





Stories and Storefronts

Introduction

In 2018, we started talking about what we wanted contemporary art to look like in Toronto. Who is contemporary art for in its current incarnation? Whose stories does it reflect? How can it speak to broader audiences?

Having both grown up in and around Toronto, we wanted to start from the heart, sharing our families' stories of immigration and inviting artists and the Toronto community to do the same. When we explored the geography of diaspora in the city for this project, we recognized how stories like ours are woven into the fabric of Toronto and its neighbourhoods, and how immigrant-owned, brick-and-mortar shops mark the patterns of movement of cultural communities into and across the city.

And now, it's 2022. After some long delays that we have all become accustomed to these days, we are happy to showcase the people, neighbourhoods, and stories that make Toronto our home. This publication is a reflection on these ideas and accompanies the exhibition, *Stories and Storefronts*, which takes place in select shop windows across Danforth East.

Thank you to everyone who has supported and inspired us along the way. We especially would like to make shoutouts to the participating artists, Sarindar Dhaliwal, Mani Mazinani, Petrina Ng, and Shellie Zhang, as well as Jasmine Cardenas, Christie Carrière, Colour Code, Durable Good, Flo Leung, Michi McCloskey, and the Danforth Mosaic BIA for their contributions to the project.

And of course, none of this would have been possible without the many people who shared the stories of their families and their shops with us. We have highlighted some of these on the Stories and Storefronts Instagram page (@storiesandstorefronts).

Charlene K. Lau and Negin Zebarjad

What
Carries
Us

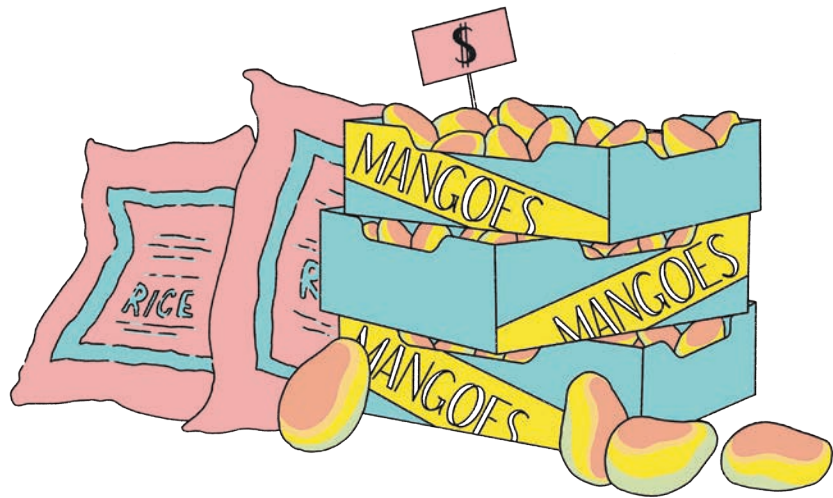
Janika

Oza

We recognize it anywhere we go. Strip mall, parking lot, tar stains, pigeons. A sign above the door, a name recalling temples and gardens and civilizations past. Golden this, Temple that. Or a name that gets straight to the point, yellow and all-caps—CASH & CARRY. HALAL. MEAT & SPICES. Or sometimes, sometimes no sign at all. A bell behind the door frame, maybe. Always, flyers in the window, hand-printed phone numbers, greasy tape. We take notice, or we don't, but we know it's there, if we need a room, or a couch, or a tutor, or a long-distance calling card. We know where to come.

We know, too, the order of the aisles. In June, boxes of mangoes by the door, towering high and orange, the top few open and sifted through, the ripest plucked and gone. The rice aisle, dusty and moth-soft, jute sacks bulging with grain. How brave, those moths, to come so far. Behind the counter, cigarettes and hair oils, movies in crinkled plastic, blank CDs burnt to hold decades of song. Our mothers, they listen while they cook. They hum into the potatoes, twirl as they grind cardamom and clove. The tears that we see slipping—just the onions! They say. When we leave home, they turn the dial up. Dance with the spoon, chappals slap on tile. We don't know how well they sing.

Sometimes we browse the frozen aisle. Cooking for friends—we buy yogurt for panting tongues, pre-rolled kachori, tubs of kulfi. We don't tell our grandmothers that we sometimes buy the rotis, follow the instructions on the packet to reheat. We don't let them look in our freezers. We don't like to look either, to let in that seed of shame, our not-enoughness. We don't like to remember how little we know, how far we've gone. But when the hunger strikes, the kind from beyond the stomach, we know where to reach. We, daughters of diaspora. We, sons of movement. We, children who don't know what we can claim.



We recognize the person behind the till. We've seen him, perhaps, for twenty years. We've met his wife, accepted bags from his son. When we check out, we share a nod. We ask when the next shipment is coming. We count out the change, he tears the receipt, and we exchange something we always have, a knowing that we are all here, that he still will be when we come back. A moment of permanence. The bell chimes our exit.

We carry the bags home through subway and snow. The moths, they come along. They cling to what carried them, what little that may be. We wash the rice, sift the stones. We open the window. Dust-laden, bereft, they find their way. Ghost wings trembling in first flight; we let them go.

Phillip

Dwight

Morgan

Cracked
Linoleum &
Ackee

1. First, you must create a cohesive visual experience using colour. The palette should match your brand.

At the front of the store, green bananas and cans of ackee greet inbound customers. Yams, stacked with their cut-sides facing out, proudly display tints of yellow and white to passersby.

2. Set the ambiance with lighting. A spa, for example, might want a darker, more calming ambiance.

On this overcast evening, the store glows. Its floodlights and fluorescent tubes are enveloped by a grey-blue sky. Shadows dance and flicker on the sidewalk as customers float between sales of mangoes and scotch bonnets.

My mother tells me this was one of the only places she could get mackerel when she came to Canada. It's especially important, she says, that the store is in a walkable neighbourhood because seniors in the nearby high-rise apartments need convenient options for their necessities.

3. Use signage to direct and inform customers.

A large sign, written in English and Chinese, is on the wall behind the cashier:

To Avoid Any Misunderstanding We
Appreciate That You Have All Your
Belongings & Purchases
From Other Stores Placed Securely in
Your Own Eco Shopping Bag
Place All Items From Our Store In
Shopping Cart Or Basket
And Not In Your Eco Shopping Bag Until
Items Are Paid For At The Cashier
Please Be Advised That All Shoplifting
Will Be Dealt By Law

4. Highlight products with point of purchase (POP) displays before finally guiding customers through the store with focal points.

A permanent marker sign scribbled on cardboard tells customers that Nutrament is \$2.49 per tin or \$27.99 per box. Condensed milk whitener is on special, two for \$3.00. At the back of the store, fish—both fresh and salted.



These are a few of the tenets of visual merchandising. They are, I've read, designed with the "optimal customer experience" in mind.

I am not the optimal customer the designers have in mind.

I find little comfort in colour swatches and mood lighting. Instead, I relish the seven different brands of soy sauces living on the centre shelf of the middle aisle. I smile when the staff do not try to correct me when I ask for "plantin chips."

At the cash register, a man pops his head in the door from the sidewalk to ask the cashier if he's been following the latest cricket matches. The cashier laughs in disbelief at the question.

"I'm Bangladeshi, of course I have been following cricket. What kind of question is that?"

I chuckle. He laughs.

For decades, soda crackers, rice, dasheen, plantain chips, Milo, bulla cakes, and so many other precious goods have flowed in and out of these doors making it a destination for people seeking the simple comfort of familiar food in a foreign place.

Danforth Fruit Market, est. May 1986. Located at 2742 Danforth Avenue. Also with locations in Brampton, and in Scarborough where, as a child, I wondered why a place on Pharmacy Avenue, so far from the downtown core, was called "Danforth."

These were my earliest explorations of metropole and periphery—a simple trip to the market with my mother, searching for mackerel and green bananas.

Bright lights provide reassurance in cold and dark places. These cracked and speckled linoleum floors are not damaged, they are a roadmap to a place we once called home.

Joy Luck
and Despair
Club

Petrina

Ng

In Spring 2020, we were learning about the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic and the simultaneous rise of anti-Asian violence in Canada and the United States. MH found a self-run seminar from Columbia University called “Constructing Identity in Narratives of Asian America,” proposing weekly meetings to discuss readings. The four of us (MH, Yshia, Rachel, and me) met online every Saturday afternoon for about six months.

While our meetings were intimate, supportive, and therapeutic, they were also work. We were working to better understand systemic racism towards Asian-Canadian/American communities (especially in the context of this pandemic, with a recent American president who freely used the term “Kung Flu” to refer to the virus). We were working to better understand the weaponization of the model minority myth and the Asian diaspora’s conditional palatability to whiteness in North America. We were working to better understand ourselves, our families, our identities, and our traumas.

We soon found the syllabus too limited, too dated, and began to stray from it, with each of us making suggestions for the following week. None of us had been schooled in fields such as cultural or postcolonial studies, and we realized that our formal education (collectively multiple degrees across numerous disciplines) had largely centred around White research taught by White mentors. This was a small gesture to counter that.

Selection of texts from the syllabus for “Constructing Identity in Narratives of Asian America,” by Lili Selden, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, University of Notre Dame, and Patricia Welch, Department of Comparative Literatures and Languages, Hofstra University.

A. Theoretical Context

DOWER, John. “Patterns of a Race War.” In *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 3–14. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

SAID, Edward. Excerpt from “Introduction,” plus final paragraph of book. In *Orientalism*, 1–15 and 328. London: Routledge, 1978. (Stop at end of second paragraph on 15, before “2. The methodological question,” then skip to final paragraph on 328).

PORTER, Dennis. “Orientalism and its Problems,” (1983) in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 150–161. Eds. Patrick WILLIAMS and Laura CHRISMAN. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

SARDAR, Ziauddin. Excerpt from "Theory and Criticism." In *Orientalism: Concepts in the Social Sciences*, 65-76 (70-76 if strapped for time). Buckingham, England and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999.

ONG, Aihwa. Excerpts from "The Pacific Shuttle: Family, Citizenship, and Capital Circuits." In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationalism*, 110-136. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. (Skip 120, par. 2, and the "Plotting Family Itineraries" and "Families in America, Fathers in Midair" sections, 124-129)

B. Background on Asian and Asian American History

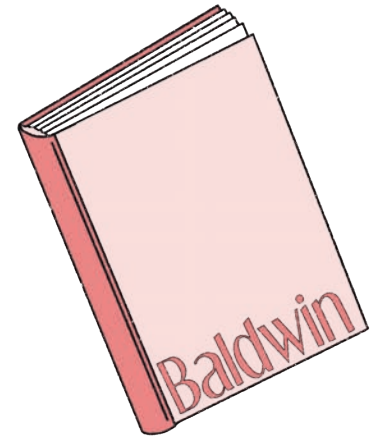
FONG, Timothy. "The History of Asians in America." In *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*, 10-35. New York: Prentice Hall, 1998.

C. Drama

HWANG, David Henry. "Afterword." In *M. Butterfly*, 2nd ed. New York: Penguin, 1990, 100.

M. Butterfly was so good, so we also read "FOB" and "Yellow Face" by Hwang, and an interview with Hwang and John Louis DiGaetani:

HWANG, David Henry and John Louis DiGaetani. "'M. Butterfly': An Interview with David Henry Hwang." *TDR* 33, no. 3 (Autumn, 1989): 141-153.



Daryl Joji Maeda's *The Asian American Movement* (2016) was also really helpful in helping us understand how Asian-American identity is rooted in resistance to American neoimperialism, the American War in Vietnam, and the fight for housing rights.

We read Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree* (1965) and pored over Suyin's obituary in *The New York Times*, written by Margalit Fox (November 5, 2012).

And then in May, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, and the protests began. Our group mourned, raged, and shifted: we watched a town hall with Barack Obama, read an open letter to the Chinese-American community written by a Yale student, Eileen Huang, and read James Baldwin's *The White Man's Guilt* (1965) and *As Much Truth As One Can Bear* (1962). We also watched a speech Baldwin gave in 1979, where he "realizes the writer is involved in a language which he needs to change" which MH paraphrases as "what it means, in other words, to realize one day that the story you have been living is a story that includes your own annihilation."

We read the Southern Poverty Law Center's article "Whose Heritage: Public Symbols of the Confederacy" (2019); the Equal Justice Initiative's 2015 report "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror"; importantly, Makau W. Mutua's critique of the human rights movement, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights" (2001); and "Should People of Color Support Animal Rights?" by Angela P. Harris, which looks at racism in the animal rights movement.

Throughout, we dissected Cathy Park Hong's novel *Minor Feelings* (2020) and Amy Fung's *Before I Was A Critic I Was A Human Being* (2019), week by week, chapter by chapter, which also led us to Hua Hsu's 2020 *New Yorker* profile on Asian-American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston.

Also somewhere in the mix, we watched two films: *Joy Luck Club* (1993), which made me think of seeing Amy Tan's books on my own mother's shelves when I was a child, and *Chan Is Missing* (1982), which I couldn't believe I had not seen before.

Thank you, MH, Yshia, and Rachel, my sisters.

Mani

Mazinani

On
Mobile
Melody

As part of the *Stories and Storefronts* exhibition, *Mobile Melody* transforms the façade of Hirut Cafe into a musical instrument tuned to scales used in Ethiopian music. Pedestrians become listeners as they hear a distant but harmonious cloud of sound radiating from the restaurant. Once immersed, they “play” the work by moving their bodies through aural space, shifting between notes and revealing a melody. Each listener’s body shapes what they hear to create a unique musical experience.

The work speaks to the feeling of constant distance to home present in the diasporic experience, analogous to the relatively distant intervals between scale degrees in pentatonic modes of Ethiopian music. Listeners’ fluency with Ethiopian music will shape what they hear.

INSTRUMENT AND SCORE

I have designed this new musical instrument that I call a “tonal sound-field generator.” Debuted as *Mobile Melody* for this installation, it is designed to support six discrete channels with manual control of sample selection and volume. The most prevalent and traditionally significant of the pentatonic Ethiopian scales, called ቅኝት (Kignts), are: አምባሰል (Ambassel); አንቺሆይ (Anchihoeye); ባት (Batti [major and minor]); and ትዝታ (Tizita [full and half]). Each of these scales is programmed in every key in *Mobile Melody*’s sample bank.

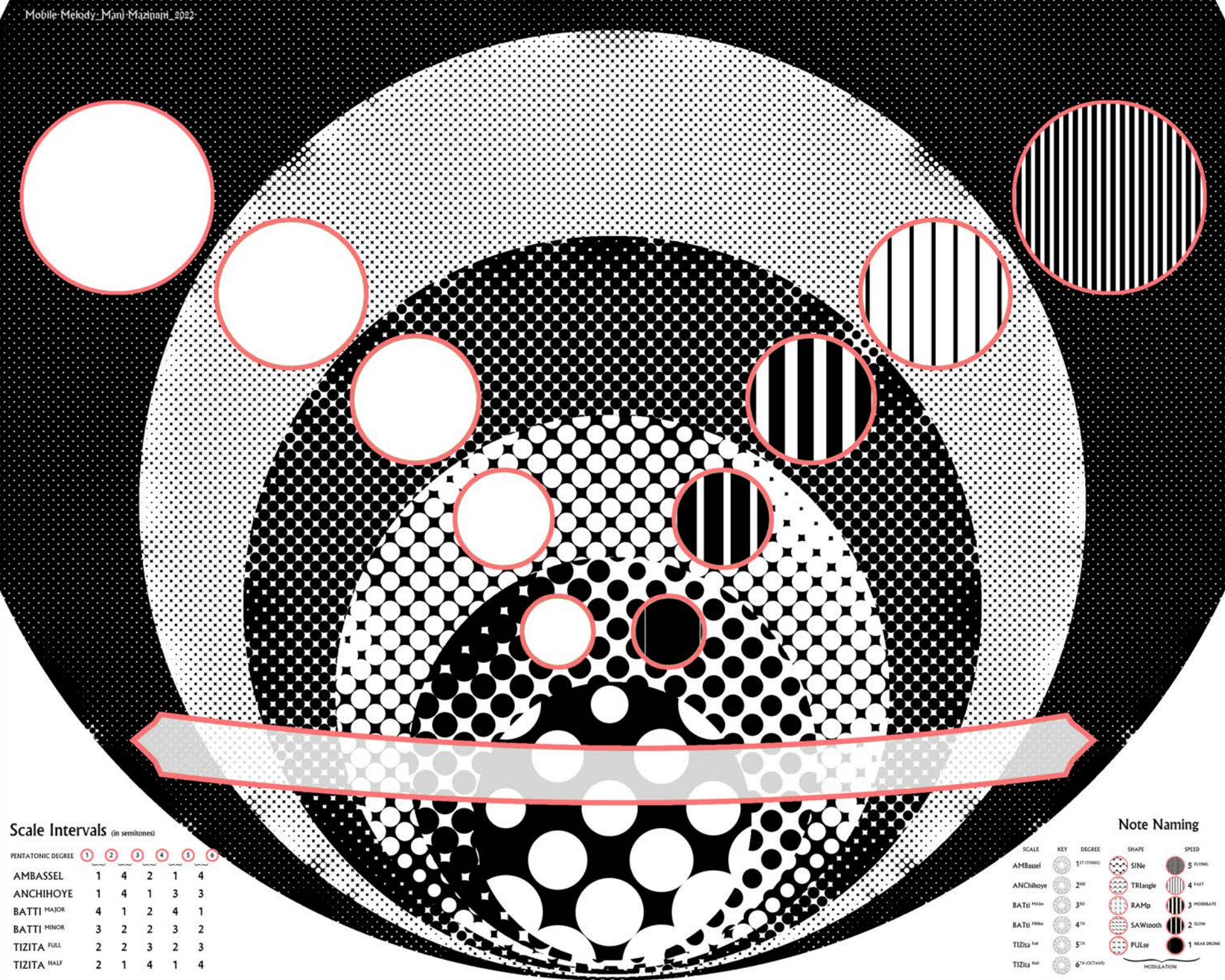
Plexiglas panels are fitted with audio transducers, a type of acoustic exciter that vibrates surfaces causing them to resonate and project sound. Functioning as six loudspeakers on the glass garage doors of the restaurant, each panel reproduces one of five tones of the ቅኝት (Kignts), with the sixth as the octave of the root of the scale.

The score on the following spread maps the sound and operation of *Mobile Melody*. Every note exists in the sonic field of its given scale, illustrated as a graduated set of circles. Variations of scale, key and modulation for each note are available, including volume shaping patterns (SINE, TRIangle, RAMp, SAWtooth, PULse) and speed (Near Drone, Slow, Moderate, Fast, Flying). A blank space stretches across the score and represents the use of *Mobile Melody* as an accompaniment tool.

Further Reading

Abate, Ezra. 2009. “Ethiopian Kīñit (scales): Analysis of the formation and structure of the Ethiopian scale system.” In *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 1213–1224. Trondheim: Department of Social Anthropology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Fekadu, Hilina. “Analysis of Ethiopian ‘Kignts’ Used Dominantly in Popular Songs Produced as Commercial Music in the 1960–1980s: The Modern recording songs in Addis Ababa.” Master’s thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2020.



Scale Intervals (in semitones)

PENTATONIC DEGREE	1	2	3	4	5	6
AMBASSEL	1	4	2	1	4	
ANCHIHOYE	1	4	1	3	3	
BATTI MAJOR	4	1	2	4	1	
BATTI MINOR	3	2	2	3	2	
TIZITA FULL	2	2	3	2	3	
TIZITA HALF	2	1	4	1	4	

Note Naming

SCALE	KEY	DEGREE	SHAPE	SPEED
AMBassel	1 ST (TONE)	SINe	5 FLYING	
ANCHihoye	2 ND	TRIangle	4 FAST	
BATri MAJo	3 RD	RAMp	3 MODERATE	
BATri MINo	4 TH	SAWtooth	2 SLOW	
TIZita FAH	5 TH	PULse	1 NEAR DRONE	
TIZita HAIF	6 TH (OCTAVE)		MODULATION	

Charlene K.

Lau

Memories
of Stuff

Pearlescent lilac twisted plastic hair clip • Iridescent pink bow-shaped plastic hair clip • Iridescent yellow bow-shaped plastic hair clip • Silver-coloured articulated fish keychain • Foldable paper fans • Plastic doilies in yellow, red, and pink • Floral handkerchiefs with a burnout pattern in pink, ice blue, and coral • Toronto souvenir ashtray with a picture of City Hall on it • 2 shallow glass bowls studded with bumps on their undersides, marked “Reims France” • Chopsticks, maybe real ivory, maybe imitation • Traditional Chinese red “Longevity” porcelain plates, bowls, soy sauce dishes • Traditional Chinese white and blue

rice pattern bowls • 2 Underdog pint glasses • Funny “European-style” figurines, probably made in Japan • Small white porcelain vases with hand-painted cherry blossoms, probably made in Japan • Small white porcelain cups and saucers with gold details, likely for a child or espressos • Strings of tiny colourful seed beads





I don't know my grandparents' variety store from memory; I was a baby when they retired. But I distinctly remember the things they sold. In dribs and drabs, items would be distributed throughout the family during gatherings, passed down over the years at holidays. A seemingly never-ending treasure trove from at least two basements. The fun plastic "kid-appropriate" stuff came first, some of which were still affixed to their cardboard displays. As I got older and had to furnish apartments, boxes of deadstock and pretty good quality Chinese porcelain dishware appeared along with drinking glasses. No one in my family wanted it except for me. Everyone else just thought it was old junk.

I've always been a collector, ever since I was a kid. My mom never stopped me from affixing stickers to every surface in my bedroom: a mirror, a dresser, the bed and its side table. I had albums full of them too. I had an egg roll cookie tin that housed all my Barbie clothes. I had cars: regular dinky cars, a blue Tonka, Micromachines. I had stuffed animals. I had trolls of all sizes.

I had a shelf on one of my bookcases that laid out all of the souvenirs aunts and uncles brought home from their trips abroad, artfully arranged as if an interpretative museum exhibit.

A faded colour photograph of my grandparents' storefront window display from the 1960s reads like a mini bazaar:

A series of seed bead strands, brass pagoda wind chimes, Christmas ornaments and other dangly items hanging from a clothesline, secured with wooden clothespins. Red and silver foil garlands swag across the window space. A brush-like tabletop Christmas tree, green with frosted white tips. House slippers. A graduated display of single kitten-heeled mules. Alternating pink and clear glass pedestals for fruit and candy. Boxes of souvenir coasters laid out flat. Porcelain tea sets in various patterns, both Western and Chinese. Beaded purses for hanging on your wrist. Big and miniature Chinese palace lanterns in gold chromed plastic. Vases, figurines, silk flowers.

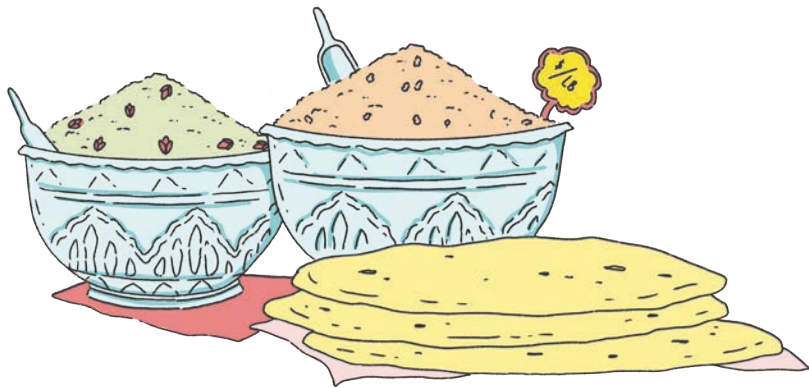
When I look at this picture, I know where I came from.

I will not
take your
money

Negin

Zebarjad

Ta'arof, the age-old art of politeness pervasive in Persian culture, vastly ranges in its degree of exaggeration: a well-practiced *after you* as you walk through an entrance with someone; an insistence on your guests having a second serving at dinner; an animated battle over a bill at a restaurant; or more dramatically, offering the keys to your new car to anyone who might compliment you on the purchase.



My favourite of all ta'arof's manifestations is a simple *ghabel nadareh* at the cash register. *It has no worth.* In other words, I will not take your money. The phrase, and delicate dance that follows, injects the otherwise crude and mundane commercial exchange with a deeply familiar formality. I relish in the ceremony of it all.

When I watch my grandfather engage in the linguistic ritual of ta'arof, his sentences drip with honey, but my Farsi is rusty. I can never quite find words flowery enough to do my mother tongue justice. But I know the drill and refuse the generous offer with a clumsy yet adequately incredulous *kharesh mikonam*. *I beg you.*

On rare occasions, it happens at the local Loblaws, steps away from the so-called ethnic food aisle newly introduced in response to the rapidly diversifying community. More often, it happens at the Iranian market, uptown, in front of heaps of pistachios and dried mulberries with the distinct aroma of saffron and fresh bread in the air.

The market is on a stretch of Yonge Street peppered with Farsi billboards, in a small plaza filled with a collection of other Iranian-owned businesses: multiple bakeries and jewellery stores, legal and accounting services, and no fewer than six currency exchanges, among others. Over the past three decades, these shops have slowly accumulated to form what is now officially, as per Google Maps, referred to as Iranian Plaza. While your money will be performatively refused at every cash register, the courtesy does not extend to battles over the limited number of parking spaces, especially if you visit close to Norouz or after a win by the Iranian national soccer team.

For me, this place is a surrogate for a time and place that has been shaped by a patchwork of residual memories and stitched together by my imagination. Caught in the space between the first and second generations, the place you're not really from is the only place you really know. A moment of ta'arof in this makeshift cultural hub helps me remember things I have never experienced. It's an odd sort of nostalgia, tethering me to a sense of belonging that perpetually feels out of reach.

Three Short
Glimpses on
Shared Space
in Toronto

Shellie

Zhang

In the context of public space, the sightly and unsightly underscore a deeper consideration of what is to be seen and what must remain unseen. Societal responses to how storefronts have interacted with agriculture, food, and dining in Toronto's neighbourhoods speak to the changing demographics of the city and also what constitutes public good, civility, and belonging. Over the course of the twentieth century, three Toronto neighbourhoods: the Danforth, Kensington Market, and Cabbagetown, tell stories of how change and its resulting tension play out on the façades of homes and businesses.



Sidewalk picketer, 1934 (City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 336)

THE DANFORTH

In 1934, the Danforth Businessmen's Association held a creative protest in opposition to the neighbourhood's fruit stores selling their goods on the sidewalk, joining greengrocers in displaying their wares outside and amplifying the perceived overcrowding. According to an October article in *The Toronto Daily Star* that year, this demonstration may have been less about fruit stands and more about the violation of a bylaw, which called for a maximum of 18 inches of sidewalk space to be used to display merchandise. To some, the stunt backfired, with the *Star* favourably remarking that the Danforth had taken on a "Parisian" flair. However, just a few months later, the City decided to enforce the previously lenient bylaw. Today, sidewalk displays of produce and goods by small grocery and corner stores are a common sight in Old Toronto, and the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in these exterior spaces becoming even more important extensions of the storefronts.



Cabbagetown yard sign, ca. 1909 (City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 2551)

CABBAGETOWN

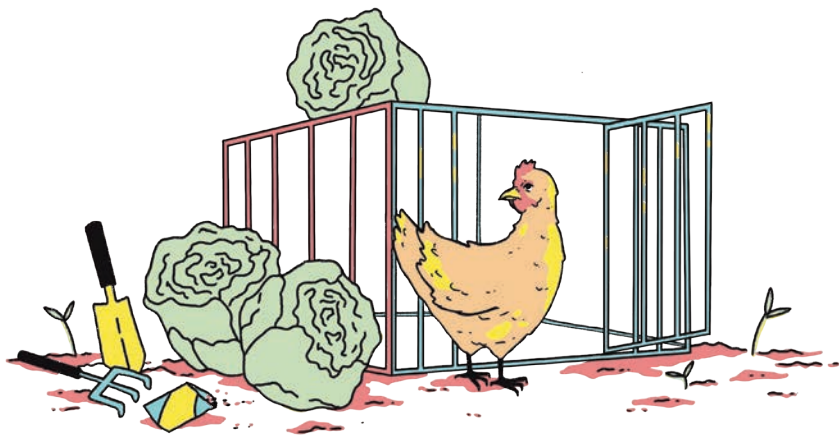
Cabbagetown's whimsical name derives from the arrival of Irish immigrants who fled famine in the 1840s. During this time, the neighbourhood was a mix of affluent streets, middle-class houses, and workers' enclaves. Newcomer Irish families in the area grew their own vegetables—including cabbages—on front gardens and other available land around their homes. Gilles Huot, member of the Cabbagetown Preservation Association, states that because of this characteristic, Toronto's prosperous British residents popularized the name "Cabbagetown" to derisively point to the neighbourhood's low-income status. As manicured lawns remain a colonial symbol of prestige in North America, the usage of front yards for growing produce is still contested today. According to Councillor Gord Perks's office, as of early 2021, front vegetable gardens were permitted in Toronto, as long as they are in compliance with the Grass and Weeds Bylaw, including an exemption given to natural gardens for the height restrictions. However, this exemption was removed later in 2021 leaving the future of hanging bittermelons, tomato vines, and herbs in front yards unclear.

KENSINGTON MARKET

In the twentieth century, Kensington Market was home to waves of newcomer communities, beginning with Jewish, Italian, and Portuguese populations who searched for their homelands' familiar flavours and routines. Fresh poultry and eggs were sold in the neighbourhood, with some vendors selling from their homes. Joel Dickau, Researcher at the University of Toronto Scarborough's Culinary Research Centre, notes that after World War II, Toronto's councillors saw the Market's live animal trade as an anachronistic, and in 1947, they prohibited the slaughtering of fowl or storing of poultry in the area. Eventually, in response to neighbourhood pressure, a number of slaughterhouses and live animal sellers were allowed to return to the neighbourhood under regulation. Later in the 1970s, there again was a call to ban the sale and slaughter of poultry and rabbits in the Market, this time from animal rights activists and the Toronto Humane Society, who cited inhumane living conditions and claimed that killing birds domestically created a "public spectacle." The then president of the Kensington Market Businessmen's Association, however, believed that this ban would change the character of the whole Market. In June 1983, the Animal Control Act was passed and live chickens, rabbits and fish finally disappeared from the Market's streets. With the rise of urban farming and its embrace by other cities in recent years, the City eventually relented in 2018 and introduced the UrbanHensTO pilot program, allowing residents a limit of four hens in permitted areas of the city. A 2020 article from the *Toronto Star* reports that to date, city staff have stated that none of the predicted blights have materialized.



Kensington Market, 1974 (City of Toronto Archives, Kensington Market Fonds, File 7, Item 12)



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