

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

Oral History, Food Justice, and Music Making

Honor Ford-Smith, Lord Emanuel Achidago, Ruben Esguerra, Nasra Mohammed,
Krystle Skeete, Marvin Veloso



What is this research about?

“Food is a language we all speak, but not everyone has access to clean, affordable food. We are here to change that”. This statement by research participant Noel Livingston, sums up the goal of this research. We aim to share practices, knowledges and insights that can amplify challenges to urban food injustice in the Black, Caribbean and African communities at Jane and Finch. The research takes the form of a study of the ongoing work of the Toronto Black Farmers and Food Growers Collective, supplemented by oral histories collected from participants in Jane and Finch. Key findings have been channelled into the making of a website that comprises stories, activities, musical and other creative resources intended to facilitate intergenerational learning, dialogue, and action on food justice.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers consisted of graduate students from the Jane and Finch community facilitated by Honor Ford-Smith, Associate Professor, Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change (EUC)

What you need to know:

In Jane and Finch, lack of access to affordable, fresh, and nutritious foods has long been identified as a systemic justice issue. Approximately 28.9 percent of Black households in Canada have precarious access to healthy food. This project shares the creative labour of unsung community members who are addressing this issue in through diverse practices. These include urban farming, the distribution, preparation and consumption of food and the sharing of intergenerational ideas about food justice.

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

and EUC Community Arts graduate Marvin Veloso. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the design of the project was modified to focus on developing a case-study; collecting the oral food histories of community members who were migrants or second-generation members of the African diaspora in Canada.

The team began by sharing their own arts informed memories of food production and consumption. They learned basic oral history techniques, identified participants, and carried out interviews based on themes emerging from their drawings and memories. They mapped community food stores and eateries to contextualize their work in the neighbourhood. They interviewed and photographed the work of the Toronto Black Farmers and Food Growers Collective at Downsview Park. They triangulated these findings with interviews, readings on food justice and research on Jane and Finch. In parallel sessions with musicians Lord Emmanuel Achidago and Ruben Esguerra, the group came up with a basic series of rhythms, melodies, lyrics, and choruses to amplify and underline the findings. They then translated the themes, into a song, spoken word compositions, stories and other activities that will populate a website. A community event to launch the finalized website will be held in Fall 2023.

What did the researchers find?

Black farmers and consumers in Jane and Finch are building alternatives to food injustices in different ways. Findings reveal three main ways communities are challenging food injustice. These are:

- Naming and confronting the origins and perpetuation of food injustice through enslavement, colonization, industrialisation, and corporatisation.
- Affirming community and celebrating cultural difference through food production, preparation and consumption.
- Recognising oppositional cultural actions, narratives, and traditions around food injustice.
- Reinventing and developing these practices by cutting and mixing inherited practices with formal and informal organized alternatives in the present context.

The Toronto Black Farmers and Food Growers Collective trace food injustice to colonization and enslavement which has resulted in dispossession and the stigmatization of Black agricultural labour. They use the term clean food to refer to food free from toxins used in industrial and corporate farms. Their small urban farm in Downsview Park is an example of the way in which the notion of “the plot” or “the grung”, in Caribbean culture can be adapted to Northern urban settings in the context of climate change. Inspired by their ancestors’ struggles for land and healthy food, they are committed to growing clean food, connecting food production to food consumption, encouraging plant-based eating, intergenerational food-sharing and breaking down racialized access to healthy food.

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

They point out that state and corporate funding for Black food production often reproduces unequal class structures and exacerbates tensions between community members, food producers and organizational hierarchies around issues of control and allocation of money and resources. Their work stresses grassroots production, often in public spaces, and the idea that culture and agriculture must combine to shape humans committed to just, caring, and healthy “livity” - a way of life that values interconnection with all aspects of nature, a complete transformation of culture from the speedy “rat race” to a slower, deeper connection to the solace that nature provides even in the midst of all the contradictions of the urban.

How can you use this research?

This research is incorporated into a website that holds musical, narrative, and other creative learning resources. It is intended for groups interested in culturally based clean urban food production; educating individuals and groups to understand, share and support alternatives to anti-Black food injustices. The website for the project <https://www.yorku.ca/euc/research/ohjam/> (to be formally launched in fall) offers activities, information on urban farming and music. It can be used intergenerationally in formal and informal educational settings by youth, students, community groups and seniors. Community groups may enjoy trying out the recipes together or in families, discussing some of the health benefits and other questions posed by the research. Groups and individuals can generate their own oral histories of food, and celebrate unsung heroes who feed and care for others. They can interpret and use the songs and spoken word pieces, create their own compositions and food sharing practices based on the prompts provided. They can organize networks for growing and sharing clean food and most importantly advocate for food justice in the city.

About the researchers

Lord Emmanuel Achidago is a Master’s student in Physical Geography at York University and a resident of Jane and Finch. His studies are aimed at assessing the impact of climate stresses on plant communities on the Bruce Peninsula. He is from an agricultural town in Ghana and has expertise in growing vegetables in his garden. He is also a musician who enjoys producing and working with others.

Ruben “Beny” Esguerra is a Juno nominated educator, musician and music producer who is currently a doctoral candidate in Music at York University. Ruben is from Jane and Finch where he and his mobile studio Wheel it! are a well-known presence in Jane and Finch. He is musical director of this project.

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Report - 2023

Honor Ford-Smith is Associate Professor Emerita in Environmental Arts and Justice, York University. She makes collaborative and community based performance drawing on oral history, ceremonial action and social memory. Her publications focus on the theory and practice of gender, race and decolonization in the Global Caribbean performance and theatre.

Nasra Mohamed is completing York University's MES program with a focus on community planning and social policy. She is a resident of the Jane Finch and takes interest in challenging urban issues that impact communities such as access to programming, quality food and housing.

Krystle Skeete is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work. Her research interests include racism, anti-black racism, human rights, mental health, and youth. She is an Ontario Certified Teacher (OCT), with a specialization in teaching from an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion lens, and has spent most of her career working with youth and adult residents across the City of Toronto, including Jane and Finch, Lawrence Heights, Rexdale, and the Downtown core in various capacities.

Marvin Veloso, Toronto-based artist and researcher whose work focusses on visual cultures of social and environmental justice. He holds Hons BA in Culture and Expression and a certificate in Community Arts Practice from York University and an advanced diploma in Graphic Design.

Keywords

Food justice, music making, participatory practices, environmental arts, Black diaspora, African diaspora, oral history,

About the Helen Carswell Chair

[The Helen Carswell Chair in Community-Engaged Research in the Arts](#) is a partnership between York University's [School of Arts, Media, Performance and Design](#) and [Community Music Schools of Toronto](#). This partnership is dedicated to community cultural development in the underserved neighbourhoods of Toronto. We facilitate and conduct rigorous academic research which explores the benefits of community music programs and the links between music and learning. The goal of our work is to significantly benefit children from high-risk neighbourhoods and to fortify community music programs globally through publications and knowledge mobilization. We especially seek to engage and help drive new knowledge and practice to community-based groups serving children in the Jane and Finch community.