known needs of people of African descent to access communal healing practices are fulfilled by this organization without the financial barriers and racial bias that commonly present themselves in city-led or public health settings; for instance, programs include small group conversations that are facilitated by trained volunteers and feature cultural coping strategies that range from African-centred rituals and drumming exercises, as well as mindfulness, meditation and other self-care practices. Additionally, plans are underway to initiate the *Safe Black Greenspace: Grandma’s Backyard* project which is described as a living memorial to Stephon Clark and a designated safe urban greenspace tailor built for artists, activists, religious leaders and followers to find peace. The space will be designed as a site for the broader

community to utilize in their efforts to cope with and heal from race-related trauma, in addition to finding refuge and community in a designated anti-violent greenspace. It is envisioned to feature a children's play area, outdoor mediation space, and a respite garden and water fountain.

*Safe Black Space* is just one example of many responsive, functional, and culturally informed organizations that are both committed to and knowledgeable in improving community conditions as they draw from organizers' lived experience and their shared understandings of healthcare adversities. The presence of these healing projects and programs acknowledges the unprecedented stress that has been burdened or worse, absolved by racialized bodies in the public realm throughout history in order to survive and successfully traverse across an abundance of public spaces haunted by white supremacist ideologies: our colonist-titled parks, the neighbourhood-watch residential streets we frequent on our walks, and, as outlined by one of my participants in this research, the evolution of our own self-policing. This practice of self-policing functions as a by-product of our bodies' increased surveillance based on biased public perception and how we are received when we enter group settings that are predominantly white or inversely, predominantly Black.

Healing programs such as those offered by *Safe Black Space* prioritize measures that protect and support the mental, spiritual, and physical health of Black people in our ongoing battle for justice, and therefore demonstrate a powerful act of resistance to colonial paradigms and frameworks that continue to oppress us. Demonstrated in the attempts of George Floyd and many other black and brown residents to exercise their rightful freedom in accessing and utilizing public space resources while walking, jogging, driving, commuting, or shopping, it is clear that black and brown bodies lack access to foundational liberties granted to white people.

Topics of accessible greenspace have become an even bigger priority in the COVID-19 era provided the lack of open space to accommodate physical distancing measures and the discriminatory policing of open and public spaces (Jouvenal and Brice-Saddler, 2020). As a result, there have been exacerbated trends of green inequity that have historically been informed by income, education, and race. According to Morrison (2017), the adverse opinions about community greening in low-income neighbourhoods, despite their intentions to improve conditions for folks, is paradoxically grounded in a strong commitment to social justice. This emphasizes the subtle dangers of eco-gentrification or "green gentrification": issues related to environmental justice arise when socioeconomic conditions and community demographic begin to change over time. As a result, it is contended that when conducting neighborhood greening programs, facilitators must be look at the potential of increasing greenspace in still-active industrial areas instead of continuing the standard practice of real estate speculation in these communities and increasing the likelihood of community displacement.

According to an article released by the Canadian Public Health Association in December 2018, "Canada remains a nation where a person's colour, religion, culture or ethnic [origin] are determinants of health that result in inequities in social inclusion, economic outcomes, personal health, and access to and quality of health and social services. These effects are especially evident for racialized and Indigenous [P]eoples as well as those at the lower end of the social gradient and those who are incarcerated (populations that are also disproportionately composed of racialized and Indigenous people)". As well, research states that systemic racism impacts patient health among Indigenous Peoples by way of colonial policies, food inequalities, poor living conditions, and negligent health care (Leyland et al., 2016). In an online article that was published through Park People, the research of Nadha Hassen (2020), a PhD

candidate and Vanier Scholar at York University, explores the relationship between the extent to which we can obtain the benefits in a given park and the capacity of our own subjective experiences and perceptions to do so (which are framed by our respective identities and intersections). Deliberations posed by Hassen include the privilege (or lack thereof) of feeling included or excluded, safe or unsafe, and to have not only one's ideas, but one's needs, instinctively considered in the process of planning these public spaces (or, inversely to get lost between the gaps that need addressing). Hassen (2021) emphasizes that approximately 10 percent of population health outcomes are derived from one's physical environment such as improvements made to air quality and ventilation or space for activities. By contrast, nearly 50 percent of population health is determined by social and economic factors, where access to park space becomes a fundamental setting for realizing factors such as social cohesion, social integration for newcomers through cultural activities and group sports, and economic opportunities for park users. Rather than focus on physical access and proximity to park space as the only obstacle, Hassen (2021) refrains from oversimplifying the barriers to entry for marginalized groups by underscoring the lesser-known problems of park layout, inadequate presence or maintenance of facilities and the limited square footage of park space available in urban cities such as Toronto that would otherwise create feasible opportunities for these types of events and outcomes to take place.

Hassen draws from one case of a new basketball court that quickly fell to disarray soon after it was built - which, according to a 2015 article by *The Globe and Mail* (Bascaramurty, 2015), involved a six-year long quest by local youth who faced obstacles of lack of funds and red tape. What stands out in this anecdote is the pre-existing racial bias that was extended to the sport itself and its role in the Black community in a preliminary public meeting where residents listed concerns about the potential presence of this facility, which included drugs, violence, and disrespect of older people. Bascaramurty (2015) makes clear that it is not coincidental that these concerns were listed prior to the erection of the amenity - which permitted space for a pivotal cultural and socializing sport that is shared within Black culture - and soon after it was built, maintenance and support for the operation of the basketball court were routinely neglected. There is even a term associated with this sequence of events: "veiled racism". In another example by Hassen (2021), the presence of a sports field becomes useful for more than just generic and Western forms of physical activity, particularly where cultural sports such as cricket are concerned (which is so deeply tied to the ethnic identity of the predominantly South Asian (i.e., Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladesh, Nepal) and Afro-Caribbean players it draws). In these circles, playing cricket is believed to be a critical integration component for newcomers who often hear about job opportunities from other players while engaging in this activity that is symbolic of their cultural preservation during the settlement process.

In these instances, the benefits delivered through park space are considered through a very different lens. Different components of park space are deemed valuable in accordance with one's intersectional identity such as race and culture, where not all parks are perceived to be:

1. Built **equally**: Not all parks are the same and therefore, proximity to greenspace or park space alone will not yield the same results, nor
2. Built **equitably**: Only certain groups' needs and desires were considered during the mass construction of parks across North America and continue to be considered in the types of programming that is yielded. What's more, the reservations and concerns of these same

“ideal” users are often prioritized in lieu of and in obstruction of the desires of marginalized groups as it pertains to improvements to park/public space use, enforcement, and regulation.

When New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow (2020) reported and reflected on his experience opening an email that revealed the passing of one of his long-time friends, a rising chef in his 30s, in large part because of unresolved chronic illnesses (but triggered by his recent contraction of the COVID-19 virus), he decided to write a piece about the interconnectedness of race and health. Blow (2020) makes connections between this third death of a friend at the hands of COVID and the unprecedented rate and conditions under which Black men are made vulnerable to illnesses such as diabetes, whereby they are particularly at a heightened risk when situated in emerging hotspots like Detroit and New Orleans. He refers to the manner in which pre-existing health conditions leave one group (or specific groups) particularly vulnerable as the “racial time bomb” of the COVID era ticks on, and Blow draws from the findings of an article published by Beil (2020) in a science-based digital magazine *Undark*. Beil’s work exposes colloquial and anecdotal knowledge that has been circulated and corroborated by the Black community for decades: we are disproportionately exposed to multifaceted conditions - both those which are palpable and social-constructed - that work together to deeply endanger our safety and our health. Further, this is a trend that is increasingly reinforced as nuanced issues emerge while systemic issues remain in force, operating and unaddressed.

Interestingly, to many members of the Black community, it seemed the concept of “equitable urbanism” became of public interest overnight in the weeks following the excessively public and pervasive execution of George Floyd. In a large part because of our society’s connectedness, the lack of privacy in the age of technology, as well as the fears of ‘cancel culture’, it became an expectation and priority to demonstrate some sort of recognition and abdication of racist practices in many corporate and public settings. As residents and community groups across North America lobbied for the reform and disassembly of the current policing structure and practice, municipalities deliberated whether they could work to integrate and realize theorized agendas of equitable urbanism across the predominantly exclusionary procedures that operated in their streets. As black and brown employees, residents, and executives in various settings began to publically align with the collective plight of the Black community, it seems as though corporations felt pressured to enforce, reconfigure, and improve their diversity, equity and inclusion training, protocols, and practices.

As I have mentioned, the emphasis of my research is the interconnected impacts of spatial disparity and the spatial segregation of greenspace to the health outcomes of residents. When considering the resulting usage patterns that present discrepancies according to race and class in particular, significant gaps exist between the imagined experiences and uses occurring in “space” that are explored and glamorized in literature, research, and policies (which were designed with a white, able-bodied user in mind (Kafer, 2013)), and the actual manners in which space operates to either positively or negatively reinforce systemic conditions when one’s body enters into it (differences that can directly threaten or advance one’s health). At the time of entry, salient social characteristics of positionality and intersections come to the forefront; it must be noted that for black and brown bodies, the conditions we face cannot simply become remedied through the imagined restorative impacts of greenspace if we are subject to scrutiny, stigma, fearmongering, and criminalization by way of our bodies’ entry into space.



For instance, in the 2016 police shooting of San Francisco local, Alex Nieto, the standard practices of racial profiling, resident and community policing and the rendering of his greenspace practices as “loitering” were the cause of his murder, chiefly due to his physical appearance and stature (Solnit, 2016). This differential and oppressive treatment of a racialized body in greenspace is not an isolated incident - it is equally evident in the 1989 case of the “Central Park Five”, a group of black and brown teenage boys who were arrested prematurely in a biased ‘witch hunt’ of affiliations with the rape and assault of a white female jogger. These boys were detained after experiencing coercion, extortion, and law enforcement’s abuse of power in obtaining untrue confessions from several of them by preying on their lack of education, social capital, and the structural gaps of legislative protection imposed on young black boys (Harris, 2019). This bias is also evident in the case of Christian Cooper, an avid birdwatcher, and a Black man, who was policed, antagonized, and threatened by a white female dog owner named Amy Cooper (no relation) when the man asked her to abide by the known park regulations and restrictions of leashing her dog on July 4, 2020 (Ransom, 2020). In the last case, it is important to understand that Amy Cooper knowingly leveraged her privilege when she not only refused to follow the park regulations - demonstrating her understanding that various rules do not necessarily apply to her - but also when she threatened to call the police on Cooper. In doing so, Cooper demonstrated her ability to wield the power of extortion, aware of the fear that this threat would evoke in Cooper by exploiting a systemic gap that subjects black and brown bodies to a higher risk of violence at the hands of police (rather than the protection that is reserved for our white counterparts).

### **Incorporating Lived Experiences to Inform Practice**

The impetus of my research is to contribute to the design of a literary space that critically deliberates and acknowledges the multidimensional and lingering by-products of colonialism. In particular, I aim to emphasize the importance of residents’ voices and experiences to substantiate the cyclical systemic and insidious obstructions to health and safety for black and brown bodies in urban settings. I am most interested in the gaps that exist in the conceptualization and practice of city planning, urban and neighbourhood design and programming, and their intersections with public health policies.

For the purpose of demonstrating the power of storytelling and the manners in which intimate personal accounts with experiences of public space programming and planning gaps can inform stronger and comprehensive forms of policy, I conducted interviews with three participants who offered powerful insight and expertise as “everyday urbanists”. Two of these participants are established members of City of Toronto staff, working in respective departments of Parks and Recreation and Transportation Planning. I was introduced to both of these exceptionally critical individuals through liaising with the Manager of Community Planning at the *Jane/Finch Centre* and having her connect me with interested professionals of colour. The third interview is with a participant who is an active community member of St. James Town and has been living in Toronto for just over 5 years. In her account, she shares early memories and intimate rituals of gardening with her mom in India and intends to pass this practice down to her young son as he grows older. I was kindly introduced to her through facilitators and programmers at the St. James Town Community Corner, who indicated interest in my research after receiving a cold email from me describing my work.

Each of my conversations with participants lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours and was held over Zoom. A summary explaining my research complete with a tentative agenda and a list of open-ended

questions was provided to each participant in advance of our meeting(s) and the interview was intentionally designed to function as an 'open space' whereby informal storytelling and narrating of past experiences were desired and encouraged. While transcriptions of these interviews in their entirety could not be provided due to their length, I have included some of the key discussion points below (in participants' own words).

***Vitumbiko Mhango*** (April 14, 2021) is a Project Manager in Parks Development at the City of Toronto. She was drawn to parks planning and her approach to creating change within the practice. Particularly, Mhango is drawn to:

"... Working on, working in spaces where especially with parks, the main thing for me is that I was contributing to creating a community benefit. It didn't matter if you're black or white, if you're rich or poor. This is a story I was telling myself. Obviously, there are nuances to that. But you could go to a park, and you could go to a greenspace and use it and enjoy those spaces. And that was really important to me because, not everyone can afford to have a big backyard. I mean, even me right now, I live in an apartment building, and I don't have a backyard."

When asked about what she has noticed changing in city planning practice due in light of the pandemic, Mhango stated:

"Even the access that people have to things happening in the community and the ability to contribute if this is to it, has changed [due to COVID-19]. I think for the better in this sense [although] I don't know how they'll proceed with public engagement when the world kind of opens[....]"

When asked to reflect on the importance of representation in greenspace and parks planning, Mhango stated:

"Obviously, we kind of come from a broader representation of different ideas, of different voices, that it's not just the same voices who are those who can attend and who do attend its considerations. That could be mine. You could be nuanced but are still there and now [could] be represented publicly."

On sharing early memories, exposure and perception of city planning and parks planning, Mhango shared:

"Interestingly enough, parks and greenspaces have become relatively important to me later in life rather than earlier. When I was younger, I didn't necessarily have the free time, if you will, to go out and enjoy free spaces. With my parents working, I had to take care of my siblings a lot of the time and I just didn't have time for fun. And there's obvious things to do, whether it was thinking of my siblings or studying and keeping

up with my own schoolwork and stuff. I'm only now in adult life. I have the opportunities to enjoy greenspaces whether that's kind of going outside and going on hikes or just even sitting in parks."

When asked about the cultural components and activities of basketball in which other significant skills become honed, Mhango added:

"Right now, if I'm in Midtown, you can go [...] and do something simple as play basketball, you know [...] [T]hings and skills that you learn in those settings other than playing basketball [...] teamwork, communication, how to get along with other people. But if you don't have always the spaces for people to organically develop those skills, then, you know, other activities have to come about."

When our conversation moved to whether she believes that changes that have been made in response to the pandemic will be sustainable, Mhango responded:

"I think that the pandemic has changed people's perspectives of parks and open spaces, and that will continue moving forward. I know even when I'm reflecting on my personal experiences, my regular activities were not available to me, and it actually made me realize that my activities revolved around food and eating in restaurants and that I needed to find other activities. I think that other people would resonate with the fact that these other activities that they found are good activities and maybe things that they want to continue doing and participating in. I know that the past year, especially, I've explored more of the cities and more of the cities or even the broader GTA and the open spaces that are available to them, like I've lived here for the majority of my life, but I haven't taken the time to go and see it. It was kind of just like, 'OK, it's there. If I really want to go, I could go.' But there been no need like this. No, 'it's a priority for me now.'"

And finally, when asked whether she is of the belief that the restorative features of greenspace can offer critical coping resources for black and brown folks who are routinely triggered by discriminatory policy and behavior, Mhango elaborated:

"I think that public and greenspaces have been almost vital when it comes to dealing with these traumatic events in two ways: decompressing, getting your mind off of it, just being in those spaces is helpful. But also, they have served as a place where people congregate and that's where they go to, you know, whether they're protesting, whether they're doing a candlelight vigil or whether they're just going to talk about their feelings. These open spaces are what have been used to facilitate those type of activities. And I mean, even the protests of people... these [happen in] public streets, right? And I think that they've definitely served the important role in providing a space

for people to congregate... We have seen a wide variety of protests, especially the last year of people protesting, and we'll leave it at that..."

**Samuel Baptiste** (April 15, 2021) has been a Senior Transportation Planner at the City of Toronto for over 10 years. Born and raised in Toronto, his parents migrated from Trinidad in the mid-1970s. Our conversation started with Baptiste sharing personal memories about who shaped his early understandings of greenspace:

"I'm drawn back to experiences with my uncle and other family relatives going to parks. I can't even tell you what parks, but probably the Exhibition and creating makeshift cricket fields... My uncle and his friends would create makeshift cricket fields and garbage cans would be wicket stands in parks playing with 'cousins' and/or barbecues... you know, pots of food being brought to parks and things of that nature..."

Baptiste shared a personal definition of greenspace:

"My personal definition of greenspace would be... broad, I mean, at its sort of lowest level or what we know to be sort of neighborhood parks that have fields, playgrounds, swings, that sort of stuff - "programing" [...] And then you sort of think of it along a spectrum of more natural areas. If I think about it in a sort of a GTA context, ravines, valleys lands... And some of the bigger parks, forested areas, they all would exist sort of on that spectrum of greenspace. The tenure of that space is up for discussion because depending on where you are, that space might be private or that space might be public..."

Baptiste also spoke on whether there is a need for more specific interventions of public space planning to address systemic barriers to enjoying greenspace among racialized groups:

"I think the broader sort of planning community is starting to realize that people are adaptable and [...] particularly people of color have always been adaptable. What we like, if there's space that is there that is 'given to us', we will use it, we will modify it to make it work for us. So then there's always this disconnect where planners want to come in and be like, 'Wow, what do we need to do? What's wrong?'"

"So why aren't [planners] more responsive to the needs of communities that they serve? [...] In Scarborough, there's a park in a hydro corridor and the fact that it's in a hydro corridor, there's nothing sort of wrong with that. It actually kind of works. There's six or seven cricket pitches there - and it's like one of the few places where people can go to actually play cricket..."

When asked to reflect on his most vivid memories of being in public space and why the experience was so memorable, Baptiste spoke of one memory at the annual Caribana Festival:

“Going there and partaking in food and just running around, engaging in foolishness that you don’t always get to get engaged [in], and so those are the good memories. And if I sort of extrapolate that [...] it was 2019, and the lasting image for me is - because I got there late and I didn't really care for the parade - at the end of the parade route, you just look out towards the park and there's just a sea of Blackness! In their various little pockets set up together, and there are coolers and there's all matters of things just going on. And it was just beautiful...”

Baptiste also shared greenspace rituals that he participates in:

“I enjoy walking by at certain points of the day where there are a lot of Black youth playing basketball because it's just a good thing to see. So, there are more activities adjacent to activities, if you're not participating in them, just being adjacent to them is sometimes just enough...”

But when asked what should be improved in greenspaces, Baptiste candidly answered:

“This for me is simple. The simple answer is the people making decisions in the City of Toronto do not reflect the population of the city of Toronto. The City of Toronto has a motto that is ‘diversity is our strength’ and that motto leaves a lot to be desired when you look at the actions of the City at large, City council and various divisions, including the division that I work in.”

**Anuradha (Anu) Yadav** (March 19, 2021) is an active and informative community member who formally studied botany and is passionate about greenspace. She and her 5-year-old son live in the neighbourhood of St. James Town with her husband.

Yadav shares her experiences with institutional racism while she travels across public space:

“I have a five-year-old son. So, one day, three years ago, when he was about two years [old], we went to visit a friend in Scarborough. While returning, on a weekend, my son insisted to play on a swing or slide. So, we decided to go to a small park - so we park our car, my husband remained in the car, and I went with my son. So, there were three or four kids, and I don't know whether the lady was their mother or guardian but they're playing with her. And as soon as we reach there, they were looking at us and they were like laughing, looking at us. Then I ignored because I don't want to let my son know about this, why are they laughing at us. But I also remember... when my son approached them for playing, they just said ‘Wait, it's not for you, it's for us. Why are you playing here?’ Then they moved away and my son started playing with the slide.



Then one girl from those children, she pushed my son so hard that he got hurt on the elbow and he started crying... I asked that girl to say sorry to him but she replied "I don't want to say sorry" - she just look at me... and that lady with her says "Let's go home. We don't want to play here" and they left. And from that moment, I felt very bad. I never felt this type of situation in India. And I never thought too that it will happen to me one day."

Yadav also shared another instance of institutional racism, this time in the TTC subway:

"Two years back, I went to somewhere with my kid to subway. And while returning, I boarded on Ossington Station at that time in front of my seat, there was one man and he was continuously staring at us and mumbling something. But there was also one lady, Indian lady. I met her in the train I was talking to her. As soon as I stood up for [...] I have to get down at Sheppard station, the man came to me and as soon as the train stopped and the doors open, he kicked my foot very hard. I was holding my kid's hand and I just hold it tightly. But I was very scared that he might hurt my kid. So, I went out from the train. And as soon as I go upstairs and report to the TTC persons, they said: 'Sorry, mam, but we don't have cameras there so we can't find that man and we can't do anything.' [...] Two years has been passed, but I still hesitate to go alone to the trains... It makes me anxious. That man was not looking like a whimsical person, you know, like a normal person. And [he says] 'All you Indians took our jobs', and he was continuously speaking something. Now if I need to get around, I walk if it's nearby."

On whether Canada - but more specifically, Toronto - felt welcoming to her in light of these horrible experiences in public space, Yadav responded:

"Still when we started comparing back home and Canada, everybody, obviously, if I talk with five or six people, all of them were comfortable back home. Of course, I just visited my hometown recently... but that feeling is very different, though. I'm living here since last five years, that feeling of confidence is really different. And I never feel that relaxed, relaxing is impossible while something is going on in my subconscious mind that 'We have to be careful if something will happen whenever we don't know what will happen next.'"

Finally, when asked about sharing personal memories about who shaped her early understandings of greenspace, Yadav stated:

"My mom [shaped my understanding and interest in greenspace]. She loves gardening, and so I was helping her. At home [in India] we have a huge front yard and backyard. So, me and my mom used to plant a lot of veggies and flowers the roses and a lot of trees or plants, little plants."

The above accounts by participants who identify as racialized people necessitate a reimagining the conceptualizing of “space” and “place” that is more inclusive of the differential experiences that are at play in these public environments. I argue in this research that these are increasingly important considerations in equitable neighbourhood planning schemes - particularly whereby reconciliatory methods and practices are intended to be achieved in predominantly black and brown neighbourhoods. These sorts of neighbourhoods require intentional strategies and continuous attention as they are most often susceptible to increased regulatory bias, poorer maintenance, heightened criminalization, and the negating of the pivotal expertise and innovation that is presented in their residents’ lived experience, in “everyday urbanism”. This term is an approach to urbanism that finds its meanings in everyday life’ and a growing approach that undermines the classist and privatized nature of urban planning knowledge, language and decision-making. Its approach is such that if one lives in an urban environment, it is believed that one has the complete capacity to make observations about the world around you and therefore, one should be able to successfully contribute with one’s informal knowledge (Baird and Crawford, 2008).

## 6. Decolonizing Greenspace

Previous research has discussed the concept of “place” and “space” in the following manners:

- Place is the meeting point of location, culture, and social relations (Relph, 1976);
- Places of the built environment shape a medium through which culture becomes real in the material world (Massey, 1994);
- The design of a place directly affects the health, well-being, and social, economic, and environmental conditions of inhabitants (Carmona, 2019);
- “Public space weaves the components of public life – people, place, and culture – together. A robust public life is the essence of a great city. It is what a collective group of people create when they flourish outside of their home and workplace” (City of Toronto, 2018, p. 7)

In my efforts to reimagine the notions of “space”, I hope to contribute to the cultivation and realizing of a decolonized set of practices and approaches. This means that these aforementioned interpretations of “place”, their efficacy and their relevance to the conditions and sociopolitical understandings of the present day must be critically examined to, indeed, account for the historical conditions at the time in which they were proposed, as well as the gaps that exist within them. In critically considering them, we must also anticipate and protect the perceptions of marginalized groups whose needs were not previously accounted for during the time these interpretations were made. In aspiring to decolonize the concept of “space”, I draw from the research of Nejad et al. (2020) who discuss the design and programming practices of settler cities which continue to draw from and carry out the ideals of colonial ideals. Nejad et al. (2020) contend that Indigenous placemaking methodologies present untapped opportunities for the development of positive symbolic capital and its associations with Indigenous peoples, the liberation of urban residents to embrace and authentically demonstrate their cultural

representation and denounce the longstanding practice of tokenism in diversity schemes, and the advancement of policies and programs that centre Indigenous reconciliation.

### **Black and Indigenous Reconciliation**

Nejad et al. (2020) recall the 2019 claim made by the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) in their *Policy on Planning Practice and Reconciliation* publication (2019) which centres the imagined integration of reconciliation into planning practice through the building of relationships between planners and Indigenous peoples that is founded on mutual respect, trust, and dialogue. In their work, it is noted that deliberations and demonstrations of Indigenous identity or Indigeneity in urban settings and cultural visibility directly undermine the very operations of power and privilege in our Western world. Nejad et al. insist that the placemaking, while perceived as an important facet of urban design, must be reconfigured and reimagined in order to create a framework that is focused on truth and reconciliation and socio-spatial justice. Drawing from Jojola (2013) and Stewart (2015), Nejad et al. (2020, p. 434) affirm: “[t]he concept of Indigenous placemaking is different from conventional placemaking as it must be driven by the unmediated participation of Indigenous peoples in urban design processes according to their own knowledge, approaches, and methods.”. Nejad et al. (2020, p. 436) go on to claim that “[t]he sense of place for Indigenous communities may be created through relationships to the land, and it is not necessarily well understood using the typical processes of Western planning and architecture. In Indigenous perspectives, land, in fact, is itself the ‘place’. Indigenous ways of connection to the land often differ from the Eurocentric conceptualizations of land ownership and territorial appropriation.”

While the research of Nejad et al. (2020) is aptly and importantly fixated on ameliorating efforts towards Indigenous reconciliation within the practice, policy and operation of city planning, there is much that can be drawn and applied from the gaps the authors pose when planning for broader racial equity schemes in public spaces. The term reconciliation in our modern political context should and must always maintain a focus of advancing Indigenous emancipation, autonomy, and humanization. Yet, it must be noted that white supremacy, its philosophy and resulting bias and bigotry, have fortified the application of systemic oppression and institutional racism to non-Indigenous racialized groups - which is executed in paralleling ways albeit impacting groups very differently on the basis of our diverging and unique histories, traditions and conditions of migration in North America (or lack thereof in the case of First Peoples). Additionally, the sociopolitical stigmas and tropes that have been connotated with specific racialized and marginalized groups and reinforced through barriers, treatment and circumstances respectively create a shared or empathetic relationship between us. As such, drawing from the concept of Indigenous reconciliation, the term of “racial reconciliation” has been introduced in recent years. A good example of racial reconciliation is demonstrated by *Racial Equity Tools*, a website initiated for the purpose of pushing forward the confrontation of the systemic denial of racialized folks’ humanity. This website is operated through the collaborative partnership of MP Associates (a national partnership-based consulting practice designed to realize and build capacity for racial justice within communities), the Centre for Assessment and Policy Development (a not-for-profit organization that has worked to push forth social change, strengthen aptitudes, and problems to achieving equity and intersectionality in the efforts towards this transformation), and World Trust Educational Services (a strategy-oriented organization who are committed to strengthening social justice and racial equity agendas through the use of mediums such as

film, dialogue and the arts). These contributors claim that “reconciliation has surged as a critical strategy that is essential to a national reckoning on race” (Racial Equity Tools, 2020).

In an interview on a podcast called the Ezra Klein Show (2020), Bryan Stevenson, a renowned champion of equity and justice for Black people, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, and a clinical professor at the New York University School of Law ponders about “the history of enslavement, of native genocide, of lynching and segregation [of Black folks] not because [he is] interested in punishing America...”, but because he “believe[s] there is something better waiting for us.” What one can take away from this powerful conversation and, further, apply its insight to present-day mediations and programs towards racial justice is that, in the United States, and, I would add, Canada, people do not know their country’s true history – a trend that remains a significant problem. Stevenson contends that, collectively, we do not fully know about the centuries of racial injustice. He poses that society has become comfortable with the theories of equality and justice - going as far as founding its Constitution in these ideals - but yet, could not conceive a course of action that would equally protect the very First Peoples from which settlers stole the land they continue to occupy. Stevenson suggests that a lot of time has been invested into conjuring untrue histories about slavery, emancipation, and the movement of white abolitionism, albeit a vast majority of these men and women with longstanding legacies for the political change were previously determined to evoke the same system of slavery, and paradoxically did not support the agendas of racial equity. The truth about our countries is that we have either consciously or subconsciously lived whole centuries committed to and complicit in consolidating the silence, ignorance and denial of our nations’ histories.

Another problem lies in the contradictory pattern of association (claim) or disassociation (unaccountability) of patriotism, or rather the use of “we” when describing one’s nation that is based on the convenience of honourable (positive) or tragic (negative) behaviors and repercussions. As Stevenson explains, for instance, when the conversation involves an American win at the Olympics, or when a national tragedy or threat such as 9/11 occurs that is imposed by a known outsider, it is likely and with ease that the term of “we” is used without deliberation. Yet, when the topic involves a known and definitive misconduct that is the fault of many and will require decades-long retribution and reconciliation, those same individuals are very quick to pass the blame to others or place blame on circumstances.

Lastly, it is important to make note of these sorts of true histories in order to identify the legacy of white supremacy and how it reinforces the disenfranchisement and oppression of black and brown people. These histories include employment barriers throughout the 1950s across the western and northern states, the refusal to extend mortgage loans or re-socialize and support returning veterans, and, spilling into the 1970s when the “war on drugs” era began, a resulting bias that ensued and was rooted in the aforementioned colonial history and targeting of Black communities, which cast us as an identified threat to a state of civic harmony. Speaking about effective, equitable and transformative models of engagement, Stevenson argues that “it’s local, it’s intimate, it’s familial, it’s communal, it’s statewide, it’s nationwide - every entity, every institution has to commit to the process of truth telling [...] It’s really important that people understand that if you’re genuinely engaged and recovering from human rights abuses, you have to commit to truth-telling first. You can’t just jump into reconciliation. You can’t jump into reparation or restoration until you tell the truth. Until you know the natures of the injuries, you can’t actually speak to the kind of remedies that are going to be necessary.”

As such, the ideals posed in the aforementioned *Policy on Planning Practice and Reconciliation* to plan for the imagined integration of reconciliation into planning practice that are founded in mutual respect, trust, and dialogue, appear invaluable. They appear to exceed beyond the scope of engaging and collaborating Indigenous groups, who have shouldered a very unique and traumatic history of unyielding accounts of displacement, dispossession, and multifaceted genocide. As this research postulates, a correlation exists between the sociocultural disconnect to the romanticized conceptualizing and idolization of greenspace that is prevalent among white mainstream culture and the social, environmental, and political conditions many black and brown communities have been predisposed to and must come to accept and adopt - many of which become intergenerational and informal teachings. To clarify, the purpose of deciphering the objective potential of greenspace - and controlling for the resulting biases that are formed and based on an individual or group's longstanding experiences with privilege or, inversely, discrimination is to deliberate whether calls for "healing" initiated by many black and brown groups can be effectively realized or resolved through the application of modern and existing schemes of greenspace interventions. If not, why is this the case and what might the subjectivity of greenspace mean for city planning procedures?

While there have been various studies that have pointed to the restorative benefits of greenspace, the extent of the results often varies by geographical location (e.g., research on the rates of participation in outdoor activities in Houston, Texas will likely yield far different results than research conducted in The Hague in the Netherlands), as well as population demographics. This presents a peculiar set of differential results, alluding to the claim that subjectivity and perception - including one's psychological and social associations - towards the conceptualizing of greenspace may play a larger role in the causation of receiving imagined restorative benefits than the objective presence of nature itself. For instance, while admitting and examining the substantiated evidence that links greenspace and bluespace to lower cortisol levels among users, Barton and Rogerson (2017, p. 80) state "causality [of these positive health outcomes] is difficult to determine, as self-selection may contribute to the positive relationship between greenspace and better health, because healthier individuals tend to move to or stay in greener neighbourhoods." Barton and Rogerson (2017) suggest several key trends: these healthier individuals are "self-selecting" or, in other words, have a choice where accommodation selection and mobility are concerned; this suggests that these individuals have the privilege of financial security (and potentially affluence). It is also commonly known that greener neighbourhoods conclusively deliver better health outcomes and thus, the presence of this will incentivize more affluent and healthy residents to live in these neighbourhoods. Moreover, there has likely been a mass wave of small-scale migration to these "green" neighbourhoods which may result in a shift of neighbourhood culture, customs and, given the longstanding history that has been mentioned concerning the creation of a "consolidated" bias, harmful perceptions of contrasting groups (i.e., "black and brown, poor, and 'unhealthy' individuals").

If this is the case, then this would support the argument that is prevalent among Black folks - that there is potential oversight in the supposed 'universal' nature of the restorative benefits and outcomes of greenspace. These findings suggest that this 'universal' approach to discussing greenspace benefits has been rooted in and reinforced by the subjective and privileged perspectives of white park and forest users, white hikers, white ecologists, and white urbanists within city planning and design procedures. Further, it can be drawn that this may present a differential or inverse impact on other users with longstanding experiences in oppressive circumstances. One might also speculate that the practice of standardizing

neighbourhood design schemes such as urban greenings through the installation of community gardens, street trees, biophilic architecture (where biophilic design interventions and other models that increase exposure to nature can produce many environmental and anthropological benefits (Beatley and Newman, 2013, p. 3329)), as well as parks, parkettes, green roofs and other landscaped green areas might prove problematic if the aforementioned nuances presented in black and brown neighbourhoods based on various intersectional identities, lived experiences, and residents' subjective perceptions of greenspace and public space reveal a need for different or tailor-built interventions in order to be effective.

### **The Subjectivity Problem**

Provided the historical and institutional racist design of city planning, urban development, and urban greenspace, a problem is presented in the way of integrating inclusive and equitable schemes into century-old ideals. This is particularly challenging when an overwhelming percent of municipal decision makers in multicultural cities (including elected officials, law enforcement, and other politicians) remain white (Marcoux et al., 2016; Berman, 2018; Stephenson, 2020).

A secondary problem ensues with obtaining a universal consensus or a shared conceptualization of public space and facilities such as greenspace - in large part because of the diverse and subjective perceptions that exist in a multicultural city such as Toronto. These perceptions are drawn from personal or lived experiences with privilege or oppression, that are then projected onto and work to inform the treatment that is received when one is physically in these spaces. If a racialized person has early memories that are reinforced by repeated traumatic occurrences of being intimidated by law enforcement, made subject to discriminatory practices such as carding or, worse, random police stops on the highway, as described by Toronto author, journalist and Black-rights advocate, Desmond Cole in article by Toronto Life (2015), it can be gathered that these unforgettable experiences may cumulate as interconnected reflections that inform how we are socialized (or policed) to behave and how we may then self-police in order to steer clear of harm's way. While post-traumatic syndrome is commonly attributed to more intensive traumatic incidence such as trauma accrued during war time, there is a growing branch and recognition of trauma that can be grown over time, entitled "complex post-traumatic syndrome". This syndrome describes symptoms such as the avoidance of situations that remind oneself of the trauma, hyperarousal or being in a continual state of high alert, the belief that the world is a dangerous place, and a loss of trust in the self or in others that prove relevant to this research.

In the case of post-traumatic syndrome, it is believed that the traumatic event can function as an unconscious and unchecked stimulus, which can be brought on by emotional, physical, environmental, or cognitive triggers that evoke a behavioural response that is informed by memories of extreme fear and anxiety and may feel similar to the emotions caused by the incident itself (Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Separate from these personal and intimate occurrences with trauma, we must also consider the unique experience of internalizing intergenerational trauma that may have been cautioned about by one's parents growing up - a situation to which Cole (2015) also alludes.

Because the urban core has been a primary site for city intensification over many decades, recent problems such as minimal park space and greenspace available in these residential spaces have presented themselves. This is important because the urban core has experienced an inverse trend whereby many groups, including white and affluent residents now choose to reside in these historically low-income spaces. While some problems have been addressed through the creation of frameworks such as the City



of Toronto Parkland Strategy, among these problems is the systematic problem whereby black and brown bodies have been routinely distanced from ecological exposure, influence, and its benefits. I argue that this has produced generations within these groups that have informally been educated and socialized their communities about behavioural mechanisms such as coping strategies without the inclusion of greenspace considerations, its uses, and its impacts. In this way, the practice being “written out” of perspectives within urban ecological literature, practice and policy has likely been cyclically reinforced because black and brown groups do not learn to consider greenspace in the same ways that their white counterparts do (in large part due to lack of proximity as a result of historical geographical settlement patterns through discriminatory housing schemes). As an unexpected by-product of this underlying practice, I have found through my efforts to obtain participants to be interviewed for this research paper, that individuals from these groups may feel they do not have enough expertise nor relevance on the topic to contribute to the ongoing discourse about urban ecology. Inadvertently, this trend continues to reinforce “white” voices, perspectives, and thus, uncritical conceptualizations. As such, topics such as greenspace and its mainstream perceptions and benefits not only become increasingly excluded from our cultural and social education, but considerations of racism and oppressive policies become equally excluded from (‘their’ predominantly white) greenspace and city planning discourse and practice.

Research findings for a study in South Philadelphia by Sefcik et al. (2019) revealed that several prevalent themes existed among predominantly Black mothers who comprised most of the participants in focus group interviews, living in low-income and racialized neighbourhoods. Where three of the four neighbourhoods contained mostly Black or African American residents, the fourth neighbourhood was comprised of residents who identified as Asian-descent and White. Each of these neighbourhoods contained several “pocket parks,” but did not have access to many large parks. The perceptions of participants about park space consisted of perceived benefits in nature, barriers to time spent in nature, and desired features of outdoor space. It was found that, while many parents who were residents of these neighbourhoods saw the potential benefits to mental health, curbing child obesity, diabetes and other physical health outcomes, and as a cost-effective activity to entertain kids, identified barriers to time spent in nature included fears of getting robbed, general feelings of unsafety, lack of police presence, people engaging in substance use, drug paraphernalia, prostitution, violence and crime, a general dislike for certain inevitable nuisances that are associated with nature (e.g. bugs, sunburns, fauna), financial hardship obstructing plans to travel to desirable sites, the potential that allergies or asthma symptoms might present themselves, and the lack of seating and/or poor maintenance of park space. Participants acknowledged and expressed their disgruntlement that parks in their neighborhoods were unsafe and poorly maintained, which they added appeared to be indicative of a larger racial and economic biases. These biases concerned the allocation of city resources that seemed to be reserved for other neighbourhoods, where it was stated that parks and greenspaces in predominantly white neighbourhoods were better kept, better regulated and safer. One resident noted a connection between park improvement and increasing gentrification trends, and another participant discussed that residents were often forced to travel to nicer parks that were far from home (if this was a possibility).

In light of important historical trends related to human geography of “urban slums” and “white flight” (or, the historical mass departure of white groups for the suburbs leaving behind neighbourhoods that begin to experience an increasing presence or settlement of minority groups), it must be noted that subjective associations with space and place in consideration of the environmental and social conditions

that an individual may have either chosen out of privilege or were forced to bear due to discriminatory policies, might impact one's politics or outlook on topics such as greenspace. Alternatively, perhaps there is a resulting ambivalence or indifference that is allocated to individuals who do not grow up with natural resources such as greenspace - either through lack of access to private yard space or proximity to suburban or rural ecology. Additionally, there are cultural differences that are reflected in the types of sporting activities that are of interest to diverging groups - differences that may instill paralleling feelings of restoration as the imagined benefits of greenspace, that have been adopted out of necessity as a result of this conditioned geographical distancing from ecology, as Baptiste suggested in his interview.

These subjective perceptions vary in accordance with an unprecedented number of factors and indicators that inform an individual's experience - all of which could never be summarized in full. As such, the purpose of this research is not to predict nor explain these perceptions and their resulting patterns, but rather to emphasize and substantiate that there is no monolithic stance on greenspace or public space that encompasses the general consensus of racialized groups because these subjective experiences - many of which are related to experiences with racism and discrimination - shape so much of our respective outlooks. As an extension of this, the process of anticipating that there is a standardized or routine series of planning and design schemes that can directly enact urban equity or improve conditions across low-income or racialized neighbourhoods is neither realistic nor congruent with reconciliation efforts of uncovering and prioritizing truth before expecting results.

### **The Data Problem**

Less than 72 hours after the death of George Floyd, on May 27, 2020, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, an Indigenous-Black woman, experienced a lethal confrontation with police officers in her home after her mother had called for assistance to have her transported to Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Korchinski-Paquet had previously been diagnosed with epilepsy and had faced mental health challenges so calls to paramedics were not uncommon. Within the short period of time that officers arrived, Korchinski-Paquet's mother and cousin recall that the 29-year-old woman became isolated deep into her apartment unit. Her family recalls Korchinski-Paquet crying out for help until her mother and brother who were barricaded by officers from the scene of the crime, heard silence. Immediately following this, police officers reported that Korchinski-Paquet had fallen from her 24-storey apartment onto the pavement (Nasser, 2020).

Many studies reveal that for groups already facing forms of marginalization such as systemic racism or homelessness, challenges in accessing adequate treatment for their mental health illnesses are abundant. A scoping review undertaken by Fante-Coleman and Jackson-Best (2020) echoes longstanding research findings that Black youth commonly become exposed to mental healthcare through either the criminal justice system or the emergency room. These statistics indicate much higher rates of informal or emergency exposure to healthcare for Black youth than other populations. This means that care is not often provided or perceived as an option unless these groups are interacting with the justice system through police intervention or unless they have shown definitive indicators of critical illness which, would then require emergency treatment (due to the pervasive trope within healthcare settings that Black people have a higher pain tolerance).

Korchinski-Paquet's fatal encounter with police violence and its subsequent concealment parallels this finding and many other anecdotal experiences of police brutality against Black people and Indigenous

Peoples during times of crisis. While this encounter did not take place in public space, her death, unfortunately did, where she was found lying on the pavement in the common area of the building after she had been intimidated off her balcony. The conceptualization of private and public space becomes challenging to decipher and further, entirely futile in positions where the world governs itself under the idea that you do not have a right to privacy as a direct result of the color of your skin; what's more, the world empowers others to conduct violence against vulnerable groups because of the absence of these clear boundaries. This is the case for so many of us who have been routinely disenfranchised, dehumanized and violated on the basis of race. In this "white spatial imaginary" where racialized groups have historically been made to be without the ideal orderly and prosperous private home that equips residents with a myriad of opportunities that surpass a warm shelter, depending on who you are, every space can operate with the same disregard as a public one (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 13).

A report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018) confirms that there is a meaningful intersection between race and mental health that might impact the decisions and extent to which force is exercised by police officers. Where imbalances are rooted in colonially derived bigotry, bias, and tropes regarding both the believed "inherent" exceedingly violent nature of Black men and our collective superhuman ability to withstand pain, respondents of this study indicated acts of discrimination such as unnecessary stops, questioning and searches, excessive force, and unnecessary charges which were forecasted to result in social exclusion and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.

There have been recent municipal and province-wide calls for the mandating of race-based data collection in response to the unprecedented amount of anecdotal evidence and data revealed by non-governmental organizations that points to the overwhelming markers that health disparity and vulnerability during COVID was disproportionately impactful in low-income and racialized neighbourhoods across Canada. The absence of substantiated reports on racism through forms of disaggregated data is believed to mark a key difference in state-led responses and levels of governmental accountability. Given the recent public acknowledgements of the existing cyclical gaps that are perpetuated in the absence of this data by municipalities such as Toronto (Singh et al., 2020; Rodrigues, 2020) and provinces such as British Columbia (because the data simply is not there), it is likely that the tragedies I have spoken to in this research makeup less than 0.1 percent of racial violence executed by way of police enforcement over the last calendar year. Direct results of the patterns of the past, data and records on our history are subjective, and it is well known in our community that these can and will be skewed by decision-makers and actors with privilege or greater social capital if it serves them. As a result, Black Canadians cannot depend on data records to accurately inform themselves of the harm that is being done to their communities by those in power.

Khan et al. (2015) uncover five important findings about racialized people and communities:

1. There is a major gap in health data and research on racialized communities in Canada;
2. Many studies that reference racialized communities often fail to distinguish between immigrants and Canadian-born racialized people, conflating differential evidence;
3. Racialized people are often treated as a monolithic category which, in turn, disregards the presence of diversity and preserves the homogenization of diverse population surveys; and
4. The vulnerability of racialized people in older adult populations is even more invisible in health data.

5. The most promising dataset appears to be the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS).

The data collection regime in the U.S. pointedly reveals more about marginalized groups than Canada because information on racial groups is, in fact, gathered. While on average, the police rates of detention remain low across the United States for their roles in conducting violence against racialized bodies (typically facing suspension or reassignment), at the very least, trends and statistics are made publically accessible, transmittable, and collected across sectors and disciplines (Stinson, n.d.). It must be noted that in Canada, we are tasked with loosely interpreting and contextualizing U.S. race-based and other disaggregated data to inform our own practices due to our government's longstanding inaction and uninvolved stance on this issue. Alternatively, group-based (and more specifically, race-based) statistics have been collected by independent researchers, organizations, and journalists such as CBC's *Deadly Force* (Marcoux, 2018), and an article by The Globe and Mail that unveils the results of a document given to the journal by the RCMP (Freeze, 2019). However, there are much greater challenges and greater inconsistencies presented in doing so as group-based national survey results and datasets are not routinely gathered outside of government census programs. This means that these organizations are tasked with either requesting this data from the government or conducting their own independent surveys in the hopes of obtaining accurate and useful figures (which are challenging as they are equally expensive as they must be expansive). As a result, this form of data collection does not regularly happen.

The historical absence of standardizing the collection of disaggregated data across Canada often leads to a dependence on anecdotal evidence (or informal personal accounts) for accurate representations of harm caused to racialized groups in present circumstances. These public accounts are also known as the "lived experience". And yet, given this known negligence, it must be pondered why we do not empower or substantiate the findings identified through "lived experience" in research? How can we better care for vulnerable groups collectively if our institutions fail to escalate and accredit (rather, trivialize) the closest form of substantive data that we have at our disposal? The tragedies that have occurred to and against black and brown groups as a result of the interconnected gaps I have mentioned as well as the resulting multidimensional challenges epitomize inequitable truths with which racialized people must grapple: our systems are not set up to help our society's most marginalized. Rather, when left unchecked, these systems repeatedly obstruct marginalized groups from achieving true equity and successful interventions of reconciliation.

The current COVID pandemic has shed a light on the importance of care and protection that is both intentional and relative to our demographics, particularly those who are most impacted. Evident in many reports that indicate Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color make up the highest percentages of reported COVID-19 cases in cities that are either predominantly black and brown or multiethnic enclaves, our respective experiences with multidimensional oppression remains an unwaveringly relevant research focus. The presence of this pandemic has increased awareness of the pervasive research limitations that are presented when the state opts out of mandating the collection of disaggregated data that is solely considerate of race - a procedural oversight commonly upheld across Canada. By contrast, the United States produces an overwhelming amount of data on the topic. This supports the efforts of scholars to undoubtedly argue that experiences with systemic racism directly influence the social determinants of health. Additionally, because of its geographical proximity and

cultural similarities, in Canada, this data functions as suitable anecdotal findings for scholars who work to argue the same point.

There is a clear need for holistic data collection that is specific to sociodemographic groups and takes into consideration the intersectional nature of race/ethnicity, gender, age, presence of disability (or otherwise), status of physical and mental health, citizenship, income levels, and more. In failing to account for this data, I argue that our governments cannot effectively confront observable inequities that are bound to our society's systems - inequities that become compounded because of marginalized communities' proximity to poorer conditions. Through this inaction, our governments may inadvertently withhold necessary resources and tools that might otherwise help to ground these subjective experiences into an objective reality that can be widely accepted and work to shift preconceived ideologies of scientific racism and other lingering colonial philosophies. But there is also a need for intra-organizational (internal to institutions such as the police force and the legal system) and inter-organizational (multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral) rectifications that aim to apprehend the entrenched biases that guide these systems and champion the Black person's right to life.

### **The Social Access Problem**

The assorted occurrence of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian acts of racism in 2020 and 2021 alone that have taken place in public spaces have garnered attention through documented evidence of these acts that has been disseminated through the use of social media platforms. That these discriminatory, oppressive, and violent practices of public space regulations have recently become public, chronicled, and verifiable knowledge presents many challenges to standard local government, agencies, and service operations, which are each accountable for contributing certain design mechanisms and regulatory practices that ensure the physical protection of its users of public spaces. Many scholars, researchers, urbanists, and community leaders have illuminated and explored the topic of racial disparities forging accessibility challenges to public greenspace through mediums such as scholarly journals, newspapers, policy reviews, and the formation of grassroots organizing platforms.

For instance, as I have mentioned, after conducting a nationwide assessment on the spatial distribution of parks and greenspace and neighbourhood access in the United States, Wen et al. (2013) found a positive correlation between the distance from parks and the rural characterization of an area. However, it was also demonstrated that there were increasingly higher rates of poverty in major urban centres (in stark contrast to suburban periphery and rural areas, where it was found that there was a negligible presence of Black and Latinx groups). Significantly, Wen et al. (2013) found that non-rural areas with higher rates of poverty and concentrations of Black and Latinx people were, in fact, situated closer to parks. This trend is explained through the deliberate differentiation between concepts of "spatial access" and "social access", where the former does not ensure high park utilization practices, particularly if residents considered parks to be unsafe or sites for antisocial behaviors including drug dealings, violence, and gang-related activities. Additionally, Wen et al. (2013, p. 7) indicate an "urban disadvantage of deprived areas in greenspace" where a greater percentage of low-income, Black and Latinx residents were underexposed to greenspace, and the authors suggest that the low-income residents of rural areas do not present similar disadvantageous trends because of their proximity and increased exposure to agricultural fields. These findings suggest several paradoxes to standardized models and neighbourhood interventions of urban greening, which are envisioned as remedial strategies to improve community

conditions and yet often exacerbate resulting social phenomena that threaten the security, safety, and cultural presence of low-income and/or racialized groups, such as green- or eco-gentrification.

This connection is evaluated in another study by Wolch et al. (2014), which, in advocating for the multifunctional application of urban greenspace to tackle illnesses and improve the quality of life and health outcomes for urban dwellers, the authors consider the discriminatory philosophy of park design, the colonial history of land development practices, and the institutional preservation of ideals that are rooted in ethno-racial inequality. These practices are evaluated by considering the myriad of challenges presented in the “urban greenspace paradox” (p. 235). The urban greenspace paradox deliberates the interconnected nature and inverse effects of urban greening in underserved and low-income neighbourhoods. When imagined, these interventions present many opportunities to benefit the conditions of the community group (i.e., improving physical conditions and attractiveness, strengthening public health outcomes, providing shade and reducing the negative impacts of the urban heat island effect, etc.); however, in practice, these benefits often inadvertently work to ripen external or foreign interest in the area, which can only house and accommodate a certain number of dwellers and thus, displace the lowest (and most vulnerable) bidders (e.g., the real estate speculation of inexpensive properties in a neighbourhood undergoing intensification and ‘urban renewal’ procedures).

## **7. Improving Greenspaces in Toronto**

As a result of longstanding health adversities and violence experienced by black and brown bodies in the public realm, particularly as they have been further intensified and publicized in the media with the police killing of George Floyd, my research emphasizes the importance of strategically realizing safe and restorative urban design interventions for supporting culturally-unique “healing” and coping processes for black and brown bodies (where institutionalized and physical power imbalances consistently become weaponized by our white counterparts). Access to high-quality greenspace in urban settings is most commonly distributed in accordance with high socioeconomic status. Yet, there remains an urgent need for interventions that aim to lower stress levels that are experienced specifically because of discriminatory features presented in the public realm that are subjected to non-normative groups such as Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups.

Worse, without the state-issued mandating for disaggregated data, an analytical gap has presented itself that obstructs the ease in which an accurate and inclusionary representation of the local landscape may be documented. Above all else, I argue that this must be of priority in a city whose multi-racial composition yields distinct socioeconomic challenges, and whose highly dense landscape yields unique health challenges where much of the ‘high quality’ greenspace is rendered physically inaccessible for particular groups. By contrast, design interventions such as tactical urbanism, which provide cost-effective and informal participatory strategies for improving public and greenspace, can function as instruments for realizing community-determined visions in underserved neighborhoods and for strengthening residents’ place attachment and sense of community. Simultaneously, it must be noted that the argument of the influential variable of subjectivity in greenspace discourse must acknowledge that there are more significant discrepancies between the imagined experiences and actual uses taking place



in “space” depending on the user, where many public spaces (which were originally designed and continue to be designed by white people) are still operating out of a white supremacist, ‘veiled’ and exclusionary framework (and bias). This is to say, more should be done to rectify the discriminatory, systemic gaps that exist within these colonial policies and practices that negatively impact and put in danger the bodies of black and brown people. We must build on the understanding that the outcomes of colonial practices and their influences have historically played a role and left lingering imprints in framing greenspace for racialized groups.

My research emphasizes the importance of deliberately developing community-led urban design interventions such as greenspace for supporting safe and restorative cultural “healing” processes for racialized groups. It acknowledges that institutionalized and physical power imbalances consistently become weaponized by our white counterparts in public spaces. Lastly, my research cautions against the oversight of the negative impacts of current city-led greenspace interventions to low-income communities such as green-gentrification or the “urban greenspace paradox” and urges for work that is design to include and reflect more nimble, tactical, and community-based strategies.

### **Recommendations for Planners**

In place of a conclusion, I offer the following recommendations based on multidisciplinary research findings, personal insight and a comprehensive review and account of good planning practices that have recently been adopted to conversely reveal what should be avoided moving forward. It is my hope that these recommendations present achievable, pragmatic, and focused strategies in which co-benefits can be received and realized by racialized groups across institutions. These recommendations are formulated around greenspace and health, and greenspace and race.

### **Greenspace and Health Recommendations**

#### **A. Specific and Local Design Programming**

- Short and informal contacts with greenspace are highly important to the wellbeing of users (Nordh et al., 2013);
- Enclosure within greenspace supports safety but also creates a feeling of entering a whole other world (Kaplan, 1995); and
- A common practice in greenspace design has been “the bigger the better”, but strategic and community-oriented design strategies can also help to determine whether a small- or medium-side park or greenspace has the potential to yield equally advantageous results for that community (Nordh et al., 2013).

#### **B. Location Matters**

- Designers should refrain from locating parks next to major arterial roads: a park’s surrounding context must be considered when anticipating how it will be experienced - not just what services/amenities are presented in the park grounds. “Silent zones” (as seen in Oslo, Norway) are corridors along parks or rivers within the city surrounded by natural sounds and away from high noise levels and have been proven to be effective for users. (Nordh et al., 2013).

### **C. Quality Outperforms Quantity**

- Presumably “higher quality” parks present a function for both personal amenity uses and supporting environmental agendas of biodiversity programming (Wood et al., 2018);
  - Greenspace quality can be measured from the human user's perspective through the identification and assignment of street furniture, infrastructure management and maintenance, and other cultural aspects that increase the sense of safety and accessibility of a greenspace (as well as being more conducive to relaxation and psychological restoration); and
- Greenspace quality can also be measured by the presence of amenities, such as lighting, sufficient seating, indications of area maintenance including cut grass, no graffiti and no littering, and small urban greenspaces that present ecological, (animal and vegetal) habitat and species diversity (Fuller et al., 2007).

### **D. Decolonize the Ideals of Greenspace to Reflect "High Quality" Features**

- Based on my research, the following were indicators of “high quality” greenspace:
  - Greenspace that is located away from built urban settings where residents could immerse themselves in nature;
  - While pocket parks are desired, however they are typically centered in the midst of an urban environment and surrounded by streets with low-to-moderate traffic, so this placement does not allow residents to receive the full restorative benefits;
  - Ecological biodiversity is key;
  - Greenspace cleanliness and vacancy attributed to increased “greenness” and helped to maximize the perceived psychological benefits of the space;
  - The presence of trails increased usage patterns and desirability where users had a broader variety of activities to choose from, such as more non-“urban” settings to run in and nature walks;
  - Increased amounts of seating (e.g., picnic tables, single-user benches, etc.) and a variety of accessible greenspace furniture as this is considered a key marker of inclusivity and usability;
  - Designs that accommodated a full range of user accessibility - studies show through the correlation between "accessibility to nearest greenspace" and "frequency" that an increase and ease in accessibility will improve frequency;
  - Greenspace exposure has a direct total effect on social health by providing more opportunities for people to engage in physical activities with others, promoting interpersonal development, social interactions, and dually strengthening community cohesion and individual wellbeing;
  - The likelihood that an individual will engage in physical activity may be influenced not only by personal characteristics, but also by the accessibility, conditions and

actual and/or perceived safety of their surrounding physical environment - including greenspaces; and

- Greenspace area, habitat cover, and biodiversity must not be designed with the understanding that they are interchangeable and will achieve the same goals (Lepczyk et al., 2017).

#### **E. Apply a Critical Lens to the Attention Restoration Theory (ART)**

- While the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) offers four prevailing characteristics that are thought to influence and improve rates of psychological restoration, we must consider whether our approaches in planning practice are inclusive of historically excluding conditions faced by racialized groups and the resulting discrepancies that are racially informed:
  1. Fascination: attention is grabbed by elements (e.g., biodiversity) when exploring the site;
  2. Being Away: ability to psychologically become pulled away or removed from the pressures of everyday life;
  3. Extent: the order, logic, organization and consistency of a site (gratification of cleanliness or quaintness of it); and
  4. Compatibility: how well a greenspace matches what an individual wishes to obtain from the site.

### **Greenspace and Race Recommendations**

#### **A. Emphasize and Escalate the Practice of Storytelling in Public Space Planning**

- Sandercock (2003, p. 12) contends that “[s]tories are central to planning practice: the knowledge it draws on from the social sciences and humanities; to the knowledge it procures about the city; and to ways of acting in the city. Planning is performed through story in a myriad of ways. I want to impact the many ways in which we use stories: in process, as a catalyst for change, as a foundation, in policy, in pedagogy, in explanation and critique as well as justification of the status quo, and as moral exemplars.” Sandercock explains that in city planning paradigms, antagonists often take the form of those who embody debated topics of capitalism, globalization, or the alienation of urban life such as trope of the “big bad developer”, alienated gang members, noble community activists who, depending on their positionality, will be portrayed as villains or heroines. She breaks this up into several stages including:

1. Community Participation Process: Planners orchestrate an event that encourages as many people as possible to recount their unique story about their community (“local knowledge”);
2. Mediation, Negotiation and Conflict Resolution: Recent facet of planning practice in which storytelling programming and activities are worked through during a situation where there is conflict - here, the practitioner works to create “space” for

stories to be heard and is expected to “just talk about things without it being product-driven”;

3. Non-verbal stories: videos, music or other art forms may also be powerful forms of storytelling, particularly for youth where this presents an opportunity to pursue artistic ways of expressing themselves, identifying alternative coping practices, and achieving healthy forms of conflict resolution.

## **B. Make Concerted Efforts to Advance Social Equity Through Greenspace**

- Greenspace - and public space at large - has been a moderating variable and framework through which this research considers the differing impacts of public health and quality of life that are distributed in accordance with race and class. The findings outlined by Karen Morrison from York University in her February 2017 research entitled “Leveraging the Benefits of Greenspace for Environmental and Public Health Benefits” include the reimagining of greenspaces to:
  - a) Include the perceptions and histories of racialized folks in emerging greenspace literature - which has centred predominantly white, able-bodied, upper class voices;
  - b) Illuminate the reality that the conceptualizing of greenspace and achieving its benefits is not monolithic nor universally obtained; and
  - c) Acknowledge that black and brown groups have not had the privilege to experience the same romanticized rhetoric of urban ecology that was envisioned and conveyed through early and historical greenspace discourse.

To support her argument that greater political emphasis must be allotted to the identified opportunities of co-benefits through greenspace, particularly by working to transform the concept of greenspace towards ideal settings for public health and wellbeing, Morrison (2017) encourages the consideration of different components of human health by applying a lens that incorporates a multidisciplinary framework. This framework includes sociological concepts of the social determinants of health, and, in drawing from these, identifies the notions of “ecological determinants of health” (or the causes of the causes of health disparity, and distal determinants of health). To better define the ecological determinants of health, Morrison describes local air pollutants and biological agents such as bacteria, parasites, viruses, and fungi as primary examples.

Morrison’s collaborative approach to obtain these benefits successfully adopts the equitable practice of drawing from, applying and integrating subjective lived experiences and the expertise of everyday urbanists (residents) to realize co-benefits that are accessible by many. However, many of the benefits listed are exclusively relevant to specific groups in accordance with a higher class status (and positionality or rank on the social pyramid of intersections), and perpetuates a rhetoric whereby these sorts of perceived benefits are universally accessible when they present adverse effects for vulnerable groups (e.g., “increasing property values and sales”; “beautifying the urban environment”, etc.).

- There is a need for nature-based solutions that contribute to the design of actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems while addressing societal challenges effectively and adaptively. Simultaneously, the delivery of human well-being and biodiversity benefits must be a priority. According to Curran and Hamilton (2020), the success of any nature-based solutions requires a combination of multiple players coordinating in support of the shared agenda. These strategies are often presented as a way of reclaiming what is considered “wasted”, “abandoned” or “disinvested” spaces from decades past, and transforming these “wastelands” into urban parks, gardens, and farms. It must be noted that these types of environmental improvement efforts are characterized for their intrinsic link to real estate agendas, and therefore, areas that are considered more “desirable” and their residents destined to benefit the most. Therefore, there needs to be a strategic focus on delivering nature-based solutions programming that sustains and secures working-class and marginalized groups “in place” (without risk of displacement).

#### **C. Increase Planting Rate of Street Trees while Understanding its Correlation to Green Gentrification**

- According to Morrison (2017), when compared to other urban trees, street trees are perceived to be extremely valuable to the protection of human health and wellbeing. Consistently more accessible than other urban residential trees that are planted in parks and backyards because they are interacted with daily, street trees play a fundamental role in offsetting climate change impacts and preserving urban ecosystems. It must be noted that large and mature urban street trees, which were planted in the mid-1900s, are reaching the end of lifespans in many of Toronto’s older neighbourhoods, which renders the policy research and implementation methods from municipalities an important issue, particularly as it concerns the efficiency of new approaches of tree planting adopted across the city, program regulation, and schemes that incentivise the protection and governance of the urban forest. Significantly, it is underscored that the following benefits can only be realized effectively when we all have a collective understanding of their value and coordinated planning and design, as well as the involvement of a wide range of public stakeholders (where the benefits listed below are only those I have identified as relevant and accessible to the majority racialized residents and extracted to include in this research):
  - a) oxygen production,
  - b) cleaning air,
  - c) providing shade, cooling air & reducing urban heat island effect (which promotes neighbourhood walkability),
  - d) increased connectivity in parks and public realm,
  - e) food provision,

- f) reducing noise conditions (e.g., buffering traffic noise),
- g) reducing traffic speed and therefore limiting collisions,
- h) increased spiritual and mental health benefits to people,
- i) fighting off soil erosion,
- j) water retention, and
- k) reducing water treatment costs.

While the case of street trees undoubtedly play a large role in preventative and proactive measures in combating the various urban issues triggered by climate change, the perceived benefits of street trees, or trees in general, must be inclusive of the differential impacts of one's experiences to influence their perception of public space, in general. Upbringing and other early socializing experiences, varied exposure to ecological features, in addition to the culturally acceptable and significant activities that either involved or excluded these considerations play a role in encouraging and reinforcing one's subjective perception of the importance of street trees. Obtaining a consensus between different cultural groups that may indicate "buy in" to the belief that untapped co-benefits are presented within street trees requires the acknowledgement that culturally- and racially- distinctive informal educational experiences deeply impact our understandings of space and greenspace, as well as the conditions they yield including safety, comfort, and psychological restoration (or lack thereof). If this "buy in" is to be achieved universally, unique strategies and programs must be designed to address these discrepancies.

#### **D. Engage Youth of Color in Outdoor and Nature-based Activities to Shape Early Experiences**

- As previously mentioned, environmental research findings reveal that the early exposure to greenspace plays a large role in determining the health conditions (as well as shaping the continued rituals and health-oriented activities that are pursued) during adulthood (Engermann et al., 2019). This suggests that building engagement and design programs that address potential barriers to greenspace use and access among youth should be a significant directive within neighbourhood planning agendas. I have also mentioned that research has indicated there is a disproportionate trend in which black and brown youth are socialized to law enforcement early and often when compared to being socialized to public health only during extreme circumstances, which inadvertently influences perceptions of the functions, objectives and uses of these two institutions (Fante-Coleman and Jackson-Best, 2020). Lastly, findings by Kardan et al. (2015) conclude that, depending on class and income level, some Canadians spent less time consulting healthcare professionals and engaged in avoidance behavior when addressing health concerns and conditions. In applying a holistic, intersectional, and multidisciplinary approach, it is important that these findings are considered in tandem.

In a needs-based assessment commissioned by Nature Canada, Scott and Tenneti (2021) conclude that a greater focus on nature-based programming opportunities for



racialized young people must be initiated that involves a critical discussion of how to improve rates of accessibility across marginalized groups in manners that are rooted in anti-racist, evidence-based, and community-informed strategies. In their research, it was found that Toronto's Black population is the highest in the country at nearly 350,000, with its Black youth population being a little over 100,000 and the proportion of youth aged 15-30 years belonging to a racialized group was over 55% (Scott and Tenneti, 2021, p. 8). Concerned about the debated "extinction of experience" that is common among youth who grow up in cities and as such, remain detached from making mental connections between the increase in urban development and reduced ecology, Scott and Tenneti (2021) ask:

1. What is the current state of engagement of racialized communities in nature and nature-based programming?
2. What are the barriers experienced to engagement?
3. What motivates those that are engaged?
4. What are the community-identified needs to support increased engagement?
5. What is the documented process of this work – to support replication in other urban areas?

The following interventions are suggested:

- community focus groups,
  - contributions from pilot programs in GTA,
  - convening proposed advisory group to contribute to research, and
  - focus studies of nature on youth of color and their lived experiences.
- In his interview, Baptiste discussed the desirability of activities and facilities such as basketball courts as a significant resource in his neighbourhood. The historical significance of basketball as a financially accessible sport among racialized youth growing up when compared to sports such as hockey, lacrosse, and tennis is a critical observation to make. The cultural intimacy between sports such as basketball and Black people is significant because improvements to the surroundings of integral youth socializing settings contributes to a growing equitable practice of keeping these groups "in place". As well, if improving health conditions among youth is an objective, connotations of "whiteness" among this group and the desire to distance oneself to be "authentically Black" must be a key understanding. Strategies must be inclusive of and reflect the cultural ideals that will incentivize more healthy behaviors in and perceptions of natural settings among youth through the incorporating of natural designs into existing cultural pillars such as sports and their surroundings. Rather than continue the practice of "whitewashing" spaces, through strategies of biophilic design practices and agendas that work to subtly improve the quality of park spaces in low-income communities (in which many basketball courts are located), an anti-racist and equitable approach of allowing these groups to heal "in place" is needed. As asserted by Westgate

(2019) in her research, we must focus on small-scale interventions to avoid eco-gentrification.

#### **E. Mandate the Development of an Equitable Data Legislation**

- On June 16, 2020, BC Premier John Horgan extended an invitation to both BC's Human Rights Commissioner and Information and Privacy Commissioner to begin the development of a policy initiative for the collection of race-based, Indigenous, and other disaggregated data. The Office of the Human Rights Commissioner created a report entitled "Disaggregated Demographic Data Collection in British Columbia: The Grandmother Perspective" (2020) which emphasizes the importance of knowledge about race-based data through an approach that is care-and solutions-oriented, rather than the figurative surrender to "Big Brother" as it has been portrayed for many years. This report recommends the formulation of a governmental practice that legislates the collection, use and disclosure of demographic data to ensure accountability and protection of extremely sensitive and implicating information.

The following mandates would be encapsulated and reflected in the proposed Anti-Discrimination Data Act (ADDA):

- Policies that support the BC Human Rights Code, which was established for structural change, including "to identify and eliminate persistent patterns of inequality associated with discrimination prohibited by this Code;
- Reinforce the goals indicated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Act;
- Advance the strategies and initiatives of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA);
- Champion the B.C. government's recent adoption of Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), a cross-sectoral analytical tool to assess differential impacts of policies, programs, and initiatives on diverse groups of women, men, and gender-diverse people and others; and
- Draw from B.C.'s existing Data Innovation Program (DIP) and its framework for protecting the privacy and protection of demographic data across public bodies.

By recommending an interconnected web of supporting materials and legislation at the governmental level, transformative measures of systemic change are far more attainable in collaboration with grassroots organizing and community-informed policy and programs which are instigating "on the ground" reform. An important danger to consider and address when planning for the collection of race-based data is the pervasive framework of a "coded bias" as our technologies increasingly advance forward and outwards, becoming incorporated across all systems. This term has been popularized through the release of the self-entitled Netflix documentary, *Coded Bias* (2020) which follows MIT Media Lab researcher, Joy Buolamwini's exploration of racial

bias that has been programmed and embedded into facial recognition algorithms, resulting in problems such as housing discrimination, law enforcement surveillance, and other forms of racial profiling against Black people.

### **Final Remarks**

In addition to these recommendations for progressive changes to policy on data, I have used this research paper to urge an increased representation in existing institutions of power, call for transparency and accountability when undertaking a structural change that is inherently uncomfortable in nature, and contend that a critical approach to the imagining, discussion and design of greenspace and its perception as “white space” is necessary when undertaking new programming measures. It is these collaborative, multidisciplinary and community-informed frameworks that have been identified as a common theme throughout my findings. They have been modelled successfully across our cities when facilitating the disruption to exclusionary practice and working to empower equity through non-intrusive interventions that ensure both culture and people remain safe “in place”.

This paper has argued for the inclusion of subjectivity as well as the overlooked insight presented in one’s lived experiences with racism and the resulting structural gaps that are unique to the urban city. In drawing from the broad range of research I have explored, the discussion of black and brown bodies in greenspace as a public health issue has been substantiated in several dimensions: lethal experiences with police brutality, repeated anxiety-inducing occurrences with community and authoritative intimidation that is rooted in racial bias, increased exposure to negative environmental by-products and health conditions that have been historically reinforced, and increased and disproportionate risk of threat by climate change and natural disasters due to precarious living circumstances. I have drawn from many informal accounts, anecdotal evidence, and critical literature that seek to evaluate our capacity to address these institutionalized problems. It is my hope that this paper validates that we urgently need coordinated, adaptive concerted solutions to these historically intertwined forms of discrimination.

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