

**Murals talk back: an understanding of community murals in Jane Finch**  
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## Abstract

This thesis is based on a study of three community murals in Jane Finch, a densely populated, racially diverse, inner-city neighborhood in the northwest quadrant of Toronto, Ontario. Within Jane Finch, there are several mural projects scattered throughout various public spaces including commercial buildings, community centers, and spaces used by youth organizations. Through a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with residents and artists who were involved in their creation, this study extends the focus from the images on the walls to the relationship between community members and the murals. The findings show that the murals represent a form of community empowerment, both through their messages of solidarity and resistance and the collaborative creation process. I argue that community murals function as a form of “free space” that foster educational and critical discourses and provide residents with a sense of belonging and pride.

## **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to the women of the Jane Finch community, the Butterfiles, Peachtrees and Suzies. The Women who work day and night to support the community, the women who rally, the women who make noise, the women who are the backbone to our community. You are valued, you are loved and you are appreciated. Most importantly to my Mom, my Mosies, my Nino and my Nanie and my Grandma. You have all been my strength. For your struggle, for your support, for your love.

Thank you

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## **Murals Talk Back: An Understanding Of Community Murals In Jane Finch**

Over the past 30 years, murals have gained attention from scholars interested in the role of public art in marginalized communities. Research on murals in low-income neighbourhoods in major American cities—New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston—suggest that they represent much more than a beautification project; they are powerful tools for social change that can inspire and unite communities and lay claim to public space (Breitbart 1995; Conrad 1995; Sieber, Ferro & Corderio 2012; Delgado & Barton 1998). Within the Canadian context, the existence of mural art projects in urban centers is well documented,<sup>1</sup> however, there is a gap in the literature concerning their cultural and political significance.

This paper explores the role of public art in Jane Finch, a low income, highly diverse community located in the northwest quadrant of Toronto, which boasts numerous murals that are scattered on the walls of its libraries, private buildings, public housing complexes, community centers, and grassroots organizations. Based on interviews with artists and residents involved in the creation of three of the most highly visible murals, *Strong Women Strong Community*, *Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others*, and *Black Creek Community Farm Mural*, the findings suggest that both the murals and processes through which they were created represent forms of community empowerment. The images depicted on the murals are not neutral; on the contrary they depict political messages, important to the context of Jane Finch which works as a form of education and a symbol of solidarity with other community members, while also depicting a counter-narrative which combats the stigma of place attached to Jane Finch by the broader public. Furthermore this the study reveals that the process of creating the murals is quite empowering for community members as it brought people of various ethnicities, ages, and

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Festival D'Art Publique (Montreal); Mural Routes: Improving communities through mural art (Toronto); Murals of Winnipeg.

genders together, fostered space or educational and critical discourses, gave residents a sense of belonging and pride and left a legacy whereby the murals continue to create awareness and dialogue. Based on this understanding, I draw on Sara Evans and Harry Boyte's concept of "free space"—"public places in the community . . . [where] people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtues" (1986, 17)—to argue that the murals represent a form of free space in Jane Finch.

### THE JANE FINCH STORY

Prior to the Second World War, the intersection of Jane Finch was nothing but farmland with a population of 1,301 inhabitants (Richardson 2008). The area expanded significantly in the 1970's as a result of urban expansion which was sparked by an anti-immigration concerns (Richardson 2008). There were two major waves of immigrants during this time: European immigrants post-war in the 1950's and 60's, and immigrants from the Caribbean in the 1970's. High-rise apartments were built to house new, struggling immigrants and low-income families who could no longer afford to live in Toronto's downtown core ( Ibid., 2008).

Today the community represents an *in-between* position geographically ; not quite part of the city but also not a traditional suburb (Young and Keil 2009:89); a low-income area, surrounded by "glamour zones" (areas with culture and opportunities akin to those in the downtown core) (ibid) like Vaughan and Woodbridge (Glaeser, Resseger & Tobio 2008). This phenomenon is known as the "divided city"; white affluent communities claim prime space whilst the poor inhabit marginal spaces, with failing infrastructure and unequal access to quality jobs, resources, and public services (Dreier, Mollenkopf & Swanstrom 2001: 46).

In addition to its marginal "in-between" geographical location , the Jane Finch community has become a household name that sparks fear and scorn (James 2012). Its identity as



an “inner-city ghetto” has been consolidated through representations in the media and various forms of public discourse. This has widespread effects on the residents who are stigmatized, as well as on the broader Canadian population who are left with negative preconceptions of the community.

There are long-term consequences to this negative representation. It leads to stereotypical conclusions; young men are portrayed as criminals/gang members while women are seen as promiscuous, unfit young mothers or “welfare queens”. Tokenism is a common experience in the community, often committed by political leaders or community organizers who invite youth participation, but in an ultimately meaningless way. Youth are given tokenistic leadership positions and their voice remains unheard, while the organizers gain publicity and advance their agendas by creating an illusion of inclusiveness and representation.

The ways research is framed by--and located within wider social discourses and socio-historical contexts--has meant that members of marginalized communities are often labeled as “other” or *exoticized*. The historic relationship between Jane Finch and York University provides a poignant example of the power dynamics in research encounters, particularly the extractive nature of “parachuting” researchers who treat community members as “data points” or “subjects”( Connecting the Dots 2015). Jane Finch residents complain of being “over-researched,” of the community being treated as a research laboratory by York, and of having their voices misrepresented. Student researchers, who want to “save” the community, ask objectifying questions based on pre-conceived notions. Community activists refer to this as the “petting zoo effect”; residents are treated as though they are part of a museum exhibition (Connecting the Dots 2015). While researchers gain status through publications based on studies in Jane Finch, there is often little benefit to the community. As a result, community-based

coalitions, like *Connecting The Dots*,<sup>2</sup> have been created to protect residents and provide sensitivity training to university students who hope to work in the community.

Whether Jane Finch is treated as exotic or as a “no-go” zone, the community and its residents are restricted to a single story which is constantly regurgitated by the media. This stigmatization cannot be separated from the racial make-up of the community. In fact, there are many other communities like Jane Finch, largely populated by low income, racialized people, that are stigmatized. It is no mistake that communities with large African populations are deemed violent, while the women of these communities are portrayed as promiscuous. These long-standing historical racial stereotypes continue to manifest in the day-to-day lives of residents.

In addition to racism, unequal relationships, and the stigma of being from Jane Finch, residents face various other barriers, including a persistent lack of economic opportunities and social services. In 2011, the community’s unemployment rate was nearly double that of the rest of the city, 13% compared with 7.2% (2011 Ward profile 2014). In addition, it has the highest youth unemployment rate in Ontario along, with the highest population of youth (ibid). The community also has the largest number of government housing units (Hodge, Kramer, Legros & McClair 1983) and a high proportion of low-income households, 67.3% of residents earn less than \$29,000 a year (2011 Ward Profile 2014).

In 2005, Jane Finch was named one of Toronto's 13 “priority” neighbourhoods, areas designated as in need of financial investment because of high poverty rates, few social or

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<sup>2</sup> Connecting the Dots runs training sessions for York University students doing their placement at community organizations in Jane Finch. The training covers topics like the history of Jane Finch and the historical relationship between Jane Finch and York University. The focus is on unpacking power, privilege, oppression and racial profiling; de-bunking and challenging media perceptions, stereotypes and stigma about the community; the importance of cultural sensitivity and culturally relevant grounding and context, and the difference between research and extraction .

community services, high unemployment, high rates of youth violence, and crumbling infrastructure. All of these neighbourhoods were located in the “inner suburbs” (SPAR Unit 2005). More recently, the community received the lowest “equity score” of the 31 “neighbourhood improvement areas” identified in Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020,<sup>3</sup> The score factors in green space, employment, income, and health (Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2014).

While the struggles of Jane Finch are well documented, the community’s many assets—its cultural diversity, numerous community organizations, high levels of activism, arts programs—are typically ignored. The high immigrant influx, for example, has made the community one of the most diverse communities in Canada: 76% of its population is made up of visible minorities (2011 Ward Profile 2014) who speak some 120 languages (James 2012:34). For many residents, this diversity eases the transition from their home countries. In the documentary, *Home Feeling: struggle for community*, a Grenadian immigrant states that Jane Finch, “In a way kinda has a home feeling” (Hodge et al. 1983).

Similar to an ethnic enclave, the community creates a large, diverse enclave which allows immigrants to maintain their culture and creates a network which provides support (Portes & Manning 2005) which responds to the lack of resources and opportunities (employment, accessible transportation, public space). Residents, for example, help newcomers get jobs or carpool to workplaces which would otherwise be inaccessible.

In addition to the strong community ties and support, the oppression that the community faces has led to many forms of activism and resistance. The second annual Black

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<sup>3</sup> The Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy, produced by the City of Toronto, is a social development plan which sets a 2020 target date for “strengthening the social, economic, and physical conditions” in the 31 designated Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIA).

Creek Food Justice Day of Action, in May 2016, for example, saw residents rally and march down Jane Street, planting guerrilla gardens on their way, to raise awareness around food justice. There is also a large urban arts movement which is supported and cultivated by the community as there is over three community studios, along with various arts-based youth programming. One of the outcomes of this is that many residents use art as a creative outlet to share stories and politicize issues; the vibrant collaborative mural art projects located throughout the community provide a striking illustration of this.

Within Jane Finch, some murals are located in spaces visible from the main streets, while others are situated in particular "hoods". Each mural represents different themes and stories. Some focus on empowering women, others on food security, while some are memorials for lost ones. The large number of murals and their high visibility suggest their importance to the community.

This study focuses on the three largest, most centrally located, and publicly accessible murals<sup>4</sup>, murals that can be seen by anyone driving, walking or biking along Jane Street: *Strong Women, Strong Community* (10 San Romanoway), *Be Inspired, Love yourself, Educate Others* (25 San Romanoway) and *The Black Creek Community Farm mural*. The two murals commissioned by the BeLovEd movement are located at the northeast corner of the Jane Finch intersection which houses two malls and provides the majority of the community's essential services, including supermarkets, community organizations, youth centers, community health centers, gas stations, restaurants and retail stores. The third mural is located north of the intersection, but similarly, is visible as it stands on Jane Street, just a couple feet south of Steeles Ave West. The visibility of the murals is important, as they are targeted towards the entire

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<sup>4</sup> Opposed to murals located within sub-communities like Lane, Driftwood, Shoreham or Jane Sheppard.

community as opposed to other murals which are relevant and targeted to those living in sub-communities living in Jane Finch.

<b>Mural</b>	Strong Women Strong Community	Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others	Black Creek Community Farm
<b>Date of completion</b>	2009	2011	2013
<b>Location</b>	10 San Romanoway	25 San Romanoway	On the fence of 4929 Jane St. (Black Creek Community farm)
<b>Funder</b>	Network of Community-based Organizations	City of Toronto 2011 Graffiti Transformation Partnership	Street Art
<b>Commissioned by</b>	BeLovEd, in association with Network of Community-based Organization, the City of Toronto, Black Creek Community Health Center, Delta Family Resource Center and San Romanoway Revitalization Center	The BeLovEd Movement, Greenwin Property Management, Black Creek Community Health Center and San Romanoway Revitalization Center	Black Creek Community Farm
<b>Community involvement</b>	Community consultation, community residents conducted small portions of mural	Lots of community consultation	Community consultations conducted. Four Community members hired to help paint murals.

**Table 1: Brief Description of community murals**

### Community Murals

There are two broad styles of visual urban art; murals and graffiti. These two art forms are similar in that both forms involve the representation of visual art in public spaces, which makes art accessible to the broader public and both graffiti and murals can be politicized. It is therefore easy to understand why these two art forms are often conflated, however it needs to be noted that there are some distinct differences between the two. Graffiti is often unsanctioned, impromptu, individual acts that are policed whereas murals are more likely to be commissioned (Delgado & Barton 1998) and involve a collaborative process that includes more planning, approval from institutions, and the involvement of the community and public officials. Murals

are therefore more collective projects, which take into account shared narratives of various community members and though there are cases of graffiti art done as a way to share collective voices, graffiti is typically the reflection of an individual option and is often targeted to other artists as opposed mural art which is most commonly used to share messages with the local community: “created in public, usually by the public for the public” (Caruso & Caruso 2003:2).

David Conrad, a prominent voice in the literature on community murals in inner cities (1995), emphasizes the long history of murals as a tool of resistance. In his paper *Community Murals as Democratic Art and Education* (1995), he provides examples, including murals in Black colleges in the southern United States in the 1930’s and CityArts workshops in New York’s lower east side, to illustrate their capacity to convey social and political messages in public spaces. He conceptualizes murals as educational tools and argues that they build awareness of social issues and increase critical consciousness (1995). For Conrad, murals ask questions and express community pride, while simultaneously "teaching outsiders about the struggles of traditionally oppressed people" (Conrad 1995:98). Additionally, Conrad challenges the view that art is objective and contends that community murals are proof that art cannot be isolated from the experiences of the artist.

Murals as educational tools is a theme that comes up again in Caruso and Caruso’s *Murals Painting as Public Art* (2003) which analyzes eight murals painted over the last thirty years as part of an urban renewal program in Waterbury, Connecticut. They highlight the importance of the process in mural creation, arguing that it “is just as empowering as the product” (Ibid :3). Murals bring together community residents, including artists, activists, and students from various cultural groups, to develop a sense of unity and solidarity. The authors argue that during the process of mural creation, residents learn about community issues and share

knowledge. Murals also give community members an opportunity to take on a leadership role and voice their opinions, which in turn creates a sense of self-value and self-respect. Murals have the ability to foster a creative energy amongst youth while creating art which reflects their history, cultural and ethnic heritage and lived experiences.

Murals, Caruso and Caruso further contend, are often used as a beautification method to improve communities which are left to decay, however, this is a secondary function; their primary function is to "express a strong narrative of social awareness using symbolic content" that shed light on the community issues while allowing the artist to express their creativity (2003:2). Murals, therefore, represent "symbolic action and imply social change" (Ibid: 3) which helps develop critical consciousness and build community pride.

In *Banners for the Streets Reclaiming Space and Designing Change with Urban Youth*, Myrna Margulies Breitbart (1995) examines a participatory community art initiative in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Urban art projects, Breitbart suggests, are used as tools to involve youth in community assessment, discussion, and change. In the initiative under study, youth were brought together and engaged in various activities, including exploratory walks, which led to discussions of community needs and eventually lead to the creation of a banner for the community (1995). Breitbart argues for the importance of giving youth the opportunity to engage with and reclaim their communities. For Breitbart, community art is a way for youth to "re-create a portion of their neighborhood environment" into a safe space which represents their hopes for their community (1995:35). The author maintains that these types of art projects can improve neighborhood conditions, raise community awareness amongst those involved in the process, and make youth feel a strong sense of belonging and power in their community (1995).

In *The Neighborhood Strikes Back: Community Murals by Youth in Boston's Communities of Color*, Sieber, Cordeiro and Ferro (2012) stress the ability of murals to depict counter-hegemonic representations of local identities, neighbourhood histories, and community hopes. For the authors, hegemonic representations of local identities are often stereotypical. Murals can combat the stigma associated with marginalized communities and provide counter-narratives while simultaneously “building neighbourhood solidarity across ethnic groups” (Sieber et al. 2012:264). The mural process unites community members through shared experiences of oppression, shared desires for community advancement and shared experiences of living in the community (Ibid.).

Murals as counter-narratives is a theme echoed in Kristin Lee Moss's study of murals in Philadelphia, the city of murals (2010). Based on a case study of two murals that depict racialized community activists, Moss concludes that these images are used as a form of resistance to hegemonic representations. The murals provide a positive visual representation of racialized people (2010). Racialized women, for example, depicted at during various points of history, are painted as powerful and dignified; an image Moss argues counters the over-sexualized portrayals found in mainstream media and dominant discourse (2010).

On a different note, in *Murals in Latino Communities: Social Indicators of Community Strengths* (1998), Delgado and Barton adapt an assets based perspective to emphasize the importance of looking at what the community has, as opposed to a deficit perspective that focuses on what communities lack. After conducting a content analysis of several murals, they argue that murals represent community strength and resilience and showcase these assets to outsiders (including social workers).<sup>5</sup> The murals include symbols of ethnic pride, counter-

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<sup>5</sup> The Jane Finch community has a long standing negative relationship with social workers who engage in “The petting zoo effect” (Connecting The Dots Coalition).



narratives of ethnic histories, religious symbols, issues related to social justice, decorative symbols, homages to national and local heroes, and memorials (Delgado & Barton 1988).

Drawing on Evans and Boyte's theory of free space—a space where “residents can come together and articulate common concerns, hopes, and shared values,” Delgado and Barton argue that murals represent a space claimed and controlled by the community (1998:346).

In *Artist & Murals in East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights: A Sociological Observation*, Holscher (1976) focuses on the artist's understanding of murals to uncover what the artists were trying to convey, their reason for painting the murals, and the purpose the murals serve the community. He finds that:

Murals of east Los Angeles and surrounding communities can be described as pages of newspapers on walls because they tell something about the Chicano culture, the history of the Chicano, and the various problems faced by the people in the barrios... The people who have painted murals in the various barrios of Los Angeles are presenting something of themselves and the community to the community and to other people from outside the barrios who may view the murals. They are also doing something for themselves, whether it be a release of pent-up anger after being the object of years of prejudices and discrimination, or a joyous cry based on pride in their people and culture (Holscher, 1976:26).

For Holscher, it's not about enjoying art, but rather the sole purpose of art is seen as an outcome of oppression. His conception of murals is therefore quite deterministic as he argues that art in totality can only be done as a form of resistance however his description of how art can be used by the people of the barrios is significant as it provides a good example of how art can be politicized and relative to experiences of marginalization.

In sum, the significance of community murals runs deeper than their aesthetic contribution to the urban landscape. Mural projects, as the studies reviewed suggest, have the potential to communicate powerful messages. They are a means of representing and expressing a community's struggles, its resistance, and its future aspirations. Because murals “can encode such things as privacy, taken-for-granted gender roles, civilization, history and progress”

(Emmison & Smith 2012:4), understanding them can provide insight into cultural values and community norms.

### Research question

The literature reviewed earlier suggests that murals can be used as tools for symbolic expression and political practice, as “murals give voice to ordinary people’s concerns and involve them in the creation of images that hold meaning for them and for their community” (Sieber et al. 2012:264). This research aims to explore the role of murals within the context of Jane Finch. The creation of the murals in Jane Finch makes for a unique study because of the intense relationship between the artists and residents involved in their creation and the community as a constant audience. By interviewing the artists and residents involved in their creation, I will gain a better understanding of the motivations and perspectives underlying this genre of public street art. The paper also discusses these murals in terms of how the artistic images and their content reflect the community, its hopes, and its concerns.

### Framework

This study draws on Evans and Boyte’s (1986) concept of “free space”, physical places that foster a stronger sense of collective identity and the development of critical consciousness. I will argue that the three community murals under study are a form of free space: community-driven, autonomous, and public. They are places where groups of people with shared interests realize their marginalization and develop self-respect and commitment to a common good and the struggle for change. These spaces are separated from dominant institutions and ideologies, which allow them to serve as counter-hegemonic thought and "ideological freedom" (Polletta 1999:6). This theory is supported by Galanakis’ (2015) study of youth in Jane Finch which finds that youth are constantly challenging what is acceptable and asserting their civic right to reclaim

and create public space (2015). Galankis concludes that public spaces (spaces youth can openly access) within the community, although scarce, provide a forum for youth discussion and the imagining of alternative environments and lives (2015). In another study, Galankis argues that “public spaces facilitate social inclusion and intercultural communication” as well as civic conversation (2013:67), characteristics of free spaces that are noted by Evans and Boyte and are also themes in the literature on murals. In this context Galankis’s theory of public spaces in the community, can be related to Evans and Boyte’s theory of free space, in that in the context of Jane Finch the scarcity of these spaces, make them quite political. Free space was originally used to discuss large-scale social movements. Evans and Boyte, for example, identify the spaces used by consciousness-raising groups of early second wave feminism and black churches during the civil rights movements (1986:VII) as free spaces that played a central role in mobilization. These were safe spaces for discussion that “gave oppressed groups the opportunity to voice their complaints and openly discuss alternatives” (Polletta 1999:6). Evans and Boyte contend that democratic action depended on the availability of spaces where oppressed people can unite, develop counter-narratives, and create a vision for the common good (1986). In these early analyses, the potential of free space to nurture critical conversations and solidarity for resistance in social movement mobilization is highlighted. In later work, the concept has been expanded and applied to different political organizing contexts.

Delgado and Barton, for example, argue that “building walls, interior and external, must also be considered free space,” including murals “painted on building walls that have been claimed by the community as their own, even though they are not owned by community residents” (1998:347). While some scholars like Polletta have argued that this broader conceptualization of free space has been applied inconsistently and is incapable of grasping the

dynamics of social movements (1999), I argue that the notion of free spaces can provide unique insight into how urban public art can function as a vehicle for community voices and neighborhood self-definition. Specifically, this study will explore the role of murals in Jane Finch as a source of counter-narratives and collective action.

Murals often use images that are drawn from community issues and involve viewers in a visual dialogue shaped by the physical space (Caruso & Caruso 2003). As such, they are also part of a larger sociological discussion on space and place, which often argues that public space has the ability to shape individuals and that individuals have the ability to shape how public space is constructed. Put simply, public space, like those occupied by murals, can play an integral part in the identity of an individual and in the identity of a community, particularly in dynamic urban communities like Jane Finch.

### Methodology

Community murals are a form of local, public art that often incorporate—and politicize—the experiences of living in urban neighborhoods. To date, there is limited literature surrounding community murals within the Canadian context. Visual sociology, a field which dates back to the 1970's, emphasizes the importance of visual relationships and their ability to uncover new understandings of sociological topics (Harper 2014). It recognizes the power of the visual and the data encoded within it and argues that methods of visual sociology can enrich and build off of more traditional research methods (interviewing, surveys and focus groups). Visual sociologists see murals as subjects of sociological study which can uncover narratives of social meaning and “provide useful information about the material and the immaterial traits of a given society” (Emmison & Smith 2012:19). As such, this paper focused on the study a form of visual art—community murals.

The study, therefore, adapts the methods of visual sociology, specifically, photo-elicitation. Photo elicitation is a process where images are used to elicit data. It produces different types of information as it evokes feeling, thoughts, memories, and emotions (Harper 2002). Photos trigger memories and reflections, and overall have the ability to “evoke deeper elements of human consciousness...words alone utilize less of the brains capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” (Harper 2002:13). The process, therefore, expands the range of data and enlarges the possibilities of conventional research.

Photo elicitation is underused and largely unrecognized (Harper 2002) because it goes against traditional ways of doing research. However, scholars like John Collier, a member of Cornell University’s multi-disciplinary research team have demonstrated the value of this method. Collier, who used this method in the mid-1950’s, in his study of mental health in the maritime provinces, concluded that “the pictures elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews” (1957: 858). Suchar and Rotenberg (1988) used photo-elicitation to explore how residents transformed their recently gentrified community. They used images of subjects posed in their homes and “surrounded by the objects through which they define their space” to understand how “old” residents occupy space which is being taken from them (Harper 2002). Photo elicitation enhances the quality of data and keeps participants engaged (Emmison & Smith 2012) by facilitating discussions which may not have been revealed using traditional interview methods.

For this study, photographs of the murals taken by community photographer Errol Young were used to elicit rich and contextualized responses from the participants. The photos

also uncovered the emotions participants experienced when viewing the murals, helped recall particular images in the murals, and helped remember particular phases of the mural creation. For example in many interviews when the murals were shown, respondents had strong reactions whether it was a immediate smile, a rush of emotions which lead some respondents to tear up, or those who needed a moment to reflect before they could continue the interview.

### *Interviews*

Ten interviews were conducted with eleven respondents (one interview was conducted with two participants, the others were individual interviews). Eight interviews were done with the artists who created the murals— four of these artists were also residents of the community during the construction of the murals. Two additional interviews were conducted with residents who were active members of the community organizations which commissioned the murals, and one interview was conducted with a member of BeLovEd who was not from the community, but who was the community development officer at the time of the mural creation. All of the participants were given the option of remaining anonymous however all participants agreed to waive the anonymity and have their names published in this study. The interviews took place in various public spaces, including coffee shops, the YWCA, the Black Creek Community Farm, and the food court at Yorkgate mall. All of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. This research was reviewed and approved by the York University Human Participants Review Subcommittee (HPRC). The majority of interviews lasted forty minutes to an hour, though the interview with Jessica Volpe, which was conducted over Skype, lasted only twenty-five minutes because of connection issues.

The interviews began with introductory questions, like “how did you get involved in the creation of murals?” This helped to clarify the participant’s level of involvement in the murals

and gain an understanding of which murals the participant contributed to. I then moved on to ask more complex questions about the murals themselves and the process of creating them.

Participants were asked what the murals meant to them, and to describe the process of creating them. Images of the murals were used to help elicit recollections and create more dynamic conversations. Probes included: “How was the decision made to make the mural? How were the themes of the murals selected? How was community involved?” Responses to these questions provided a more comprehensive understanding of the creation process. The participants were also asked to reflect on how they currently felt about the murals and what they wanted the murals to accomplish for the community. Finally, in all the interviews, the interviews were concluded with a review of the existing literature and participants were asked if they felt that the mural they created in Jane Finch aligned with the current research on murals in the United States. Key words which were found throughout the literature review (murals as political, counter narrative, murals as a space which brought community together, murals as a way to raise awareness on community issues) and participants were asked if they felt these themes/words stood true of the murals under study.

<b>Participant name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Mural/s</b>	<b>Date</b>
Jessica Volpe	Lead Artist	<i>Strong Women, Strong Community</i>	March 28 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Butterfly Gopal	Long time community resident, member of BeLovED	<i>Strong Women, Strong Community &amp; Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others</i>	March 19 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Andrea Bouchard	Long-time community worker and member of BeLovED	<i>Strong Women, Strong Community &amp; Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others and Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March 23 <sup>rd</sup> 2016
Laura MetCalfe	Former Jane Finch community development officer and member of	<i>Strong Women, Strong Community &amp; Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate</i>	April 7 <sup>th</sup> 2016

	BeLovEd	Others	
The Real Sun	Community resident, artist, and member of BeLovEd	<i>Strong Women, Strong Community &amp; Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others and Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March 25 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Yasmin Woodley	Youth, former resident, and artist	<i>Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others</i>	April 2 <sup>nd</sup> 2016
Shalak Attack	Artist	<i>Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others &amp; Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March 15 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Fiya Bruxa	Artist	<i>Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others &amp; Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March 15 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Bruno Smoky	Artist	<i>Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others &amp; Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March 15 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Zea Malcolm	Youth, resident, youth, and artist	<i>Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March 14 <sup>th</sup> 2016
Suviana Burey	Youth, resident, and artist	<i>Blackcreek Community Farm</i>	March, 14 <sup>th</sup> 2016

Table 2 Interview participant's description

### Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was used to uncover “identifiable themes and patterns pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of [respondents] collective experience” (Aronson 1995:1-2). Transcripts were organized and analyzed in chronological order. Open coding was used to break the data up into understandable and relevant categories. Once the coding categories and subheadings were created the data was broken down into themes. In general, the themes were identified through the identification of reoccurring codes of specific words and sentences. For example, it became clear that the murals were considered as a form of community empowerment through the sense of pride they built; along with the way they democratized art. Consequently, words like “pride” and “democratizing art” were used to code for themes. These themes reveal important components of the collective experience that



“represent some level of patterned response or meaning within data set” (Braun and Clarke 2006:82). In addition, quotes, which are used in the discussion section of this paper, were selected based on their clarity and ability to convey major themes, in a manner which ensured that the voices of all respondents were represented.

### *Bias*

I’ve often wondered how my insider status influences my role as a researcher researching my own community. I walk by these murals every day, does this affect the way I see and study these murals? Undoubtedly, my identity as a 1.5-generation immigrant<sup>6</sup>, a racialized woman, and a youth in Jane Finch who has faced a socio-economic crisis, shapes my perspective and my idea of my community. This position shaped my experience of the community, which is quite fundamental to this study. It is, after all, these experiences that brought me to this point and motivated this study. I have often wondered if I was “too close” to the study and whether this clouded my judgment. However, as already noted, Jane Finch has become an over-researched community, residents are tired of being objectified and of researchers “parachuting” into the community “for a short period of time without ever establishing roots or committing to long-term engagement or solidarity” (Connecting the Dots Coalition 2015). As a resident I have participated in countless academic studies, but have rarely been informed about the findings. Consequently, I felt passionate about doing this study in a manner that was responsive to such community concerns. Throughout this study, I tried to remain conscious of my position and constantly reflected on how my role as an “insider-outsider” influenced the data, my interactions during interviews, and how the literature resonated with my experiences.

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<sup>6</sup> 1.5 generation immigrant is a term used to refer to someone who was born in another country but raised in the one of migration.

### *Limitations*

This study is not inclusive of all the community murals in Jane Finch. The focus is on the three particular murals mentioned earlier, and an understanding of these murals by those who were involved in the creation process at some level. It is therefore not intended to represent the overall perception of the community to the murals. The study also does not cover the opinions of all of those involved in the creation of the three murals.

This paper is not intended to provide an aesthetic evaluation of the murals; rather the focus is on understanding the motivation for their creation and what they represent to those who were involved in their creation.

### *The Findings*

The interviews provided insight into the motivations of those who participated in the creation of the murals and what the murals meant to them. The finding section will begin by presenting an in-depth understanding of each of the murals, including a breakdown of who the murals were commissioned by and the level of community involvement. We will then move to a discussion of the findings. Throughout the interviews, several recurrent themes emerged. Participants saw the murals as a medium to voice community concerns, particularly around social justice issues. In the case of the BeLoveED mural, participants discussed empowerment of women as a means to end gender-based violence; a message which was conveyed through images of strength, diversity and solidarity. Respondents stressed the importance of the focus on social justice issues, particularly issues that are not traditionally discussed within the community or by the broader public; food justice and gender-based violence. Others spoke about how the murals conveyed messages to both the community and the broader public. These messages were intended to counter the stigma associated with Jane Finch. The collaborative process was also

emphasized by all of the respondents, who felt it was unique and made the murals meaningful. Some spoke of the mural as a way to democratize art, while others talked about the legacy of the murals. In what follows, I will elaborate on each of the main findings.

### *The murals*

BeLovEd, a local grassroots collaborative, composed of community residents, city workers, and artists, created both of the San Romanoway murals. The collaborative organized in response to *The Road to Health Final Report on School Safety* (Falconer, Edwards & MacKinnon 2008), which found that over 33% of high school female respondents in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reported being victim of sexual harassment over a two-year period. The murals were commissioned as a community-based public education campaign designed to raise awareness about harassment while also showcasing stories of struggle, resilience, and the strength of survivors of gender-based violence. The BeLovEd movement wanted to ensure that the murals were defined and created by the community.

The first mural, *Strong Women, Strong Community*, was originally done on plywood panels that were to be installed onto the building in 2009. However, after the mural was completed, an engineering report found the installation process was too expensive and the group was forced to re-paint the mural directly on the building. The mural, which was funded by a \$10,000 grant to BeLovED from the Network of Community-based Organizations<sup>7</sup>, was launched on December 10, 2009 alongside the official launch of the BeLovEd movement.

Jessica Volpe, a community facilitator at “The Spot”, a local youth drop-in center, was hired as the lead artist. Volpe recruited her sister to help with the mural creation. Before the mural creation, BeLoveED and Volpe worked with community members to select some of the

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<sup>7</sup> The Network of Community-based Organizations includes the City of Toronto, Black Creek Community Health Center, Delta Family Resource center and San Romanoway Revitalization Center.

images that would be used in the mural. Several community members volunteered; some helped with painting; others, who were walking by, would often stop and give the artists ideas. Hence while there was consultation, the level of community engagement was limited. In fact, the feedback organizers got after the creation of this mural was that there needed to be more community involvement. Consequently, the murals that came later, which involved BeLovEd, had higher levels of community engagement.



Figure 1 Photo by Errol Young: Mural "Strong Women, Strong Community" (10 SanRomanoway)

This mural showcases the diversity in the community and the vital roles women play. It depicts six women of various races/ages. The image on the farthest left is of a woman holding her newborn, on the furthest right there is an elder looking back in nostalgia on the young mother. In the middle, the words “Strong Women, Strong Community” are painted in bold orange letters along with smaller images of women sitting, standing and engaging with nature. The backdrop is a blue sky and green hills, a relaxing and calming scene, which also includes a small glimpse of a high-rise building to link the image to the community.

As a resident, this was the first mural I had really noticed in the community. It was in such a visible location, I passed it every day to get home, as do many who take the Finch or Jane bus to the notoriously packed intersection do. I also remember noticing how its vibrant colours contrast with the plain white wall of a building which also acts as a landmark of the Jane Finch

community; the San Romanoway buildings, or Palisades, as community residents call them.

Today the mural is surrounded by a community garden, launched just this July,(2016). As I walk by it, I can't help but feel whole, the image is almost like a romanticized notion of what I want for the community. Romantacized in that mural showcases happiness and positivity.



Figure 2 Photo by Errol Young: "Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate others" (25 San Romanoway)

The second mural, *Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others*, at 25 San Romanoway is quite different from *Strong Women, Strong Community*. Whereas the first only depicts positive images, the second was intended to be more political, symbolic and provoking by showcasing images of pain, struggle and resistance. Created by Fiya Bruxa and Shalak Attack, artists from the Essentica Arts Collective, in collaboration with BeLovED, this mural was funded through the City of Toronto's 2011 Graffiti Transformation Partnership, which included Greenwin Property Management, the San Romanoway Revitalization Association, the BeLovEd Movement and the Black Creek Community Health Center.

*Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others* depicts the journey of a woman during different stages of her transition from a victim of gender-based violence to empowerment: “It depicts a story of struggle, survival, strength, love and support for young women who triumph through gender-based violence” (BeLovEd 2011). The first woman is seen screaming in agony



Figure 3 Photo by Errol Young “Be Inspire, Love Yourself, Educate Others (25 San Romanoway)

and beside her is an image of a hand lifting another woman, intended to represent the community supporting women. The center demonstrates her transition as it shows three set of hands interlocked; a sign of solidarity which is coupled with two images of faces, one blue, representing cold, the other orange, representing warmth. These are the faces of the gatekeepers who open the doors to empowerment. Further right a baby held by a wrinkled hand represents the importance of intergenerational learning and the birth of new life. The mural is encapsulated in the frame with an image of a woman looking back on the woman in pain, representing a woman looking back on her journey. Along with this main narrative, the mural also incorporates

various cultural patterns, intended to represent the diversity of Jane Finch, the image of an enlightened man, representing men's roles in eliminating gender-based violence, and the name of the mural. As a resident who passes by this mural nearly everyday, this mural represents the power in our community. The images resonate power, the power of strong women, the power of supporting each other, and the power of the Jane Finch community. The mural depicts so many images which represent my lived experiences: being supported by the women in my community represented by the hands lifting the woman up and the intergenerational learning's is quite significant in our community. Below are some interpretations of the murals recorded during interviews:

You see for example on top, the unity of the community, holding—standing strong together like building a stronger community ...in the context of gender-based violence, you have a man here [points at image] and that consciousness and awareness of what that actually means um the baby the future generations, new you know family what that means. And then we have portraits of different faces, from different cultures and different skin tones ...on the other side um oh yeah, yeah so kind of travel through left to right and so, you know the hurt, the pain um the struggle and the challenges of domestic violence and then the communities hands coming together to support so that together we can empower um people who have survived—who are survivors of domestic violence, these are kind of like the gatekeepers, and going through and that's why this portrait over here, she was looking back at her voyage. -Fiya, Artist

The standing on the hands right, the hands are holding you up. You have to be held up and knowing that. The very gently but in there, love yourself, be inspired, where you have to take a second to like you know what I mean, the pathway, the weaving, you know and even like the universe but here in your thyroid, which is very important space, in your throat in your voice, how do you share with people. It's amazing. It's amazing. I know that this one, this image always freaked me out for a minute, I was like are these like ghosts ...I always use to say that, but I mean I don't know what the intention was but like how I see it is like we can't be where we are at without our ancestors. ... So that's why I always thought of those two-- Andrea Bouchard-BeLovEd member

Um so the journey of the woman from going from distressed and I guess being a survivor of violence as a woman, um is then lifted up by members of the community, which all the different hands represent. Um and then this is kind of like a passion through from a cold existence to warmth, right? and the colours, and through the solidarity of kind of reconnecting then you have now birth of new life, and we wanted to have a man present in the mural as well, just to say that this is not just about women, in struggles, but it's also , it's men who are doing these things and so we need to also have the conversation with um, with men because their 50 % of this picture and so we wanted to have you know kind of a man that was strong and aligned and I guess aligned is what this depicts of being part of that transformation. Of the male population kind of going through that growth process as well. In this, I think there was a real beauty centered around the hands holding the baby being really old. Like old and wrinkly hands holding new life, so that was I guess this is the face of real transformation right here. Um and then, in the end, you have a more

empowered woman kind of looking back on the journey and being in a better place. So that was the story um of the visuals um, - The Real Sun, Community resident

*Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others* was created through community consultations held in the lobby of 10 San Romanoway and in the Yorkgate Mall. The first consultation, held on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009 in the lobby, was facilitated by The Real Sun with a Black Creek Community Health Center staff member. Organizers printed out images of public women (like Rihanna and Oprah Winfrey) who experienced gender-based violence and engaged in discussions with community residents of different ages, races, and genders. Through this consultation, the collective heard what residents would like represented, which images resonated with them, and the themes the mural should embody. This feedback was then translated into symbolic imagery that was used to create a mock up of the mural. This process ensured community voices informed and guided the mural project.

Youth from the Jane Finch Community Family Center's summer camp participated in the painting process. A group of young women who were residents of the community also helped to prime the wall, while another group of about twenty youth helped the art collective fill in lines of the textiles which are backdrops of the mural. Involving community in this process was quite significant as it facilitated discussions and allowed for community input. Residents asked questions and had discussions. These young people got the chance to learn techniques for spray painting and mural creation which provided them with transferable skills.





Figure 4 Photo by Errol Young: Photo of the Black Creek community Farm mural



Figure 5 Photo of the Black Creek Community Farm mural Retrieved from [http://www.blackcreekfarm.ca/?event\\_harvest-festival](http://www.blackcreekfarm.ca/?event_harvest-festival)

The third mural, located at the entrance of the Black Creek farm, supported by a grant from Street Art, was intended to make the farm more visible. Four local artists were hired and paid an honorarium, two of whom were interviewed in this study (Zea Malcolm and Suviana Burey) along with three muralists from outside the community (Shalak Attack, Fiya Bruxa and Bruno Smoky from the

Essencia Arts Collective).

The Black Creek Community Farm mural showcases the farm and nature. It contains images of bees, soil, roots, fruits, and vegetables, people cultivating the land with an urban backdrop of the skyline to contrast the city with the farm. In addition, indigenous symbols, like the dream catcher on the far right, were used to acknowledge the land which was being used.

For the Black Creek Community farm mural consultations were held with residents. The Real Sun, longtime resident and activist, was hired to coordinate the community outreach. Through her network, she was able to recruit local artists like Suviana Burey and Zea Malcolm, youth who were actively engaged in the community. The youth who were hired to help with the painting also took part in community programming surrounding food justice. They were taught painting techniques, particularly how to use spray paint. This collaborative participation engages the community in a meaningful way and is integral, in the same way as Moss has argue it can “maximize the positive impacts of public art for diverse ethnic and neighborhoods communities” (Moss 2010: 374).

### *The voice of the mural*

The role of murals in communicating messages was a consistent and recurrent theme throughout the interviews. Many respondents noted that they did not commission the murals for the sole purpose of beautifying or creating an aesthetically pleasing painting. Instead, they wanted the murals to send messages to the community and to society in general. In fact, through the interview process, it was discovered that the BeLovEd Murals were intended to be part of a public education campaign to raise awareness and put an end to gender-based violence. BeLovEd believes in the power of art as a political tool; the idea that advocating through art creates awareness and meaningful social change. The Real Sun articulated this commitment, “as an artist rather it be visually, vocally or through poetry, um it’s always about the message right, and art serving as a conduit, or as a tool to engaging in deeper conversation about the things that we need to be talking about”.

The artists from the Essencia Art Collective (Shalak, Fiya, and Bruno) describe art as an expression of the lived realities of communities, and stress the importance of publicly expressing

them. Shalak, one of the founding members of Essencia Art Collective, considers the images in the murals work a form of communication developed by the community which is understood across all languages and culture.

Members of the collective also emphasized the importance of making public art political. As artists engaged in public expressions of art they believed that they had an obligation to discuss social justice issues. Fiya, a founding member of the Essencia Arts Collective, who participated in both *Be Inspired, Love Yourself Educate Others* and The Black Creek Community Farm Mural talked about how the collective saw art as a tool for social change and community empowerment.

As such according to respondents, the BeLovEd murals focused on social justice in two key ways. First, they conveyed messages of solidarity and community support to women. Second, they were embedded with empowering images which showcased the commitment, strength, and resilience of women. Shalak described the mural on 25 San Romanoway in the following manner:

So this mural is both a way of like celebration of coming together as a community to support women and to empower women and then at the same time its ah it's kind of manifestation of the like the women screaming like saying no, like Basta, that's enough, ...being like we don't want any more violence [then] coming into how do we not have violence is like how do we support women and come together as a community... Yeah, so it's basically empowering women and men. Coming together.

One of the intentions was therefore that the mural could be used as a symbol of support for women with collective experiences of gender-based violence. This message of solidarity was particularly important because the murals were a response to the report on school safety known as *The Road to Health* (Falconer, et al 2008). Some respondents felt that the murals supported the young women in local high schools who shared their stories in the report. The murals were a way of showing them that their community cared and was trying to rally and respond. Butterfly

Gopaul, a long-time resident, BeLovEd member, and community advocate explains that the mural:

validated the young women[and] the students that participated in those interviews and shared those experiences. The worse is that [we could have done is] create spaces for people to be honest about their feelings, and end up like assaulting them you know, you take something so real from them and you don't do anything about it . So I think maybe that's the hope that people saw themselves, they were heard and that community residents, organizations moved around doing something about it

In addition to empowering women through images of solidarity, the BeLovEd murals were considered a milestone because they were the first public display to celebrate and recognize women. This is particularly significant in the Jane Finch community where many women take on informal roles as a youth- or community workers, jobs which go far beyond the typical nine-to-five work day. Women are constantly fighting for justice, providing support to residents, and helping others navigate large institutions like TDSB, hospitals or Children's Aid Societies, institutions which play a role in the lives of racialized women in the community. Butterfly's emphasized the importance of the theme *Strong Women Strong Community* when she talked about the abundance of work women do in the community and the lack of recognition for this work. For Butterfly, the murals depicted the real work that women in the Jane Finch community do, something she felt was not traditionally recognized. Andrea Bouchard echoed this appreciation of the murals as celebrating and appreciating women:

A lot of very strong women who are out there, not just raising families and dealing with all these institutions and trying to either protect your children or get your children into particular spaces, um but then they're also actually taking the time to put some of those things down for a moment and try to work on the larger community, cause they know their children are in these spaces, their families, they're raising their families in these spaces so that's what politicized this so much for me. It's like, it's about women, and me being a woman whose always been doing this work and seeing that this work is really pushed and driven by women.

Bouchard continues to stress this recognition dimension of the murals:

[The murals] send a message to us, that when someone says thank you, that community says thank you and that were important. And that's amazing. To you know that you can be like—and it's right across from the same places that we have to go there to do those thankless jobs, going and getting the groceries getting on and off the bus with your children, you know, in such a like it's such a obvious space, um to just say thank you and that's amazing and that's why it's so politicized you know.

Jessica Volpe, the artist of the mural on 10 San Romanoway also echoes this theme. For her, *Strong Women, Strong Community* highlights the strength of women and how this strength builds community. Volpe discussed what she hoped the mural would mean for community “well just basically for women, in general, to realize that they're important in the community and ...that they all have a presence that their roles are important.”

Many of the respondents highlighted the positive messages that the murals portray, even though the themes were centered on the elimination and

prevention of gender-based violence, a topic that can be dark and heavy. Both the artist and the residents involved believed that by acknowledging the significance and importance of women, the mural demonstrates the need to end violence towards women in addition to showing abused women that there is a way out.

The notion of murals conveying messages related to social justice was also a theme amongst those who were involved with the mural located at the Black Creek Community farm. While this mural was created with a simple intention, to bring attention to the “new” urban farm, the artists and community members saw it as an opportunity to create community awareness of

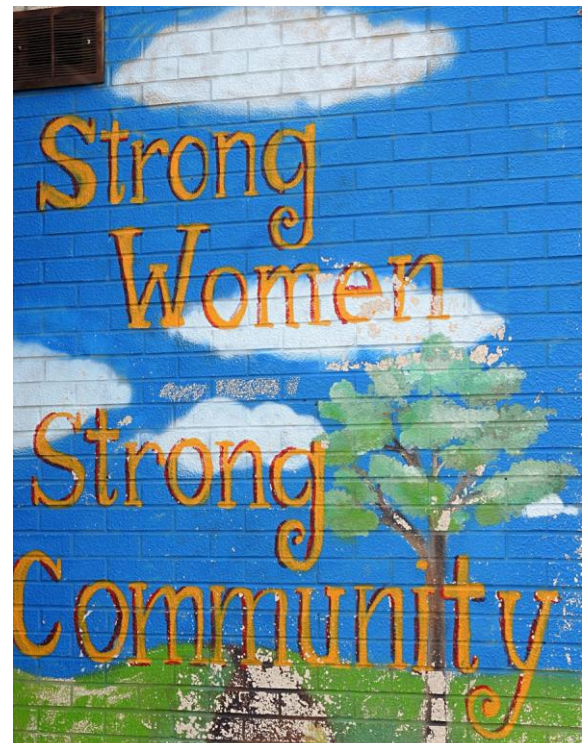


Figure 6 Photo by Errol Young : "Strong women, strong community" 10 San Romanoway

food justice and food security issues within the context of Jane Finch. Zea Malcolm, talked about the underlying message of the mural:

I think the underlying message is the buildings in the background. Simply that organic food—you know where your food comes from, isn't to far from your city. Right and that's a main- well not one of the main—there is, there's a whole bunch of problems and a whole bunch of worries. You have worries of re-gentrification , you got, cause Freshco comes in and Freshco is a symbol of regentrification, you got um the fact that um Longos and superstore, the good grocery stores will sell their food once it hits a certain point to No frills and so that's why it's cheaper, right and certain produce won't be there, like you won't see.

For Malcolm, the explicit purpose of the mural was intended to show residents that there was a place where they could go for organic food in the community. However, after stating this purpose, he talked at length about the lack of access to healthy food in the current community grocery store (No Frills)— which often sells rotting produce while simultaneously failing to sell healthy or organic options— contrasting it to the new grocery store (Freshco), which has more access to organic foods, but is often linked to gentrification. Suviana Burey, another resident, youth, and artist who worked this mural, also echoed these sentiments.

It means a lot in terms of your body, like being healthy. It means a lot in terms of this is a place where you can get healthy food, now branching out into your personal life. Like we went from everybody to you as an individual. It means a lot to the individual to say hey...even though I live in a low-income area I don't always have to eat McDonalds just because it's cheap, there's a place where I can go, where I know I can get fresh foods, ...fresh vegetable and fruit.

Members of the Essencia Arts Collective also spoke about the political significance of the murals in the context of Jane Finch.

If you wanted to show a utopia beautiful way of life where everything is organic and people are working in harmony. If you look at that within our society it's a political stance to do that, because you're almost going against the big corporations. It's a different sustainable way. So just to want to live in that certain way is a political stance. (Shalak)

Fiya Bruxa expanded on this theme:

The reality that we live in now, of corporate ownership of water and food, and how most of our food is toxic. Our water and our soils are being intoxicated and so this mural that is just about plants and animals therefore then becomes an extremely urgent community politicized mural within that context.

The respondents also noted that they embedded these messages in the murals to raise awareness and to build critical consciousness about issues facing the community. Yasmin Woodley for example noted; “I know that it [the mural] brought awareness for the people in our community. I know that it did, and I do believe that it continues to”.

The themes emerging from the interviews resonate with the existing literature on murals located in marginalized, racialized communities in the United States. Findings of this study suggest that the murals in Jane Finch were created with the intention of sharing messages with the local community and the broader public. The murals, therefore, express social awareness – particularly surrounding food justice and gender-based violence using imagery. David Conrad also argues this point when he suggests that community murals are a way for the community to share political and social messages (1995). The murals in Jane Finch were designed to raise awareness and mark the start of change to a healthy lifestyle and a community without gender-based violence. This resonates with Caruso and Caruso’s argument that murals can be used to create social change (2003). In this way, the murals represent a form of *free space* (Evans and Boytes, 1986), as they mobilize community awareness around pressing social issues.

It should be noted that awareness of food security and gender-based violence are particularly important because they are topics that are rarely discussed in the community. The lack of awareness about these issues made making a public art piece highlighting them particularly poignant. Bouchard noted, “I’ve always done social justice work, but one of the pieces that I’ve always left out of social justice was like my environment...we talk about income, we talk about health. [but we also] need to talk about food and food security and access to food”

reflecting on the farm mural. Food justice and food security have always been a major problem in the community, although these issues have never been a mainstream and were often pushed to the backburner. The community has always lacked access to healthy foods and is often called a food desert by its residents. Walking through the malls, or driving on Jane Street from Wilson to Steeles, one sees that major fast food corporations, like McDonalds, Pizza Pizza, and Popeye's, occupy the most space. Indeed, many residents view Subway as the only healthy option in the community (even though Subway's nutritional value is often contested). Concerns surrounding the quality of foods sold in local grocery stores have also been raised as there is a widespread belief that stores located in upper-class neighborhoods send their leftovers to Jane Finch.

In this particular context, a seemingly simple message about farm-fresh produce takes on heightened political meaning. If the mural was located elsewhere, a place where people have access to freshly grown produce regularly, its political nature would change. However, in the Jane Finch context, where the majority of the population live in high density apartment buildings with little access to green space, few residents know where their food comes from or have access to organic food. The farm mural raises awareness; it lets residents know there are opportunities to grow their own food and to purchase reasonably priced organic food. The mural brings attention to the issue of food security by shedding light on what it means to have access to healthy food. Link this to the Toronto skyline which is painted as the backdrop to the mural. For respondents this mural was two-folded, it demonstrated the marginalization of the community from the downtown core, yet it also works to showcase the ability to have healthy foods, even in an urban setting (showing a farm with high-rise buildings as the skyline).

When talking about the BeLovEd murals, Bouchard, along with many other respondents, expressed similar sentiments. "We're talking about ending violence against women right, which



is something that is not necessarily traditionally spoken about... so it's politicized cause we're talking about something that we don't always talk about in community development”.

Furthermore, the two BeLovEd murals can also be seen as political in the context whereby the murals were created as a direct form of resistance to the report written about safety in TDSB schools. Though BeLovEd believed that it was important to acknowledge the stories of those women who shared their experiences of gender-based violence, they also felt that the report drew excessively on examples from Jane Finch even though it was supposed to depict violence in schools throughout the TDSB. This disproportional representation of violence reinforces the labels of deviance and violence traditionally associated with the community. Creating murals as a response to this report became an intentional act of resistance. Laura Metcalfe the previous community develop officer and a member of BeLovEd talked explicitly about the BeLovEd mural as a response to the report written about safety in TDSB schools.

There was a bit of an unfair focus on the Jane Finch community. It identified violence as a problem in schools across the City of Toronto but it focused on examples for this community so a lot of parents and residents were like “why is this report again stigmatizing our community” . . . we had said through that committee we want to work with residents and community agencies and partners to develop a community-based response to the issues of gender-based violence [and] to say that this community is actually very active and responsive and if issues are identified there can be community-based responses to these issues.

The murals represent a counter-narrative that contradicts the implications of the report and shows that the community cares about its female residents and is taking the lead on creating a solution to bring an end to gender-based violence.

The importance of counter-narratives targeted to outsiders was another recurrent theme. All the respondents, even the artists who were not from the community, discussed the stigma associated with Jane Finch, portrayed by mainstream media as “one of the most notoriously

crime-ridden neighborhoods in Toronto” (Laidlaw 2013). For many, the strength and vibrancy of these murals counter stigmatization by providing real-life narratives of the community.

Respondents felt that the murals demonstrated realities of Jane Finch which opposed sensationalized media stories written by outsiders. The murals showcase attributes of the community – strength of the women, diversity, and activism— rather than pre-conceived notions identified by Butterfly as “women in Jane and Finch are seen, you know, as just having babies, having baby daddies, don’t do anything, drop out’s”. Respondents felt that the murals contradicted these dominant perceptions of the community. This theme also emerged in interviews about the mural at the farm. It shows “there’s a fight going on,” observed Malcolm, who felt that the mural showcased community activism and commitment to social justice. Malcolm also wanted the mural to alert outsiders to the contradiction the community, to question “why does this beautiful place have issues?”

Artists from outside the community also spoke how about this juxtaposition creates a different perspective, one that contradicts hegemonic depictions of the community. Shalak, for example, when speaking about this experiences, recalled that:

over the last five years, me and my sister have said wow, the experience that we’ve had in the Jane and Finch community is so different from the stereotypes. You come downtown or you work with other people . . . and you hear the stereotypes like "you’re working in Jane and Finch," and it’s like what? It’s not like a foreign land or not like a, you know, a bad movie like all the stereotypes. It’s actually one of the most beautiful communities that has so much love, it is a celebration of what life is.

Shalak’s sister Fiya also noted that “these particular murals are reflective of how a strong and united community Jane and Finch is”.

The discourse constructed around women is even more rigid in racialized, low-income communities like Jane Finch, where gender stereotypes intersect with racial stereotypes and notions of classism. Women are not only subjected to traditional gender norms, they are also

subjected to labels that are unique to their community. For example, they are often constructed as “ratchet,” a term used to describe racialized women from the inner-city, similar to describing someone as “ghetto,” but a term applied exclusively to women in Jane Finch are also constructed as promiscuous, unfit mothers or “welfare queens,” a theme touched upon by Butterfly during her interview. The murals, therefore, depict counter-hegemonic representations of local identities, a finding which is consistent with similar studies reported on in the literature, for example, Sieber, Cordeiro and Ferro’s (2012) research on marginalized youth and community murals in Boston and Moss’s (2010) case study of how murals in Philadelphia counter dominant discourses surrounding racialized people.

Another counter-narrative is the community’s commitment to social justice, something which is not recognized in media representations of Jane Finch. The murals demonstrate the community’s critical consciousness and activism, countering stereotypes that residents are lazy and disengaged. As Malcolm observed the murals showcase community unity and solidarity. The BeLovEd mural shows that there is a way out for women who are experiencing gender violence, that the community is standing with them. As such the murals counter many narratives which exist about the community.

Indeed, it becomes clear the location of the two BeLovEd murals was strategic: placed at the center of the infamous Jane Finch corridor, they countered the typical association of violence and despair with a message of vibrancy and hope. For Bouchard the location itself is inspiring:

The position of [the murals] is what’s inspiring...that ever so infamous corner... You know that Jane Finch corner that like everyone rather you’ve actually been there or not, you’ve heard about it. ...[but] You have this crazy intricate yet beautiful piece at the corner but again dedicated to ending violence against women which is such juxtapose against what people believe. You know, “they’re like violence dada da,” but then look community made a piece representing how we pledge to end violence.

Metcalf also spoke about the high visibility location of the murals:

So we thought it would be visible to residents but the other idea was that again with the stigma that the community faces the conception of Jane and Finch and the images that the media perpetuate of Jane and Finch we wanted to do something that was right at that intersection that was beautiful, that was positive, that was artistic, that was created with input from residents, that just told a different story about the community that highlighted some of the strong women in the neighborhood that are part of what makes the neighborhood so vibrant ...not talk about violence against women but talk about the strong women who are leaders in the community making change and the women who are inspirations, not only in the community but in general. So we felt like there was a symbolic importance to have them all – the mural at that corner, but that there was also a practical importance in the sense that's it's like a busy visible intersection where many residents would be traveling to and in and able to see and interact with the mural.

As such it should be stressed that the messages conveyed through the murals were never neutral, something which came up when one of the youth who created the mural on the farm, mentioned the mural on 10 San Romanoway. The respondent mentioned that she felt the mural was “just good”, and also mentioned during the early in the interview that she felt the mural on the farm was created with the intention to be neutral. It became clear that these murals were political during the later part of the interview as this same respondent started to make the links to the mural on the Black Creek Community farm and food justice and food security. Similarly though this respondent described the mural on 10 San Romanoway, as “just good” it became clear that an image which was “good” was political as it portrayed positive images of racialized women was a political.

At first glance one would not think the two murals are political but it is their meanings and the process of creating the murals which is significant. On the contrary, the mural on 25 spoke directly to gender-based violence. This mural and the images were quite explicit.

Evans and Boyte argue that free spaces, “defined by their roots in community, the dense rich networks of daily life” (1986, 20), create the conditions necessary for mobilization. Although the murals discussed here have not sparked the kind of massive mobilization (e.g., second-wave-feminism and the civil rights movement) that Evans and Boyte discuss, they clearly

played a role in strengthening communal identity and mobilizing residents around community concerns. The farm mural drew attention to food justice issues and connected residents in Jane Finch with the Black Creek Community Farm, an organization which provides gardening plots and access to affordable, fresh produce. The two BeLovEd murals engaged the community in discussions about gender violence and women's rights.

### *The mural creation process*

Through my interviews it became evident that the murals were very much a collaborative effort, which involved community engagement in various capacities: developing themes, securing funding, choosing the location and painting and construction of the murals. The literature suggests that when murals are created collaboratively in marginalized communities, they facilitate civic engagement and critical dialogue. This was found to be true for the murals in Jane Finch as well as throughout the interviews the importance of the collaborative creation process was a reoccurring theme.

For the two San Romanoway murals commissioned by BeLovEd community consultations were held in community spaces to engage community voices and community members helped with the physical painting of both murals. The Black Creek Community Farm mural also included community consultations, programming with youth, and collaborative painting with young artists. Respondents spoke about their appreciation of this; this process created space for and valued community input.

# BELOVED MOVEMENT

**MURAL TO BE PAINTED ON  
25 SAN ROMANOWAY**

***we want your input***

**COMMUNITY CONSULTATION**

**TUESDAY JULY 19<sup>th</sup> 4-5 PM**

**FRONT ROOM IN THE LOBBY**

***EVERYONE WELCOME!***

The BeLovEd Movement was launched in 2009, as a community based response to the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment in high schools as cited by the School Community Safety Advisory Panel in 2008. Their safety survey found that 33% of (high school) female respondents reported being a victim of sexual harassment in school over the past two years. Youth, agencies, and community partners in the Jane & Finch community have joined together as part of the BeLovEd Movement, educating to end violence against young women and promote healthy relationships.

***'Be Inspired. Love Yourself. Educate Others'***

***For More Info Contact SUN: 647 262 5836 – [sun@therealsun.com](mailto:sun@therealsun.com)***

Figure 7 Community Consultation call out poster

The Essencia Art Collective repeatedly emphasized their commitment to a community-engaged process and noted that this engagement is essential to their artistic output. In fact during the interviews the collective stated that if the community is not involved in the creation process, they often refuse to participate. Bruno, noted that the mural was important because they are “building something up. Not just art but also everything for the good for the community.” Shalak echoed this sentiment:

I think it [community involvement] is super important especially when you're doing a community mural because, as an artist, you don't want to overlap your own voice or your own vision when you're trying to empower a community. So what you're trying to do is like highlight the voice that is already there. So it's us really trying to get ideas and get the voice and understand it and have that be the expression. Then we help kind of conceptually, artistically uh because how we see the murals is like a language so it's like almost translating from English to Spanish, or English to art to like the visual language of the murals... so basically it's yeah trying to empower the true voice that is already there

This ongoing commitment to empowering community voices was highly recognized and appreciated by the community and community residents. Butterfly, for example, noted:

So the process was really beautiful right, like I mean there was a lot of community discussions or consultations, people coming together to talk about a theme. So it was a process you know, bringing in the artists and really allowing the community to see themselves. Through their vehicle of telling a story, um and it was a time to kind of take the shame away from people's experience, to get to the point where they are. Um it was really driven by community artists and community developed these pieces

This collaborative process was described as democratic and organic. The artists did not impose their opinions on community members; the community was given the chance to take the lead in the content of the mural. Because of the high degree of community involvement the residents felt that the murals told their stories, sent their messages, and showcased the images they wanted. In other words, the murals were reflective of community realities, something quite significant as residents rarely have an outlet to voice their stories and realities.

In addition this collaborative process involved bringing a variety of people from all over the community together to work on a single project. For respondents, this experience of uniting people of various ages, races, genders and ethnicities was highly valued and productive. Butterfly noted that "it's so reflective of different experiences, different communities, and cultures coming together to really like represent." She continued, "It took time... it engaged young people, elders, people who lived in the neighborhood, um, organizations invested time, so it was really beautiful". One of the results of bringing various groups together was the creation of a collective identity.

This is particularly significant in the context of Jane Finch, as the community's marginalized position means that the residents' voices are often ignored or unheard, they rarely have a say in community matters



Figure 8 by Tony Bock / TORONTO STAR

controlled by institutions. A prime example of this was seen when the community was renamed “University Heights” in 2008 as part of a rebranding strategy initiated by city councilor Anthony Perruzza. There was no community consultation which outraged residents who felt that the rebranding was a Band-Aid solution, one which negated the sense of pride many residents associate with the name Jane Finch (Aveling 2009).

The active involvement of residents in the mural projects also facilitated the community's ongoing engagement in pressing community issues. This is clearly illustrated in Fiya comments about *Be Inspire, Love Yourself, Educate Others*:

Perhaps all those community members would not have, we would not have sat in rooms together to discuss these issues of you know Gender-based violence or Gender-based violence in Jane and Finch. Like it actually gave us an opportunity to talk and the weeks that we painted the mural people kept stopping by and saying stuff and like talking about it

The Real Sun felt it was extremely important to have workshops which provided the young artists with the opportunity to have critical discussions before and during the painting process. They talked about the importance of food justice and what this concept means in the context of Jane Finch as well as what food security means, and the role of the Black Creek



Community Farm. During the interviews, references to these conversations came up frequently and were clearly significant. Malcolm, for example, repeatedly referred back to food justice issues emphasizing how much he valued their inclusion. Bouchard spoke about how empowering the dialogue process was:

It created a lot of space for dialogue in the painting of the mural, as people are walking by, were having the conversations like what is this about da da . It wasn't just promotion about the organization but the conversation about gender-based violence and the report that came out from the TDSB about our young girls. So um I think the creation of the murals sparked and laid a stage for these important conversations to take place, that perhaps may not of? Especially with young people.

This dialogue made the mural process an educational one; the murals became a tool for engaging in conversations about social justice issues. This was also seen in the two BeLovEd murals; the workshops, the setting up of images in the apartment building lobby, and the ongoing conversations with residents facilitated meaningful discussion and raised awareness in the broader community. Fiya discusses this too:

I think it's the process and the dialogue we create [both] before it was painted or after people um see it...that dialogue is the exchange of ideas and concepts and opinions or emotions that come from this work, and I think that's where empowerment comes, cause dialogue will always lead somewhere.

This is another example of how the murals acted as a form of free space where people could unite for a common good and create social change.

The Real Sun, spoke about this as she reflected on the experience at the farm: “we didn't feel it would be complete without actually having that education piece with young people in the community”.

Conrad (1995) and Caruso and Caruso (2003) discuss the use of murals as educational tools. Evan and Boyte also argue that free spaces are spaces where people become aware of forms of oppression and develop self-respect and commitment to a common good. In other words, in free spaces, people should be able to develop counter-hegemonic thought. This was witnessed in all

three of the murals, as there was an ongoing, meaningful dialogue about various social justice issues which fostered critical consciousness. The murals became spaces where people could have counter discussions in isolation of major institutions; discussions which would otherwise not be had. Furthermore long after their creation, the murals continued to be used as spaces to have conversations about alternative ways of life, or community change discussions which are markers of free space (Polleta 1999).

**COMING SOON!!!**

**BeLovEd Movement Mural**

*“Be Inspired. Love Yourself. Educate Others”*



**Painting starts Monday August 1, 2011 on the outside wall of  
25 San Romanoway (facing Yorkgate Mall)!!!!**

*For more information about the project, please contact Lisa Brown  
@ Black Creek Community Health Centre (416) 249 8000 x2298*

**Figure 9 BeLovEd Coming soon flyer used to notify residents**

Though all three of the murals had different levels of community involvement, each involved community consultations and community participation in the painting process. In short, this collaborative process was the key to creating outcomes, which would not have occurred otherwise; specifically, the involvement of community residents and the representation of their voice and realities in the murals.

## *The legacy of the murals*

Another recurrent theme was the lasting legacies of the murals, the feeling that their message and political impact would persist long after their creation and launch. Bruno, alludes to the murals' ability to convey political messages which endure over time as he states:

we don't want to put colours on there, we got to say something because we have the tools. It's the same as the people doing a protest, they are going to have a page saying oh stop putting pipes in you know the lakes and let's try to be healthier or maintain the nature, but those people will be gone in a couple minutes [but] for us it's something that we do and this is going to last for five or six years.

This comparison is quite significant in that it demonstrates murals ability to leave messages that continue to resonate through time. For respondents the murals created an ongoing dialogue with community members. According to Butterfly:

The murals created a conversation with people who weren't connected to the development of the mural. When the mural came up people started having conversations about these pieces of art in the community. And that was something maybe the planning table never really thought of, and that had an impact

Woodley echoed a similar view when reflecting on *Be Inspired, Love Yourself, Educate Others*;

I think it brings love in a way because once you see art on a wall where you're like – for me walking past it every day going to school, or going out you get to look at them with other people and sharing your thoughts about it ...and that's just like bringing love in with everybody because you talk to other people about it, and stop and stare, and it also shows the different stories and people that come from that community

Shalak, talking about the same mural, commented “space and time to reflect... Uh to think about it and to read ...the different messages ...at so many different levels [it provides] the time and space for people to actually look and reflect about uh what does this mean”. Fiya also discusses the way these dialogues continue on social media : “and um even years after, people share the image on social media and then it's talked about again, and then it's shared”. This is significant because the murals function to keep conversations alive.

## Murals of Jane and Finch

Updated about 5 months ago

I was asked if I had pictures of the larger murals in Jane and Finch. I do but it seemed simpler to go out and shoot them this morning. A cold, overcast day. These were created over the last ten years or so and are starting to show their age. However, they still speak to the humanity in our community.

Three of them are on the walls of social housing highrises in the area and one is at the Black Creek Community Farm. Each is a powerful graphic statement as a whole as well there are some very powerful images in them. I have mixed them up a bit.



Figure 10 Facebook post regarding murals made on January 14th, 2016

In addition the murals continue to be used as a common space for community residents. Bouchard describes the importance of their location in “a public space right where the community is going to be gathering, where the community is going to be having conversations, where the community is going to be seen every day, rather it’s morning, rather it’s lunch, rather their coming home from school”. Butterfly also spoke about using the images of the murals afterward in many presentations. She also shared a story about bringing women she was working with to *Be Inspired, Love Yourself Educate Others* to initiate discussions that demonstrated the value of the mural in the community, the way it is utilized as a common space, and how it continues to further conversations related to gender-based violence:

I brought young women that I was working with, who were part of a program “women moving forward” [they were] moms, single moms on O.W and um we had like a picnic lunch... and these are women from all different backgrounds, white, west Indian brown-black... we just sat there and talked about different parts of the image and what it meant to them, with the hands coming from the ground, to like their stories of child welfare, of

being pushed out of school...how they feel being with their welfare worker or like, um you know the night of day of like, honestly I'm just kind of remembering what was said and what we talked about and like every part of this mural I think was talked about. And it wasn't just talking about the image, but what it meant what it triggered for them inside. And everything was hard and tough but the beauty they were able to see in it.

The respondents talked about how the murals continue to be used in various capacities. In 2012, the mural located on 25 San Romanoway was used as the cover picture on the report

“Improving mental health services in the Jane and Finch community:

Research with the Afro-Caribbean, Latin American, Somali, Tamil and Vietnamese communities.” (Trevelyan, Barragan, Grendys, Martella, Ampoinsah, Chom, Walko, Rich, Tang & Hamilton 2012). Images of both BeLovEd murals were used throughout the report. In 2015 the mural on 10 San Romanoway was referenced in the “The Jane Finch TSNS Task



Figure 11 Artist call out for New mural to be commissioned 2016

Force” report. In April 2016 Nathan Baya, a community resident and artist, filmed his political music video “Bring PMA back” with the murals as his backdrop. The song calls for the

reopening of a community space which was wrongly closed down because workers wanted to be unionized.

In May 2016, flyers reading “Make Your Mark” announced that another mural would be created on San Romanoway, with a similar collaborative process. These various uses and evocations of past murals demonstrates their significance to residents.

Furthermore the murals have been used as a form of common space, a theme Bouchard highlighted, referring to the mural on 25 San Romanoway:

This one reminds me of like ... music, of marching, I don't know. Like the picture is one thing but it always marks something for me cause whenever we do stuff with like Jane Finch Action Against Poverty or some type of rally it's like the meeting place right. If you don't know where you're going and you're coming through Finch, there's a mural :just look across the street and we WILL be over there. So, it's always like a marker to me.

Commenting on the farm mural, she reflected,

“it becomes a marker at the farm, you want food, there's a farm up there, and I'm like where? There's a mural if you see the mural, and there like oh I see the mural and I'm like great that's where the farm is. So now it's become more of a marker of a space”.



Figure 12 Photo by Errol Young : section of Mural located on the Black Creek community Farm

Accessible, public space is particularly important in Jane Finch, a community with a

deficit in spaces where youth feel safe. Galankis (2015) argues that that youth in the community are constantly challenging what is acceptable and asserting their civic rights to reclaim and create public space. As a form of free space, the murals represent one of the few spaces in Jane Finch which youth have reclaimed. Through the process of creating the murals, spaces within the community provide a forum for discussion and the imagining of alternative environments and lives.

Finally, in terms of the lasting impact of these murals, one of the most common themes was the sense of pride, which all those involved in the mural creation process experienced. Respondents reported feeling proud of being part of the process. Several residents spoke about the murals as “landmarks” for the community. Malcolm noted that the mural on the farm should be celebrated because it was done by the community, for the community, and through a process where youth gained skills. In fact, Malcolm felt like going through the process was a significant achievement for the young artists. Woodley, another young artist, shared similar sentiments. Though she no longer lives in the community, she repeatedly noted her love for Jane Finch and the sense of pride because of her involvement in the mural:

I think anybody would be proud. Me personally um I love where I came from...I think I'm just proud because it's like me leaving a mark in my community and being able to show people this is where I come from and what I'm a part of...it's like actually now go on the internet and be like, “guys this is what I'm a part of, this is where I come from, this is me,” you know, and I'm very proud to be able to showcase that in such a form of art if you know what I mean, because I am an artist.

The process allowed the residents to play a vital role in the creation of the murals. For young artists this was an especially formative experience:

You know and it was young people, right from the high schools who are now like rather in college or university, or working or maybe starting with their families, that started this. So now they have a story to tell their youth. “I did this work when I was doing leadership work within my schools... to know that you have spaces in your community that are dedicated to those statements that you can say when you are twenty “ uh listen I was doing this when I was fifteen and there are marks in my community that show this kind of work (Andrea Bouchard)

The Real Sun spoke about how the mural fostered a sense ownership for the artists;

It is a landmark, something to celebrate. It is a stable part of our community now. Everybody knows that there are murals on Palisades...I feel really humbled to be a part of that legacy piece, in the motion of creating them, I wasn't thinking about that, but now kind of looking back at it, I'm like that's really cool... Just the idea that maybe I can come back when I'm 80 years old and these buildings are still here and to be like “oh yeah I” [laughs] very selfishly like that's what I'm thinking, but in terms of just the community like, it just its art, it's not concrete. You know, it's not just more blank walls and more brick and more you know cement. It's something that people can look at and um and be—and feel good about, and also have conversations about.

It needs to be noted that the dynamics of Jane Finch make that concept of ownership quite rare, the community has the highest number of public housing units in Canada along with a majority of the residents who rent, and a large proportion of residents who live in shared dwellings (Ward profile 2011). Residents therefore rarely get a say in what happens to the infrastructure of the community. Hence, the opportunity to construct a message and share a message or to create a tool to showcase their voices in a public space becomes quite significant. In this context, the creation of the murals provide residents with the opportunity to engage with and to reclaim their communities (1995).

*Bringing art to the “Hood”; democratizing art*

The final theme that emerges from the interviews is the importance of the murals as a way of democratizing art. Traditional art is typically elitist, displayed in galleries, and inaccessible to the working class. Murals take art to the street and to the broader public and a form of art which belongs to the community. This “democratization of art” was especially significant in the context of Jane and Finch, a community that has little access to conventional art. The artists spoke about the significance of doing art in a lower income communities; they felt it was much more important to do art in these communities as opposed to wealthier communities, where people have access to much more.

I’m so happy that there are these beautiful murals up top<sup>8</sup>. Away from the downtown core, cause that’s where you see a lot of grafs, and a lot of work. And you don’t get to see that as much up top, like in the North side of the city...so I was really excited by that.

Bruno, the artist provided an interesting perspective as he express that he felt that it was for more meaningful to share his artwork in communities like Jane Finch because he felt it would be more

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<sup>8</sup> Uptop is a particular “hood” located north of the Jane Finch intersection.



appreciated there. Bruno felt that sharing art in communities which don't have access to traditional art like art galleries, is quite important:

And I feel like oh I feel like I don't want to share my heart down here [downtown], where people can have access all the time to everything, good food, good technology, good location, good everything...so id rather do something up there [Jane Finch] for the people to live with and appreciate everyday then have to go downtown to see it. so for me its way more important to paint in those communities where its missing art and visual language

Shalak added on to this, and added the importance of art in public spaces;

so having those expressions in a public space where everybody can see it is really powerful cause it really democratizes what art is, when we usually, what Bruno was touching on before is like you have to go downtown, or you have to see them in museums or in Galleries and you, it's not always in your day to day life in our society. So I think it's a really powerful way of communicating ideas and concepts and also feelings and having that cultural side within your day to day life is very powerful

In fact Shalak noted that one of the reasons she became a muralist was because of her political upbringings which made it important to her to make art accessible.

This theme itself linked to the communities' physical marginal position as further away from the downtown core, and can be linked to the discussion of divided city. It is without a doubt that there are no convention art galleries in Jane Finch (the closest is the art galleries located at York University) as opposed to the downtown core, which houses numerous art galleries and museums.

Furthermore art in private spaces like musesm are reserved for those who have the social-economic ability to access them. They are kept behind closed doors from the public. Murals on the contrary are located in public spaced for all to access, Fiya disucsses this

world of art as well its extremely elitist and institutionalized, galleries and once you go into that world I would say it's one of the most elitist art forms that exist. And so graffiti and street art and taking art out of the institutions, putting it on the street is already questioning the elitism and it puts this like, the newspaper or the voice me media back into the communities hands.

The murals, the graffiti, the youth who perform their pieces at community events, these are the ways the Jane Finch community accesses art, and often this art is done by the community itself.

As such the murals represent a way of performing art in the everyday space. Making art public, for those of various socio-economic positions rather than reserving it for the elite.

### Conclusion

The findings suggest that the three community murals under study encode and politicize experiences of living in Jane Finch. The murals share messages which build awareness about pressing community concerns, contribute to mobilization around these concerns, and create a sense of solidarity among community residents. The messages embodied by the murals are forms of resistance, resistance to the dominant narratives of what it means to be a racialized woman, of what it means to be from Jane Finch. The murals tell a different story of Jane Finch, a story of community solidarity and of civic engagement. They spread awareness and mobilize the community around issues of food justice and gender-based violence.

The process of creating the murals empowered residents. The murals were community driven and created through a democratic process which valued community voices, led to reclamation of community spaces, and united a wide range of residents together to form a collective identity.

The legacy of the murals remains strong and positive; they stand as lasting symbols of the community. The murals reflect the realities of living in Jane Finch, and as a result they inspire and instill a sense of pride and belonging. They continue to be used as common spaces and as spaces which are linked to social changes. This is significant in a community that lacks access to public space, in particular, spaces for youth.

Finally, the murals can be considered a form of “protest against injustice and praise for cultural values” (Conrad 1995:129). They work as a political act by redefining art in a manner that resonates with residents; they are a form of art for the people, by the people.

In this sense the murals democratize art.

From the findings I suggest that the murals function as what Evans and Boyte (1986) called “free space” in several ways. They are physical markers of community-driven, autonomous, public spaces, spaces that foster a strong sense of collective identity and the development of critical consciousness concerning issues of food justice and gender-based violence. The murals are spaces which allow and facilitate counter-narratives.

#### *Further research*

Despite the lasting legacy of the murals in Jane Finch, one must question how much longer murals will continue to function as political tools of mobilization. This question arises because, in the Toronto context, murals are increasingly being used for their aesthetic appeal; and in some cases as a tourist attraction. Murals used in this context are not created collaboratively and are not used to convey political messages. This shift to commercialization was seen in 2015 when the Essencia Art Collective created a mural at Caledonia and Lawrence to showcase the realities of global warming. The mural depicted images of environmental destruction and was highly criticized because it was frightening and for its political nature (Sunshine 2015). The muralists rallied to combat the attempt to depoliticize the mural—a city councilor had proposed “editing” the images. A petition to protect the mural’s integrity received over 3085 signatures. The impact of the increasing commercialization of murals on community murals is a topic that warrants further study.

Another question, which arises from the data, is how can we preserve these murals which have such significance in the community? Murals are temporary in nature. Over time they fade, and they can also be painted over in an instant. What does this temporality mean to the lasting legacy of the murals? To the role they play in the community? And how can community

members deal with this temporal nature? This is especially important in the context of Jane Finch which is in the process of gentrification. How does the community ensure that the collaborative process of creating murals continues? How will the murals change in a gentrified context where residents claim to community becomes threatened?

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Appendix A: Launch event posters

*The Network of Community Based Organizations, the City of Toronto, Black Creek Community Health Centre, Delta Family Resource Centre and San Romanoway Repatriation Association cordially invite you to*

*The Unveiling Ceremony of the*

*"Strong Women, Strong Community" Mural*




*Accompanied by the Launch of the*

*BeLoved Movement*  
*A campaign to eliminate gender-based violence*

Thursday December 10, 2009  
4pm - 8pm  
Palisades Cineplex  
15 San Romanoway  
(NE corner of Jane & Finch)

*Performances by Nomenland Mad Poet & Sun*

Please RSVP by December 4, 2009 by phone @ (416) 249-1252 x2222

Link us for more info :  
On  @ Beloved Movement | <http://beloved.movement.blogspot.com> | [publiceducationcampaign@gmail.com](mailto:publiceducationcampaign@gmail.com) | 416.249.1252 x2222








Event sponsored by:  
  
  
  
  
  
  


Figure 13 Mural on 10 San Romanoway Launch

**BLACK CREEK COMMUNITY FARM**

Light Refreshments Will be Served

**Community Mural**

*Inviting*

**OCTOBER 26, 2013**  
**2-4PM**

**2949 JANE ST**  
blackcreek@everdale.org  
416.393.6381

BLACK CREEK COMMUNITY FARM  
Everdale  
FRESH  
Afri-Can FoodBasket  
FoodShare

Figure 14 Mural on Black Creek Community farm Launch poster