

Review

Anna Wilkinson, Concordia University

Shawn Micallef, James Roussel, Gabe Sawhney, Robin Elliott, and Isako Shigekawa, “[murmur]”, <http://murmurtoronto.ca>.

“Murmur” is a documentary oral history project which not only makes accessible voices “that are often overlooked when the stories of cities are told,” but also engages listeners with their urban physical environment by installing signs at various locations throughout neighbourhoods, in cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Dublin, Edinburgh, Galway, San Jose, and Sao Paulo. By calling numbers posted on signs, visitors may access and listen to multiple oral histories about a specific area, store, home, street, or community organization. For the most part, these collections of recorded stories do a tremendous job of revealing the hidden, intimate details and memories that populate these places. Through oral history, the project also explores the variety of social relationships, including familial relationships, which make up a city.

The Murmur project may also be experienced online through its [website](http://murmurtoronto.ca) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca>). Even without visiting the physical sites, the website provides listeners with a good sense of the layered and diverse history of a neighbourhood. For instance, by clicking on the red dots that represent Murmur sites on beautiful hand-drawn maps for any one of six neighbourhoods represented in the Toronto Murmur section of the website, a visitor can access a small photograph of the physical location and may choose from multiple, short audio clips describing anything from the Jewish community in the area, Chinese cultural centres, the experiences of an Indian storeowner, a childhood memory, or a bizarre street encounter.

There are a variety of reasons why visitors may choose to engage with Murmur through its website only. My visit to the Montreal Murmur sites was disappointing because most of the signs along Saint-Laurent Street were missing. Consequently this review focuses on Toronto’s Kensington Market, where the project first originated. Here signage is well maintained, though bitter winter weather did create an obstacle to freely and fully exploring this neighbourhood. Though cell phone technology is lauded for its accessibility, it should be noted that not everyone owns a cell phone and long calls may be financially prohibitive for some visitors.

Despite these potential obstacles to visiting the physical sites, [murmur’s] stories “truly come alive as the listener walks through, around, and into the narrative.” Physically interacting with the locations provides an engaging embodied experience and highlights the myriad and intersecting ways that ideas

of identity and home relate to place and memory in a way that the website alone simply cannot replicate. For example, [Tam Goossen](http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?213601) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?213601>) discusses her memories of a building at 285 Spadina Street in Kensington Market in Toronto. Her memories are personal; she laughingly describes her visit to what was at the time a burlesque theatre, and moves seamlessly into speaking about the significance of the surrounding area to the Chinese immigrant community and the buildings once owned by Chinese associations, which provided aid to new immigrants in the absence of developed government services. By standing in the places that she discussed, I found it easier to understand how her memories related to both the tangible and intangible aspects of her community.

As a visitor to the physical sites, the stories that work best are those explicitly prompting simultaneous engagement with the orality of the narrative and the physicality of the space in which they are told. Specific references to spatial aspects of the locations being described make stories told by [Chris Williamson](http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?219614) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?219614>) about the Moonbean Café and Kensington Place by [Stewart Scriver](http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?218614) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?218614>), both located in Kensington Market, particularly effective. The placement of the sign by Kensington Place, a small back alley lined with homes that at one time belonged to workers, allowed me to negotiate the space for myself, participating in the “discovery” of a hidden nook. Chris Williamson’s anecdotes bring the visitor through the back rooms of the café, filling them with his personal memories.

In the process of bringing intimacy to public spaces, the discussion of family acts as a point of reference in many of these personal stories. In its Toronto incarnation, [murmur’s] focus on everyday histories in multicultural neighbourhoods means that family, and its relationship to concepts of home, are used as a way of emphasizing interviewees’ connections to their communities and their neighbourhoods. Take for example, [Sydney Palmer’s](http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?222615) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?222615>) description of his family’s residence at 178 Baldwin Street in Kensington Market. His family history includes a discussion of his parents’ relationship and their livelihood in what was a Jewish area from the 1930s to the 1950s. This highly personal and detailed narrative places Palmer, his family, and listeners, in the neighbourhood as it was many years ago.

At other times, family emerges as an indispensable backdrop for highly individual recollections about geographic locations. For instance, [Warren Morris](http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?223622) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?223622>) describes a childhood memory of Presky’s Meat Market in Kensington Market. He remembers weekly shopping trips to the market with his mother, but neither emphasizes their relationship nor her purpose for being there. Rather, his memories are filtered through his unique

perspective and relate the excitement of seeing live chickens and the bustle of the crowds as a four-year-old boy.

In many instances, family is not present at all. There are a variety of contemporary recollections populated with friends, lovers, neighbours and local storeowners who make the neighbourhood their home. These descriptions represent other family-like relationships that make Kensington Market feel like home to the interviewees. For example, [Donna Kakonge](http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?211611) (<http://murmurtoronto.ca/place.php?211611>) remembers her relationship to the Saigon Pearl Restaurant and what it meant for her and her circle of friends. However, given this overall emphasis on the harmony of the neighbourhood and its positive social relationships, the Murmur project in Toronto may be criticized for not delving more deeply into darker memories related to racism or community division. While acknowledging the difficulty of broaching such subjects in public spaces, I would argue that a more comprehensive vision of the community could have been provided with the inclusion of more contentious memories surrounding certain locations.

Even with these omissions, the Murmur project as a whole has the potential to transform how visitors and listeners “think about the place and the city at large.” By revealing some of the hidden memories of everyday places, it contributes to producing what scholar Toby Butler describes as a “mobile but deeply spatially engaged practice that can explore multilayered and plural histories of place.”¹ Certainly it is through these layers that visitors may discover new and creative ways of thinking about and interacting with their physical environment, whether as individuals or as members of their families and their communities.

¹ Toby Butler, “Memoryscape: How Audio Walks Can Deepen Our Sense of Place by Integrating Art, Oral History and Cultural Geography,” *Geography Compass* 1/3 (2007): 370.