

Direct Action: Jane Finch Action Against Poverty

by Maandeeq Mohamed



The corner of Jane Street and Finch Avenue gives way to an expanse of concrete at the edge of the Jane Finch Mall parking lot. Over the decades, the space has been used as an ad-hoc stage, playing host to everything from parking lot carnivals to community protests. Such improvisation is not uncommon when a lack of public infrastructure necessitates curious riffs on public space. Ledges and banisters become benches to sit on when carrying heavy groceries while waiting for the bus. And that large concrete slab at the corner of Jane and Finch could be anything you want it to be. For Funmilola (Lola) Lawson, a rapper who goes by the name of LolaBunz, the corner of Jane and Finch is where she cut her teeth at community rallies as a member of Jane Finch Action Against Poverty (JFAAP), a grassroots organization formed in 2008 to address purposeful state neglect, through a combination of tactics including mutual aid, advocacy, political education, and direct action. Since 2008, JFAAP has organized against the School Resource Officer (SRO) program, which placed cops in Toronto schools. Alongside groups like Education Not Incarceration, the Latinx, Afro-Latin-America, Abya Yala Education Network (LAEN Toronto), Jane Finch Education Action Group and many other activists, JFAAP was part of a concerted effort to remove cops from Toronto schools. By 2017, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) would vote to remove all police officers from its schools.

It is mid-July of 2021 when I meet with JFAAP on Zoom. It has been a little over a year since the start of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. And approximately a year since the summer of toppled statues and abolitionist desires played out in protests on the streets. Though these desires were quickly diffused in the public imagination and absorbed into electoral politics, for JFAAP, the fight never stopped. The terrain of struggle existed long before that one summer, and will continue long after it. The work of freedom is piecemeal—so much precedes the cathexis of the burning police station. My conversations with JFAAP focus on the pressures of organizing amid constant surveillance. From undercover cops infiltrating JFAAP meetings and public schools, to the long history of mistreatment of community members (and especially youth) by security guards, from ubiquitous CCTV cameras to heavy police presence at their protests, the entire Jane Finch community has been under constant surveillance. There is wariness around their public assembly.

Accompanying “A Day in the Life”
by Funmilola Lawson.

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Photograph courtesy of **Jane Finch Action Against Poverty**.

Another conversation that is of importance in my meetings with JFAAP, is the question of space. After decades of state neglect, Jane and Finch is now at the centre of conversations surrounding “urban renewal” and “revitalization.” With York University’s subway station completed in 2017, and Metrolinx’s expansion of transportation infrastructure linking Jane and Finch to the downtown core, the neighbourhood is increasingly gentrified. Government-subsidized housing is labelled as a “safety risk”— a pretext to tear down affordable rental units before selling the land to developers, despite the fact that for decades, soon-to-be demolished communities like Firgrove Crescent were denied basic repairs and maintenance. And in 2008, there were attempts to rebrand the intersection of Jane and Finch as “University Heights.” The proposed name was meant to associate the neighbourhood with nearby York University, as if to distance Jane and Finch from the anti-Black news headlines that equate the community with abject violence. Consider former city councillor Giorgio Mamoliti’s remarks about the neighbourhood in 2018: “I see it like spraying down a building full of cockroaches.”

In line with such narratives of “revitalization” and “progression,” in July 2020 Metrolinx (Ontario’s regional transit agency) reneged on its promise to allocate a parcel of land for the Jane and Finch community’s benefit, instead revealing plans to sell the land on the open market. In response to public pressure, Metrolinx vaguely gestured to the possibility of a “condition of sale” that would require a private buyer to also build a community centre. JFAAP organizers tell me that Metrolinx is just the latest in a long line of institutions that have shut down access to public space: before Metrolinx, the San Romanoway Revitalization Association abruptly closed the Palisades Media Arts Academy in 2014. And yet another key space was lost with the closure of West Side Arts Hub in York Woods Library. JFAAP members emphasize that nothing has been “given” to the Jane Finch community without a fight. For instance, the “Community Before Profit” campaign launched by JFAAP was instrumental in pushing the Ontario government to eventually transfer “Metrolinx lands” for use as a community hub. Community-led plans for The Jane and Finch Community Hub and Centre for the Arts are now underway. What does it mean for Metrolinx to sell stolen land? Many of the communities that make up Jane and Finch are themselves displaced by colonial violence across the Americas, Africa and Asia. As Saidiya Hartman tells us in *Lose Your Mother*, “staying is living in a country without exercising any claims on its resources.”

In Jane and Finch, people look for other forms of living that do not rely on generating profit from stolen land. Consider the Nomanzland collective. Formed in 2006 under the former name CAST, Nomanzland was a diffuse performance collective whose former members included Lola. The group name cheekily nods to a phrase often used to refer to the Jane and Finch neighbourhood: “no man’s land,” as if to say that no humans live here. “No man’s land” is also reminiscent of the phrase “no humans involved,” which is a term used by police to describe the deaths of Black people. I also think of *terra nullius*— the idea of Turtle Island as “nobody’s land.” In 1787, the logic of *terra nullius* allowed the British to claim that it had “purchased” what is today known as Toronto from the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Gentrification depends on the continued displacement of Black and Indigenous peoples. Nomanzland asks us: what becomes possible outside of colonial humanism?

After 10 years of working with Nomanzland, Lola continues to write. Her most recent work is “A Day in the Life,” which is a poem on the minutiae of state abandonment,

perhaps best represented by the 35 Jane bus. As one of As one of the most heavily used transit lines in Toronto, the 35 is chronically underserved. In a neighbourhood whose residents rely on public transit, it is not uncommon for the 35 Jane bus to be consistently overcrowded during a pandemic and subject to delayed service. In stark contrast, nearby York University has its own subway station, providing a seamless link to the downtown core. Lola recounts the drudgery of the 35:

35 Jane!

That's the bus route that takes me home.

I've been waiting for this damn stupid bus for over 35 minutes.

Two buses have passed.

One out of service, and one was too packed.

Not to mention it's rush hour.

This is a regular day on the Jane, though.

Lola’s stream-of-consciousness style recreates the tension of a bus that never comes: “a regular day on the Jane.” The lines invoke tired feet, or the weight of groceries in bags with handles that dig into knuckles. Lola’s is a poetry of the everyday.

When Lola reads me an excerpt from “A Day in the Life,” her cadence alternates between a conversational flow, like chatter you’d hear on a busy bus, and staccato bursts, as if the bus itself was coming to a sudden halt. The ease with which she controls her flow can be attributed to her background in rap. Under the moniker LolaBunz, Lola is quickly becoming one of Toronto’s most compelling underground rappers. On “Hot Heads,” she introduces her drill track with a bit of genealogy:

Yo these youths are wilding fam, like it's not even a joke ting right now.

But you want to know the real reason these youths are wilding?

Cuz back when they did the raids,

and they raided all the hoods,

they took out all the OG's, you know.

And these are the only OG's that can talk to these likkle wild youths, you know.

These lines make me think of the long history of police raids by 31 Division officers in Jane and Finch. The track pays homage to a previous generation of Lola’s peers. To remind the new kids of her milieu, she tells us: “over a decade in the game, I ain’t never been a stranger.” Lola’s history of Jane and Finch is one that acknowledges the neighbourhood’s profound impact on Toronto’s cultural imagination, which is hinged on the cultural production of Black youth who imagine otherwise in the midst of state violence. Lola’s citational practices remind publics of “what happens when I touch the mic”: an ode to Jane and Finch, her interlocutor.

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