

*Memories to Futures: Re-Imagining Planning Toronto through Black Art and Stories*

by

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## **Abstract**

Memories to Futures: Re-Imagining Planning Toronto through Black Arts and Stories is a two-part portfolio project. The purpose of this research is to honour and document moments of community amid rapid change. To demonstrate what the everyday lives and challenges of blackness in Toronto may look like. The first portfolio component is platformed through a digital gallery <https://firgroveviewsruins.wordpress.com/> and combines storytelling, photography as a reflective piece of revitalization of the Jane and Firgrove community. The second component is demonstrated as a critical mapping project profiling Black Toronto artists <https://toblackartmapping.wordpress.com/>. Clyde Woods, Blues epistemology informs mapping as the cultural history of Hip Hop, Blues operated as tools of resistance and expressing urban realities.

## **Forward**

**Keywords:** Urban Revitalization, Spatial-Justice, Art-based Practices, Community-Based Knowledge, and Displacement

This research fulfills the learning objectives of my plan of study in several ways. First, the portfolio includes assignments from courses I took to satisfy my learning objectives on community-based knowledge, socio-spatial justice, and urban revitalization. Keywords such as displacement, grassroots organizing, arts, decolonization, and tower communities from the plan of study have become central themes in my research. My research sheds light on urban revitalization through the lens of Black cultural production. The currents of thought and practices from the plan of study has helped construct the major research proposal's theoretical and methodological frameworks.

My research is informed by critical urban theory and hip-hop methodologies.

The projects from courses like The Black Atlantic and Environmental Justice and Cultural Production Workshop: Socially Engaged Art have constructed the foundation of my major research proposal. Through this research I will fulfill the following learning objectives:

- 1.2: To develop a solid understanding of methodologies that highlight community-based research;
- 2.1: To have participated in learning opportunities that explore processes of actionable socio-spatial justice;
- 2.3 To create art that embodies socio-spatial justice.

Guiding research questions that inform this project include:

- 1) How can art-based practices translate into radical, transformative planning practices through which communities will benefit?
- 2) How does music and socially engaged art reveal spatial injustices?
- 3) How can cultural productions be used to make legitimate claims to the right to space, and to shape future built environments?
- 4) In what way can we learn from overlooked community members that receive more oppressive outcomes from the system such as incarceration, surveillance, and violence as a result from disinvestment in social and physical infrastructures?
- 5) What do important spaces look to the community, where do they not feel safe? Where do they feel the most empowered? What are the material realities of spatial inequities?

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I dedicate this portfolio to my mother, Khadija Mohamed, who inspired me to always be connected to my community. She is one of many community care workers, always a phone call or knock on the door away from her neighbours. I am grateful to my sister, Nora Mohamed who pushed me through difficult times and provided me with laughter and care.

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I want to thank my MES classmates and friends, Anab Mohamud and Patrick Stogianou. I appreciated our school mental health breaks at great coffee shops. They were the encouragement and the inspirations I needed.

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## **Introduction**

The region of Toronto continues to expand and grow, while economic and socio spatial disparities deepen in the city. For this portfolio I use the term urban revitalization to broadly refer to urban change through the redevelopment, intensification of existing communities for the purpose of change. I believe it is important to illustrate how the community responds to urban revitalization projects that may result in the death of their space due to displacement. It is a precarious time due to neoliberal political systems that push for austerity which further disadvantage vulnerable communities. These measures exacerbate access to resources, adequate housing, and they further push people out of reach from livable and/or amenity-rich neighbourhoods that are walkable, transit-oriented, or 15-minutes between jobs, amenities, and housing. Amenity-scarce neighbourhoods are part of Toronto's socio spatial disparities that include pockets of the city's core and inner ring suburbs that were neglected for decades. These communities happen to be disproportionately racialized which raises the question of who are they developing for? For this reason, I utilize the term Black that best describes the history which led to the conditions and contextualizes the material realities of Black communities due to centuries of systemic oppression. Jane Finch and Regent Park may be situated in different areas

of the city but face similar interactions with structural forces of state racism that result in violence, disposition, lack of resources and neglect. In rapid change and transience, concerns that citizens may have and conditions they are living through are not properly being addressed in formal planning and consultation processes, therefore, storytelling is an alternative but critical method of making voices heard and documenting lived realities. In the context of change (urban revitalization), the purpose of this portfolio is to humanize pathologized spaces and bring lived realities that are deemed invaluable to the forefront.

The purpose of this paper is to produce a critique of current planning consultation and planning practices that reproduce racialized spaces of dispossession, while demonstrating how art as a form of resistance does not allow for the erasure of lived experiences and memories of place. This paper is informed through qualitative research methods, particularly autoethnography and hip-hop methodologies, that contributes to a deeper understanding of particular neighbourhoods and their social relations in the city of Toronto. This portfolio sheds light on lyrics as critical text that depict the everyday lives and material realities of Black communities bringing attention to the vulnerabilities, marginalized condition, but also the practices of resistance, placemaking, and community belonging. The objective of this portfolio is to contribute to critical discussions on public consultation practices in planning, and how we can create more participatory process to move beyond consulting and informing the public to co-creating with the public shaping neighbourhoods through memories, lived experiences, and community networks. In order for urban planning to be transformative, knowledge production also has to be released by hierarchical ways of thinking and expert control. Urban revitalization

needs to be coupled with co-creation and participatory moments in the process for the benefits of such improvements to be enjoyed by all equitably.

I started my life in the west of the city, in a tower neighbourhood called Martha Eaton Way by the Trethewey Drive and Black Creek Drive intersection. My family, a family of four, lived in a one-bedroom rental in one of the towers. We did not have the capacity to upsize for a two bedroom in these buildings as the rent for one was too much for a single income low-wage employee. This one-bedroom unit rental had cost between \$900-\$1000 from 1997 to 2002 which is equivalent to \$1400-\$1500 today. The unit as of 2023 lists for \$1950 a month.

My mother made the right decision to put our family on the waitlist for Toronto Community Housing. It took 5 years, and we thankfully were offered a 2-bedroom apartment in Jane Finch. So, 2002 was an exciting time for my 5-year-old self, to not have to sleep in the same room and the same bed as my sister and mother.

Jane Finch had our schools in front of us, two malls with grocery stores, two plazas and playgrounds within walking distance. Perfect for a mother raising a 3- and 5-year-old. We made it home for 21 years and never looked back.

My perspective has come from engaging in youth art programs such as poetry open mics that acted as a place of workshopping community knowledge production into expressive practice. The aim of such programs was to connect BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities across Toronto that face similar obstacles such as displacement, violence, and racism. Storytelling and art are meaningful ways that communities form social circles that facilitate supportive networks of resources.

My research excavates the narratives of people who have historically received short ends of the stick but who have embodied resilience. I believe it is necessary to focus our efforts on community-based knowledge that can lead to transformative planning practices. Community knowledge can provide a rich resource for urban revitalization projects, which can give residents equitable and meaningful opportunities to shape decision-making that not only honours the legacy of the neighbourhood and its histories, but it allows residents to envision the community and public amenities and spaces they want to see. This research is presented as a two-part portfolio that reflects contemporary cultural production amongst racialized Toronto communities who are undergoing the process of urban revitalization. To further discuss the precarity of place, culture production is observed throughout the decades to display how art-based practices act as a tool for resistance, expression, and spatial justice. What racialized people placemake is an essential part of Toronto's heritage.

The aim of this portfolio is to contribute to scholarly and transformative planning conversations that focus on community-based arts projects as forms of expression, storytelling, recovering and

reclaiming spaces as strategies of placemaking and excavating forgotten and/or invisible realities and histories.

## **Methodology**

The socially engaged art project is presented as a digital gallery, which displays a short audio-visual component of footage that I have collected over the demolition years, the video is 1 minute long. The audio-visual and photographs are supplemented with an ethnography of spatial memories such as a place for youth to congregate and play whilst adults use the court to host community events, such as BBQs. I discuss how this project is relevant to socio-spatial justice and archival work. My focus is on discussing each aspect of the imagined space and their meanings. I narrated a reflection piece as a form of storytelling methodology for this project.

The methodology for the second part of the portfolio, Toronto Black Urbanity and Music, is counter-mapping Black artists in communities undergoing urban revitalization. Counter-mapping is an alternative way of mapping that can provide a different narrative to space through highlighting the everyday narratives of those that interact with the environment. In this context I will be using it to present nodes of music creation in specific neighbourhoods that unearth spatial narratives and a sense of place that is embodied in the song lyrics and music videos. The artists that are presented in the map create the spatial realities as lyrical ethnographers, where they expose the social relations of their spaces through music.

## **Component 1: Socially Engaged Art Project: Views (Ruins) from the Court Digital Gallery**

### **Background**

This component of the portfolio comes out of an art-based proposal initially developed in Professor Andil Gosine's class ENV5 6350 Cultural Production Workshop: Socially Engaged Art. The initial construction of this project came from experiencing the chronological dispossession of my neighbourhood and exposure to archival studies at my high school Westview Centennial Secondary School. The course was called Local History where we learned about the Jane Finch neighbourhood, Jane Jacobs, and Toronto's Jane walks. We also organized a Jane's walk ourselves. I had the opportunity to show my classmates and a few strangers my

neighbourhood. I was so proud to show people my after school activities at the recreational centre, Firgrove Learning and Innovation Community Centre (FLICC).

This class was the first time I found the words to critically analyze what was happening in the community. We were shown a documentary called *Home Feeling: Struggle for Community* (1984) and although this piece depicted Firgrove in the 1980s, it captured something timeless of the Firgrove community in 2015. I began to wonder why we were having mirrored realities and felt we were now at the tail end of the legacy produced from decades of disinvestment.

Jane and Firgrove, also known as Connections, is a Toronto Community Housing neighbourhood that has been undergoing revitalization, which required the demolition of 236 Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) units. Over the last seven years, residents have been and continue to be uprooted from a community they have created through networks of support, culture and meaning even through decades of neglect from the state. The disruption of their everyday life happened abruptly once the massive public transit infrastructure projects, the Finch West LRT and the Vaughan subway extension were underway. Transit-oriented development inevitably increased the value of land due and initiated the process of urban revitalization in the Jane Finch community.

The financialization of housing and revitalization has allowed to produce more unaffordable units in an area designated for social housing. What the community has faced has led me to pursue a socially engaged art project that allows me to showcase socio-spatial contradictions and lived realities in Jane-Firgrove through the decades it has existed. The central focus of this

project is on spatial challenges that have become a vessel of community cultural reproduction. Although all RGI units were demolished in 2022, the basketball court is the last remaining structure. I will be utilizing the basketball court as a point of reference in the exhibit. The basketball court represents the minimum investment of recreation that was provided during the planning of a dense social housing community. The space as a focus allows me to appropriately present a film that encompasses footage I have collected, a scene from *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community* (1984) and Jane-Finch.com archived video of a community BBQ hosted in 2017 before tenant relocation began, in a way to archive and reflect on spatial realities.

### **Views (Ruins) from the Court Literature Review and Discussion**

The written reflection piece describes my initial feelings of the disposition of my community after not being a priority for 50 years. The video that I have put together demonstrates a series of photographs I have taken of the remaining parts of the community and demolished site. At the beginning of the video, I personally archived the last time I walked through Connections before it was closed off to pedestrians for the planned demolition process. The second part I show a clip of myself discussing concerns of gentrification of Jane Finch with it now being a transit-oriented development area. The interview was for the CBC during the 2022 provincial election where Premier Doug Ford was elected. Next, I utilized a scene from *Home Feelings: Struggle for a Community* which provides visuals of the community 40 years before. The documentary also

depicts community concerns with policing, employment and quality of life which were relevant narratives to Firgrove's community memories, as a vocal and connected neighbourhood that were continuously advocating.

The following link is the website for the Views (Ruins) from the Court project.

<https://firgroveviewsruins.wordpress.com/>



## Revitalization Reflection (2023)

**Figure 1** Photos of Basketball Court and Revitalization Notice, Nasra Mohamed (2023)

Revitalization Reflection (2023) Nasra Mohamed

After 50 years of neglect. The grassways are declared structurally dangerous to live in.

At the same time.

Community is now starting to be valuable, good real-estate.

New infrastructure is being proposed at every corner.

We revitalize. For who?

How can we revitalize something that has died?

I avoid the use of the word resilient in a state of loss.

Why must we always be resilient, are we resilient when we are resentful?

Or is the resentfulness a lack of gratitude.

“Be proud of our community being the site of urban change, renewal, revitalization.”

In the midst of the uprooting.

I face the townhomes that are replaced with paved dirt.

The only structure that remains is the basketball court.

Like a headstone.

The centre, where my mother and other women would watch.

as we played, they drank tea in backyards, discussing their day , lives , dreams.



**Figure 2** Jane and Firgrove basketball net, Nasra Mohamed (2023)

The literature that informs this project and reflection piece is informed by Christina Sharpe's (2016) book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe (2016: 17) best describes the state of mourning and grieving, calling the process Wake Work in which "in the midst of death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death" she asks, "how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death." Memories amongst Black grieving being juxtaposed to the state of counselling and joy can be captured in cultural production.

The city's relationship to racialized geographies can be seen through mediums of art through indirect or direct ways by providing context to the lived realities and frustrations of community members. Artistic displays may operate as a projection to understand residents' concerns who may not feel comfortable showing up at a meeting or engaging with the consultation process.

For this reason, this project illustrates how we can learn from Black creative communities. Carpenter and Horvath's (2022) article, "Co-Creation and the City: Arts-Based Methods and Participatory Approaches in Urban Planning" demonstrates insight on the use of transformative planning practices. They demonstrate the possibility of alternative methods to involve citizens into the urban planning process where Carpenter and Horvath (2022: 312) define co-creation as a process that is collaborative and has the "potential to contribute to planners' understandings of local knowledge production." They also draw attention to the power imbalances inherent within the planning system, which need to be mitigated to move towards more inclusive and socially-just cities."

This component was an autoethnography , where my lived experience and memory work served as a form of knowledge. Archival processes and memory work provide a context and background of community that demonstrate meaningful interpretations of connection to space and a reminder of what matters to community. There needs to be more opportunities for community-based knowledge production as a form of participation in formal planning processes. Current planning practices do not platform alternative forms of expression beyond meetings for people to discuss applications. For planning to be transformative, people need to be inspired and transformed through meaningful engagement.

## **Component 2: Toronto Black Urbanity and Socio-Spatiality of Music- Lyrical Ethnographers**

The second component of the portfolio is expanding on a website that focuses on music mapping. This work demonstrates the socio-spatiality of music in conjunction with the shifting of physical spaces. The geography of music sheds light on how sound can be used as a form of representation, pride, and forms of grieving. In the context of my research, I argue that music created in a particular place and context is a vessel of memories and lived realities that are quickly shifting through process of dispossession and displacement. For instance, music videos or art displays such as murals can show what some people in the community may ascribe

meaning to or what types of spaces are important for youth, and where they feel safe. The reason for the project is primarily to show how informal uses of space and certain musical expressions are important to document and excavate in light of the demolition and loss associated with urban revitalization. A part of the project's objective is to commemorate and demonstrate how arts within Black communities act as a tool of healing, learning and resistance.

## **Discussion**

My research draws on current music from The West-End (North York and Etobicoke neighbourhoods), Jane Finch and Regent Park. I look at how music connects to spatial identities and stories. The artists I discuss in my music-mapping project follow their stories in Toronto Community Housing neighbourhoods and tower communities of inner-suburbs. Hip hop inherently participates in knowledge production through narratives which is evident in their lyrics and music videos.

Black music production in communities like Jane and Finch has created a new wave of arts-based practices. Music allows us to look at Toronto during different decades in a different way—and to consider music as important and valued as any other artistic expression. Anti-black racism does not deem these forms of culture production as valuable. For instance, Hip Hop is often reduced to propagating violence instead of exposing the complexity and nuance of many systems that are at play in these realities. Even with vulgarity in some of the music, it still is a form of musical agency to vulnerable peoples who are describing their experiences.

Woods' (1998) blues epistemology and Gilroy's (1993) Black Atlantic inform this component of my research and provide a theoretical lens to understand and compare diasporic realities within Toronto that have been shaped for centuries to create the conditioning of environmental racism, lack of access to resources, adequate housing, and the cycle of geographic dispossession.

Furthermore, Clyde Woods' (2000) *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* is a relevant text that provides historical context and conversations of art-based knowledge in Black southern communities in the U.S., especially in demonstrating the explanatory nature of the Blues tradition. Woods writes about the displacement of African American communities through exclusionary state investment policies led by powerful political actors known as the Plantation Bloc, and how the Black community in the south responded. Lived realities of spatial injustices and racialized violence have are documented in Blues music.

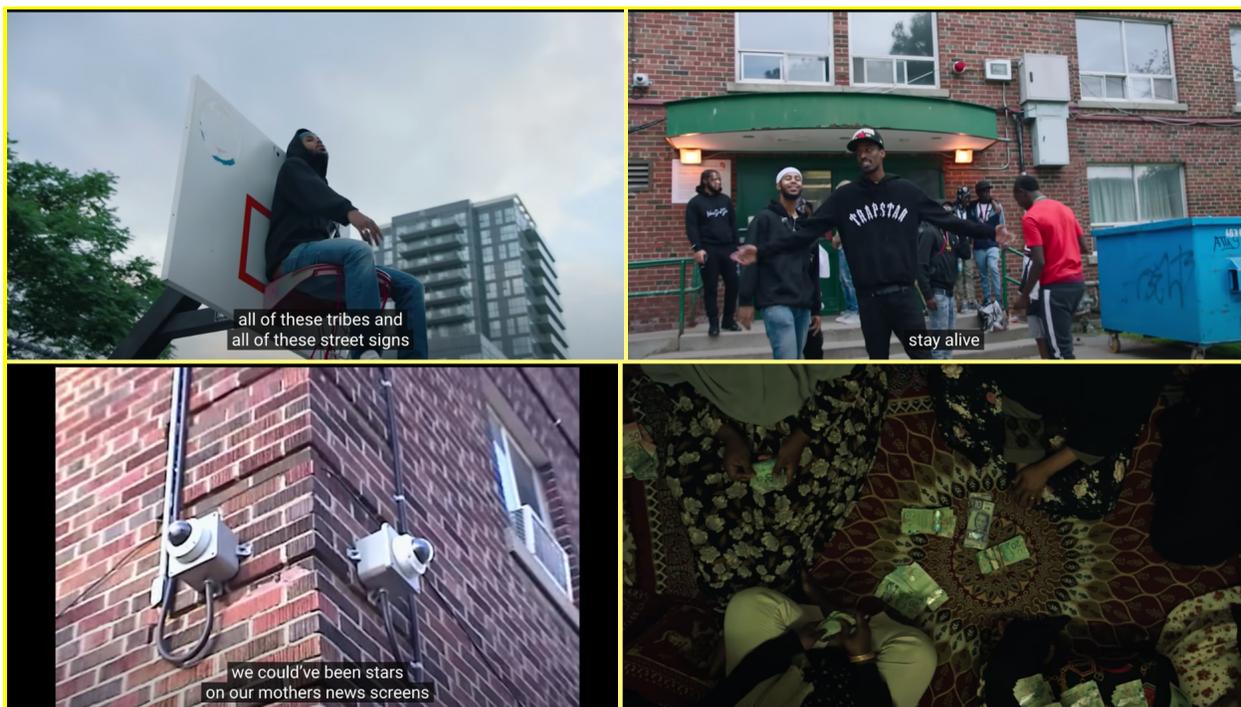
Geographer Bobby M. Wilson (2012: 2) captures this in his essay "Clyde Woods: From Blues to Hip Hop" where he states that "Clyde took his readers to the cultural side of political economy where he challenged them to know and understand the blues as a cultural form behind the lack of development in the Mississippi Delta." Although Woods (2000) discusses the blues from a geographic perspective and political, economic, and social context situated in the southern U.S., some relational comparisons can be made to present-day resistance-based cultural spaces found in Toronto's Black communities. The Blues have influenced modern-day music and its patterns of storytelling, and I argue that such forms of storytelling should be seen as ethnographic research in Toronto's urban context.

Murray Forman (2000: 67) discusses the spatiality of rap in the article, “‘Represent’: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music” and describes the artists as “cultural workers” where rappers are involved in “more than just a geographical arrangement.” The artists’ “relationship to space or, more accurately, a relationship to particular places” makes them ethnographic researchers.

Through this lens the artist is a researcher who is in the unique position to describe the lay of the land and what is going on. Embodied knowledge can inform local culture production and transcend scales to connect with broader shared realities of oppression. One of the music scenes I highlight in my research, the Toronto Drill, is quite popular among youth in the city. This local music scene extends to Black diasporic ears across Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America through social media platforms and YouTube.

The reach this music has could be explained through sociologist Paul Gilroy's (1995) concept of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy's (1993) book *Black Atlantic as Counterculture of Modernity* describes the continuity of colonial practices that dates to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Gilroy (1993: 15) defines the Black Atlantic as “a concern with the Atlantic as a cultural and political system [that] has been forced on black historiography and intellectual history by the economic and historical matrix in which plantation slavery – ‘capitalism with its clothes off’ -- was one special moment.” Therefore, current spatial realities in the geographic region known as the Black Atlantic which includes North America, The Caribbean, Europe, and parts of Africa, exhibit similar experiences with racism such as spatial concentrations of racialized poverty. Hence, music that youth produce in a neighbourhood in Toronto, a Canadian city, can be a congruent reality for communities in the described Black Atlantic geographies. The counter map demonstrates music in low-socioeconomic racialized communities that face gentrification.

I profile three artists that have created music that have gained popularity and cultural precedence with their art. (see <https://toblackartmapping.wordpress.com/>) . I first discuss Mustafa the Poet, a folk artist's music, to represent Regent Park. His music video Stay Alive (2020) and Air Forces (2020) illuminates nostalgia, pain, and praise of the neighbourhood. The videography of their music provides viewers a sense of various community connections and meanings to space. Where there socio-spatial presence can be outside of the building with his brothers or be in a neighbours living room with neighbourhood women counting ayuuto , Somali for rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA). These informal community support systems such as the mentioned ROSCA are examples of financial systems that the community has created in order to aid each other with fixed or low incomes.



**Figure 3** Mustafa the Poet Music Videos Stay Alive (2020) and Air Forces (2020)

Mustafa sitting on top of the basketball net to be seen as he sings “All of these tribes, and all of these street signs. None of them will be yours or mine. But I’ll be your empire. Just stay alive, stay alive, stay alive”. The recurring themes of the chosen songs reflect struggle, solidarity, and placehood similarly to the blues tradition. Toronto Black music culture such as Clyde Woods concept Blues epistemology in a way presents embodiment where there is an emphasis on music being a form of knowledge production and organisation in relation to shared oppression (Woods, 1998).



**Figure 4** Mustafa the Poet Music Videos Stay Alive (2020) and Air Forces (2020)

Local music scenes and socially engaged art can produce new understandings of spatial inequities in Toronto, and how such forms of cultural production can contribute to spatial justice. These artists illustrate the physical death of their homes but also the grieving of many young folks who have fallen victim to gun violence. I look to Jane Finch, an artist known as Duvy from Firgrove/Connections, that performs a hip hop genre known as Drill music.



**Figure 5** Duvy Music Videos *Nightmarez* (2020), *Nightmarez II* (2021), and *Live for the Moment* (2022)

Firgrove, revitalization site. In Jane Finch, Drill artist Duvy music videos provide hyper-visualization of space with block identity that encapsulates the reality of survival. The aura of survival is reflected in the lyrics from *Nightmarez* (2020) where he says “Ain't chose my life, I'm on that Jane too (Yeah) Mary Jane, plain Jane too (Yeah) Don't think it's love, that bitch gon'

line you (Line)” and in Live for the Moment (2022) “My mama was stressing, young in the streets just with my henchmen. We running so wild for digits, it took me a while to get it”.

Alexander Weheliye's book *Phonographies: Groove in Sonic Afro-Modernity* discusses the sound of space , spacing of sound that identifies cultural production and communality (2006,p.111). The songs that artists like Duvy curates become an anthem meant to be sung together just like his friends have in the music video *Nightmarez*. Furthermore, the music videos *Nightmarez part 1 and 2* followed by *Live for the Moment*, the background of Jane Firgrove also known as *Connections* slowly become ready to be demolished. The capturing of this, whether intentional or not, becomes a form of archiving through musical socio-spatiality.

Lolabunz is an artist that I have selected to represent a broad geographical location colloquially known as the west end. The west end is essentially much of North York and Etobicoke black diaspora communities. Placehood in Lolabunz music video is visualized through her being in different locations such as Little Jamaica, Jane Finch and Weston.



**Figure 6** Lolabunz Music Video, Westend (2018)

Lolabunz showcased different central areas to her while also inciting the meaning of diaspora spaces and connections that are not central to one neighbourhood. Realistically many people of African or Caribbean diaspora frequent each other's communities to eat, shop and connect with one another. She mentions in her song that she is a representation of the different black diaspora groups being of Jamaican and Nigerian background.

Music lyrics and music videos produced by Black creatives demonstrate how artists' stories and interpretations hold significance. Such creative productions also highlight the value of informal organizations in these spaces. Memory work through cultural workers maps out meaningful perspectives as it constructs language and empathy to their physical surroundings; for example, the blocks or plazas that display pride, demonstrate communality and survival.

## **Conclusion**

This portfolio aims to produce new insights on placemaking practices by looking at the intersection of cultural production of Black urbanities and planning in the city of Toronto in order to understand how memories can help envision and shape more socially just cities. The practice of spatial justice and sense of place through music or art movements provide valuable narratives to understand community strengths and gaps in a meaningful way.

For the future of our city, how can it include those who it has historically left out, and can they truly benefit the space? How can we honour the past by informing who has lived here?

The portfolio presents a reflection on how urban ethnography through art-based productions can inform critiques of urban development practices while also re-imagining socio-spatially just futures. Community resistance that exists in cultural production interweaves these conversations together. This portfolio provides a critical analysis, which is informed through arts-based storytelling of Toronto Black neighbourhoods in low-income communities in North York, Etobicoke and Jane Finch, and Regent Park because they are currently places of interest for development in Toronto. How communities organize informally and bring attention to disparities is at the heart of this analysis. This project's objective was to present community-based

knowledge with cultural workers and autoethnography through my lived experiences as a form of resisting hierarchical arrangement of knowledge production in academia. The communities I have discussed throughout my portfolio have been subject to over-research for academic interests. Black cultural production and spaces in Toronto are experiencing intensification and the rationalization of physical change by Urban Planners can be harmful. For this reason, as a planning student I believe memory work and arts-based knowledge produced is important and humanizes Black spaces to ensure our community is never forgotten and a reminder we have right to Toronto's future.

Memory work to help shape our cities, understanding past advisories and culture to build better futures for a spatially equitable city.

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