

**“TUNING-IN” TO KUNDALINI YOGA: PHYSIO-SONIC EXPERIENCES IN A
PITTSBURGH YOGA STUDIO**

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

University of Pittsburgh

2010

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Kundalini Yoga classes in the United States have offered a holistic yoga practice with particular emphasis on chant (*mantra*) since the late 1960s. The use of the voice assumes a central position in Kundalini Yoga as various forms of *mantra*, sound intentionally uttered to alter one's state of consciousness, are incorporated in every class. The ways in which *mantra* is used in Kundalini Yoga presents epistemological questions concerning the ways sound shapes participants' experiences of the yoga class itself, of their own bodies, and more broadly of their own mind-body states of being. Is it possible to discover what it means for Kundalini Yoga participants to add to a soundscape with their own voices? How important is each element of a Kundalini Yoga soundscape to the participants (i.e. breathing, *mantra*, background music), and how might they think and talk about Kundalini soundscapes?

An ethnographic case study within a weekly Kundalini Yoga class in Pittsburgh demonstrates the way its soundscapes can shape participants' sensory experiences by simultaneously restricting their fields of vision and redefining what it means to “listen.” Building on theoretical approaches drawn from phenomenology, this study explores kinesthetic experience by suggesting that the ways in which the sense of one's physical state is intertwined with hearing in Kundalini Yoga (physio-sonic experience) enables practitioners to access a deeper level of emotional and physical consciousness which is activated and mediated by sound.

Through a repositioning of the body as the center of ethnomusicological fieldwork, this thesis analyzes physio-sonic experiences of Kundalini Yoga activities, illuminating ways to listen and engage with sound that join awareness of mind and body. Such experiences have lead regular participants to conceive of Kundalini Yoga practice not only as a way to balance and refine their whole body-mind, but even in some cases to conceive of the practice as a model for how to approach life outside of the yoga studio.

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PREFACE

My experiences as an undergraduate studying music performance planted a seed that grew, over a number of years, into the impetus for this project. Over these years I have remained deeply affected by the training I received in areas such as Alexander Technique and eurhythmics, which pushed me to question the ways in which I had previously been using my body. I had not really thought about the possibilities for better, easier and even more enjoyable movement (either while making music or not). In time, I began to think about my body in a very different way because of how I had been encouraged to use it for improved or enhanced music-making. This raised a number of questions, namely: If making music can change one's understanding of the body by opening up new perceptions of what it is capable of when employed in the most efficient ways, what could we learn by looking at music-making as a means to enhance the body?

As I continued to develop these thoughts, I encountered a new activity which led to a second shift in thinking about the facility of my body. For about three months at the end of a semester of study in Brazil, I attended Swasthya Yoga classes two times each week. Every class was different, with a focus on maintaining balance between various yoga elements such as meditation, *mantra*, and *asanas*, or body positions or poses. I grew to respect the holistic qualities of yoga, enjoying the balance created by pairing particular poses with one another, the music played from an iPod to enhance our classes, and the occasional incorporation of sung

mantra. I was influenced by the way in which the instructors spoke about state of mind. They urged students to keep a calm, peaceful attitude and facial expression even when our muscles burned and shook. Over time, I came to find a sort of peaceful euphoria in the feeling of pushing my muscles to their limit while allowing my mind and my emotions to be calm. I came to find joy above the discomfort of the physical challenge. The breathing exercises invigorated me, and so did the gradual mastering of particular poses that inevitably occurred the longer I worked on them. I was astonished when I felt the pain present while holding one pose suddenly dissolve, as if I had pushed through some sort of “pain barrier.” Swasthya Yoga showed me that the human body is capable of many things, even when they do not seem possible.

Walking to the yoga studio in my neighborhood, it was hard not to feel as though I was being accosted by the environment around me. My ears were inundated by the noise of cars and busses, sweat dripped down my face and back, grit from the street worked its way between my toes, unprotected in flip flops. But the yoga studio in Brazil presented a contrast to the streets outside. Once inside the studio, every visitor would clean their feet, wiping off the dirt with towelettes from the shelf. We would place our shoes in rows and step into the sitting room. A soft, flokati rug and an excess of pillows covered the floor. The yoga studio greeted you with cool air conditioning, the smell of incense, and the spice of cardamom, cinnamon and ginger from the chai tea the instructors made daily.

I was impressed by the way the instructors seemed to represent so vividly how life’s experience can be enhanced through the practice of yoga. The instructors were kind, thoughtful, and calm. They always looked radiant, at peace, and at ease. Their bodies were strong and lean; they moved fluidly, like dancers. One instructor in particular demonstrated the way in which the senses are supposed to be enhanced through yoga when he could tell what ingredient might have

been missing from the chai just by smelling it from the other room. Through my practice there, I came to conceive of yoga as a powerful and profound way to gradually experience life more fully.

Swasthya Yoga is a practice specifically intended to enhance not just the body, but one's whole mind-body and how one interacts with the rest of the world. In my experience of Swasthya Yoga, sound was an integral part of meeting and reflecting upon the challenges of the practice. Yoga seemed to present the perfect field for the exploration of sound and the body, with a hope of advancing a new perspective on the effects of music on the body, or on the types of bodily engagement with music that are both powerful and inherent to music-making and listening. I was finally able to pursue a project along these lines when I encountered Kundalini Yoga in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

I was drawn to Kundalini Yoga in Pittsburgh because participants play an important role in creating the soundscapes of each class with their breath and their voices. While breathing is an element of yoga practice which is emphasized in other yoga forms such as Ashtanga or Hatha Yoga,¹ the use of the voice assumes a central position in Kundalini Yoga. Various forms of chanting, or *mantra*, are incorporated in every class. The ways in which *mantra*, sound intentionally uttered to alter one's state of consciousness, is used in Kundalini Yoga presents epistemological questions concerning the ways sound shapes participants' experiences of the yoga class itself, of their own bodies, and more broadly of their own mind-body states of being. It is important to understand the way yoga participants interact with sound in this context because it may further illuminate ways to understand sensory experiences in a multitude of other contexts in which the physical body interacts with sound – making vibrations, listening to them, or both.

There have been many related studies which analyze the power of sound and altered states of consciousness (Rouget 1985) or deep emotional responses and different experiences of the “self” (Becker 1994, 2000, 2004), as well as the importance of the kinesthetic experience

¹ The main difference between Kundalini Yoga and Hatha or Ashtanga Yoga is that Hatha and Ashtanga methods espouse an emphasis on the movement or flow between a regular sequence of poses that is not present in Kundalini Yoga. For sources on Hatha yoga (and which also mention ashtanga yoga) see Strauss (*Positioning Yoga*, 2005) and Alter (*Yoga in Modern India*, 2004).

involved in making music (Yung 1984), dancing (Hahn 2007), or even in performing a martial arts-dance-game (Downey 2005). Questions regarding the role of sound in physical practices (such as yoga) in relation to spirituality and the personal cultivation of one's own mind-body states, however, have not been fully explored in the field of ethnomusicology.

While both Rouget and Becker explore the power of sonic experiences in regard to trance, the prospect of experiencing different mind-body states whether explained as a new level of consciousness or an alternative “self” (a different “kind of person”) ² is an important goal of Kundalini Yoga that is meant to be realized through engagement with *mantra* sound. In her work, Becker aims to show that the “listening self” involved in trance ceremonies (when one is open to or anticipates a different experience of self or personhood) “... may be the same body but may not be the same self as that inhabited in more commonplace life activities. Music, for many deep listeners, opens pathways of being not ordinarily experienced in everyday life.” ³ This study is meant to show how Kundalini Yoga and the sounds that are a central part of the practice also offer various “pathways of being” that regular participants think of as significantly different from everyday sensory interactions. Most importantly, in Kundalini Yoga these new experiences of the self in relation to one's environment are regarded as restorative experiences which bring balance and composure to the whole mind-body. Literature related to the restorative powers (and experiences) of sound may be found in the field of music therapy as well as within the body of Indian-language publications on yoga, two significant areas which unfortunately cannot be surveyed within the scope of this study.

² Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 88.

³ Ibid., 106.

My aim here is to elucidate the ways in which the sounds of Kundalini Yoga, in the context of a particular environment, contribute to practitioners' individual sensory experiences of the physical, mental and emotional manifestations of Kundalini Yoga practice. It is important to conduct research on Kundalini Yoga because of the potential for opening up new understandings of voicing and listening that could provide a comparative perspective in the field of body-studies and inform quantitative accounts in the field of music therapy.

The site of my research is the Kundalini Yoga soundscape, the sonic environment, or as described by the composer R. Murray Schafer, the "acoustic field."⁴ Throughout this study the capitalized form of "Kundalini Yoga" or "Kundalini" will be used to refer to the specific brand of yoga that has been the fieldwork site for this study, while "kundalini yoga" or "kundalini" will refer to other instances of yoga practice which are not specifically derived from the guru persona Yogi Bhajan and his teachings.

My relationship with Kundalini Yoga began with the inception of this project, with no prior notion of what Kundalini Yoga class would be like. Beginning in September of 2009, I became a regular participant at weekly Kundalini classes, observing, listening, and partaking of each session's offering of exercises, meditation, and *mantra*. I quickly realized that *mantra* was not only a main feature of Kundalini Yoga soundscapes, but that it was regarded as a very important catalyst for activating the body's energy and for raising participants' levels of consciousness. This process of using sound to enact change in a person's state of being has, in fact, been the goal of kundalini-focused yoga as practiced in India for hundreds of years. Fieldwork in Pittsburgh has shown how sound dominates Kundalini Yoga, as does the word or concept of "listening." This focus on the aural surroundings creates an unusual composite

⁴ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1977), 7.

experience – one that is communal, in which participants chant together, listening to their full, combined sound and one that also becomes entirely self-centered, as participants are encouraged by the instructor to “listen” to their own bodies. Kundalini Yoga provides an opportunity to tune into a group endeavor and the long lineage of knowledge passing from master to student in the yoga tradition, while simultaneously allowing participants to leave behind the minutiae of daily life to focus on their own thoughts, feelings and sensations for an hour and a half each week.

Over a six month period attending classes from September (2009) to March (2010), I have come to regard Kundalini Yoga practice as an activity which is quite separate in place, time, and quality from the rest of my life. This time spent practicing Kundalini Yoga has led to a number of research questions, including whether or not other participants experience Kundalini Yoga in a similar way. Most importantly, what is the role of the sound, particularly the *mantra*, used in Kundalini Yoga practice? How exactly does Kundalini *mantra* affect or contribute to the environment of the yoga studio? Is it possible to discover what it means for Kundalini Yoga participants to add to a soundscape with their own voices? All of these questions are meant to address *how* the sounds that are created and heard almost exclusively ⁵ in a particular Kundalini Yoga context (in Pittsburgh) shape the experience of participants. How important is each element of a Kundalini Yoga soundscape to the participants (i.e. breathing, *mantra*, background music), and how might they think and talk about Kundalini soundscapes?

⁵ Recordings heard during class sessions would not necessarily be heard exclusively in class since they are from CDs which can easily be bought from iTunes, Amazon, or even a nearby store in the neighborhood where classes are held, Journeys of Life.

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

In order to seek out answers to these questions about the ways in which yoga participants interact with and relate to Kundalini Yoga soundscapes, I began attending a Kundalini Yoga class that meets every Sunday morning in an upscale Pittsburgh neighborhood, Shadyside. As an “upscale” neighborhood, I mean that Shadyside is not only a neighborhood in which high-earning families and individuals reside, but one which serves as a prime shopping and entertainment location offering luxury goods and services.⁶ The studio in Shadyside is just one branch of the Schoolhouse Yoga company (SY), which also offers classes in three other neighborhood locations.⁷ My desire to explore the sonic element of yoga led me to look for classes in Pittsburgh that explicitly incorporate *mantra*. Not knowing anything about Kundalini Yoga initially, I chose this Sunday morning class as the result of a casual Internet search. Of all of the thirteen classes offered at Schoolhouse Yoga, only the description of Kundalini Yoga posted on the SY website listed *mantra* as one of its main components.⁸ This particular version of Kundalini Yoga is a mixed formulation of the teachings and methods of Yogi Bajan, the man who is credited with bringing Kundalini Yoga to the United States. This study analyzes the ways

⁶ Kundalini Yoga classes in Pittsburgh seem to attract a certain demographic made up of middle/upper-middle class, mostly Caucasian (but also Latina), mostly female practitioners. This is supported by data collected about Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) members in the 1970s and will be discussed in Chapter 2. Neighborhood census information from 2000 confirms the larger number of high-earning Pittsburghers who reside in Shadyside compared to other neighborhoods. Pittsburgh City Planning, “2000 City of Pittsburgh Neighborhood Census Report,” City of Pittsburgh Website, http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/cp/assets/census/2000_census_pgh_jan06.pdf (accessed September 26, 2010).

⁷ The Strip District, South Side, and Squirrel Hill neighborhoods may not be labeled as upscale in the same way as Shadyside, but they have been targeted areas for commercial development and are marketed as leisure and entertainment destinations for Pittsburgh’s many students (<http://www.schoolhouseyoga.com/directions.aspx>).

⁸ “This class will introduce students to the tradition of Kundalini Yoga. All levels and backgrounds are welcome. Classes will focus on specific chakras (energy centers) of the body. Kundalini yoga incorporates breath work, asana (yoga postures), mantra (sound & rhythm), meditation, and relaxation. This style of yoga is renown [sic] for its ability to heal students emotionally.” “Classes,” Schoolhouse Yoga, <http://www.schoolhouseyoga.com/classes.aspx#descriptions> (accessed January 15, 2010).

in which his teachings on *mantra* are interpreted and incorporated into classes by the SY instructor, Kendell Romanelli.

1.1.1 History of Kundalini Yoga in the United States

The form of Kundalini Yoga available in Pittsburgh through Schoolhouse Yoga is based on the teachings of Yogi Bhajan, although it is not affiliated with or sponsored by the Healthy, Happy, Holy (3HO) or the Kundalini Research Institute (KRI) organizations associated with him. The instructor, Kendell Romanelli, has had no specific Kundalini instruction, although she uses books written by members of the 3HO organization and students of Yogi Bhajan (to be discussed below) to teach her Kundalini Yoga classes. Two such student-authors, Dharam S. Khalsa (2002) and Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa (1996) both cite their training directly through the instruction of Yogi Bhajan in their books. Kendell's teaching also relies on her experiences taking classes in Kundalini Yoga studios on the west coast and activities like the chant workshop she attended in June 2010, led by Snam Kaur, a second generation student of Yogi Bhajan.

Decades after Yogi Bhajan's initial arrival in the United States from India and years after his death in 2004, the transmission of his form of Kundalini Yoga now clearly manifests in many different (regulated *and* unregulated) ways. Kundalini instruction that takes place within the 3HO organization is likely to be held to different or more rigorous standards than instruction which takes place beyond the organization's reach. Kendell, for example, very often incorporates non-Kundalini Yoga elements (extra time for recuperation between exercises, for example) into her classes. Therefore, despite the regulatory activities of the 3HO and KRI organizations, the institutionalized framework established by Yogi Bhajan is not all-encompassing. As is shown by this local example in Pittsburgh, the widespread instruction and practice of Yogi Bhajan's

Kundalini Yoga manifests as an interpretive form that allows for individual articulations of the tradition.

Kundalini Yoga's origins were apparent to a much greater extent in its initial, singular presentation in the United States. Kundalini yoga is an Indian tradition that is described as having been taught only privately, secretly being passed down from master to disciple.⁹ It was introduced and spread throughout the United States beginning in 1969, when Harbhajan Singh Puri, more widely known as Yogi Bajan, came to the country to teach yoga. Yogi Bajan is reported to have been the first person to teach kundalini yoga publicly (beginning in the US),¹⁰ having also been pronounced a Master of kundalini yoga at the young age of sixteen.¹¹ Although Yogi Bajan's name may not be familiar to many Americans, he became an extremely influential figure in the West during the second half of the twentieth century. The projects that he worked on, for example, his promotion of the Sikh religion and the mass marketing of his tea recipe as Yogi Tea, continue to be incredibly wide-reaching. Yogi Tea has become one of the "leading tea companies in the health food market in the USA and Europe."¹² By supporting and promoting the Sikh religion, Yogi Bajan helped American Sikhs to gain legal recognition in the United States in the early 1970s,¹³ leading to the development of the Sikh Dharma International

⁹ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O'Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 15.

¹² "Siri Singh Sahib Bhai Sahib Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogiji," *The Sikh Network*, <http://fateh.sikhnet.com/yogibhajan> (accessed March 10, 2010).

¹³ In his article for the *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, cultural anthropologist Bruce La Brack explains that the period from 1900 to 1965 in the history of Sikh immigration to the US was shaped by "...persistent and blatant legal governmental discrimination in the form of a series of exclusionary acts, extreme social isolation and prejudice" (1095). It was not until after Indian independence (1947) that "...Sikh immigrants from India, as well as long-term resident Sikhs, were able to gain the right to vote, own land, hold passports, travel freely, demand equal protection under the law, and participate fully as citizens as they so chose" (1097). After fifty or so years of such treatment (directed not only towards Indians but to Chinese and Japanese immigrants as well), it is likely that Yogi Bajan met with some remnants of discrimination against Sikhs when he came to California in the late 1960s, and that it is this history against which he fought as a Sikh representative.

organization. This accomplishment was eventually recognized by the United States Congress in a resolution following Yogi Bhaijan's death in 2004.¹⁴

Yogi Bhaijan's original vehicle for imparting his knowledge of kundalini yoga was the organization he founded, 3HO: Health, Happy, Holy Organization. Based in California, 3HO grew quite rapidly – under Yogi Bhaijan's "...guidance as Director of Spiritual Education, 3HO mushroomed worldwide, to 300 centers in 35 countries. In 1994 3HO became a member of the United Nations as an NGO (Non-Governmental-Organization) in Consultative Status (Roster) with the Economic and Social Council, representing women's issues, promoting human rights and providing education in alternative systems of medicine."¹⁵ As Yogi Bhaijan's reach broadened, he gained greater power and influence not only through an increased audience, but through the legitimization of official international recognition.

As 3HO expanded, Yogi Bhaijan taught Kundalini Yoga classes in *ashrams*, or centers created for yoga practice and related activities, such as gatherings of devotees who would come to listen to Yogi Bhaijan's teachings. Yogi Bhaijan also spoke in parks and other cultural or community centers, and created more intensive festivals for the practice of Kundalini Yoga as well as initiation into Sikhism. The Summer Solstice Celebration, for example, consists of a week of camping in New Mexico filled with yoga instruction, lectures, music, etc. This festival still takes place each summer, forty years after its inception.

As a way of regulating and preserving the information that he shared with students, Yogi Bhaijan established the Kundalini Research Institute (KRI) in 1972. The KRI is a non-profit

Bruce La Brack, "Sikhs in the United States," in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World, Volume 2*, ed. Melvin Ember et al. (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004).

¹⁴ *Honoring the life and contribution of Yogi Bhaijan, a leader of the Sikhs, and expressing condolences to the Sikh community on his passing*, S. Res. 148, 108th Cong., 2nd sess., <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:S.CON.RES.148::> (accessed March 10, 2010).

¹⁵ "Siri Singh Sahib Bhai Sahib Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogiji," The Sikh Network, <http://fateh.sikhnet.com/yogibhaijan> (accessed March 10, 2010).

corporation, which “...safeguards the purity, integrity, and accuracy of the Teachings of Yogi Bhajan.”¹⁶ The thirteen full-time staff members at the institute currently maintain a library of Yogi Bhajan’s teachings (mainly audio and video recordings) and develop teacher training certification programs. They are also responsible for awarding the “...KRI Seal of Approval to products that successfully meet the standards of KRI Review,” or carrying out the process by which KRI staff deem a new product a successful and accurate conveyance of Yogi Bhajan’s teachings. KRI also sells an approved collection of books, CDs, DVDs, digital downloads, and even photographs advertised as coming from “the source” (or, the ultimate authority, as opposed to a periphery distributor who merely cites or reinterprets Yogi Bhajan’s teachings) and available on the KRI website.¹⁷ And finally, they provide online resources to students and teachers of Kundalini Yoga such as instructions for exercises and meditation as well as transcriptions of Yogi Bhajan’s lectures.¹⁸ Discussion of Kundalini Yoga products within this study will focus on two books in particular, suggested to me by the instructor at SY, Kendell Romanelli, as helpful sources which she has used to guide and inform her yoga instruction. Both Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa’s *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* and Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe’s *The Kundalini Yoga Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* are

¹⁶ “About the Kundalini Research Institute,” Kundalini Research Institute, <http://www.kriteachings.org/about.htm> (accessed on March 11, 2010).

¹⁷ “The Source,” Kundalini Research Institute, http://thesource.kriteachings.org/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=65 (accessed on April 11, 2010).

¹⁸ The commodification of Yogi Bhajan’s teachings subsumes a number of issues that deserve mention here. The marketing of Yogi Bhajan’s lectures and yoga philosophy also involves the marketing of Yogi Bhajan himself as an Indian guru personality and the perpetuation of his authority as yoga master over other yoga instructors. The sale of books, audio recordings of lectures, and instruction manuals, however, contrasts somewhat with discourse about Yogi Bhajan’s Kundalini Yoga. One review of a book by one of Yogi Bhajan’s first students (Khalsa 1996) found on Amazon.com, for example, refers to the sacred quality of the information given therein which is so valuable it could not be bought at any price. Yet, much to the KRI’s advantage, Kundalini Yoga practitioners may be more likely to pay a higher price for information which they believe to be invaluable. The commodification of Yogi Bhajan in general raises questions about his motives (and the motives of the members in his organization): was Yogi Bhajan mainly seeking wealth and power? Was he looking specifically to finance the spread of Kundalini Yoga and Sikhism? Was it a pursuit of both? Lastly, for a discussion of the role print media plays in constructing and maintaining “imagined” yoga communities, see Strauss (2005).

stamped with the KRI seal of approval. These books are also at the top of search results for books on Yogi Bhaijan's Kundalini Yoga, although it is unclear which of these details about the books (popularity or stamp of approval) is why Kendell chose to use them.

It is important to note that Kundalini Yoga and Yogi Bhaijan's teachings can be found in contexts outside of 3HO centers or events because of the wide variety of resources available to the general public. Books, DVDs, and even YouTube videos are all easily attainable sources of information about Yogi Bhaijan's Kundalini Yoga that can be used by untrained people who are not members of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization. The extent to which each one of these easily attainable Kundalini Yoga sources are regulated by the KRI is beyond the scope of this study, but it can be said that the transmission of Yogi Bhaijan's Kundalini Yoga is not simply a situation in which the KRI solely possesses control over all instances in which Yogi Bhaijan or his teachings are invoked. The Kundalini Yoga class offered at Schoolhouse Yoga in Pittsburgh illustrates the ways in which individual teachers interpret, perform, and transmit these teachings as a way of relating to class participants and shaping their experience of Kundalini Yoga practice.

1.1.2 Discourse about the Kundalini Yoga Experience

The Internet plays an enormous role in the dissemination of yoga information; various websites about Yogi Bhaijan's Kundalini Yoga dispense information to anyone with computer access.¹⁹ I discovered Kundalini Yoga because of information I found on the Internet, choosing to attend

¹⁹ In her book about the transnationalization of yoga, Strauss (2005) includes a brief discussion of "the potential of the Web for supporting and expanding the international community of yoga practitioners" (142).

Schoolhouse Yoga's Kundalini class because they had a website that was clear, easy-to-navigate, and which prominently displayed their class descriptions. One major source of information about Kundalini Yoga on the Internet is a website dedicated to Yogi Bhajan, his yoga form and his teachings which appears to be maintained by the Kundalini Research Institute. On this website, the purpose and function of Kundalini Yoga is summarized:

"The focus of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan® is on one's personal experience and awareness through the practice of *kriya* and *naad*. We awaken the kundalini in order to be able to call upon the full potential of the nervous and glandular systems and to balance the subtle system of chakras and meridians within the body. "*Kriya*" is an orchestrated pattern of movements, sound, pranayam, mudras, concentration and meditation that automatically guide the energies of the body and the mind to a specific result or change of consciousness." ²⁰

To clarify, this form of yoga is basically meant to develop self-awareness through a series of exercises that combine body and hand postures and/or movements, breath, and the recitation of *mantras*. In addition to stimulating and directing the mind, these exercises are also intended to affect various areas of the body, including the glandular system and the nervous system in particular. Kundalini Yoga is also meant to affect a system of energy centers (referred to as *chakras* above) and channels (*nadis*) within the body.

This energy system can be contrasted with the dominant concept of the body in the West where biomedical practices take precedence. Within the sphere of Western biomedicine, the human body is viewed "...as a biological object distinct from other objects." ²¹ Western biomedicine depicts a body made up of gross matter ²² and discreet objects such as organs, blood vessels, bones. An Indian yogic world view, however, involves a freer, more fluid model of the human body which is neither as compartmentalized nor as isolated. As anthropologist Mari Womack explains, "The universe is not viewed as being composed of discreet objects, as is the

²⁰ "About Kundalini Yoga," The Teachings of Yogi Bhajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAAboutKY.htm> (accessed January 6, 2010).

²¹ Mari Womack, *The Anthropology of Health and Healing* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2010), 212.

²² *Ibid.*, 56.

case with Western medicine. Instead, the human body is considered to be a part of the energy comprising the universe.”²³ This part of the human body which is connected to the universe can be thought of as non-discreet matter, or a finer layer of the self called the “subtle body.” The energy system in the subtle body is, however, thought to *correspond* with elements of the physical body such as the nervous system or the glandular system.²⁴ The state of a person’s energy centers or channels would be capable of affecting the functioning of a gland, for instance. As a way of making the subtle body easier to conceptualize, during Kundalini classes at Schoolhouse Yoga the instructor describes these energy centers and channels as glowing light that can radiate throughout the body.

The awakening and activating of the energy system in yoga is talked about in terms of *kundalini* – which was a yoga concept before it was used to refer to an entire form of yoga practice. *Kundalini* is “the latent creative potential of the human being, which when dormant, lies coiled at the base of the spine.”²⁵ This coil is also referred to as “serpent power” or as “the manifest form of cosmic energy that is the agency of enlightenment as it moves up the central *susumna nadi*” during yoga practice.²⁶ The *susumna nadi* is the “medial channel” of the body through which the *kundalini* ascends. This *nadi* can be thought of as existing where the spine is

²³ Ibid., 209. Here, Womack is discussing ideas about the body from the Ayurvedic tradition, which is “based in the holistic world view of Hinduism” (208). While it is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain in detail which philosophies emergent in Kundalini Yoga practice have their origins in either Hindu or Sikh tradition more specifically, a basic assumption is being made that Hindu philosophies remain an influence woven into Kundalini Yoga even as it was used to promote Sikhism by Yogi Bhaajan.

²⁴ Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 465.

²⁵ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 15.

²⁶ Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India : the Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2004), 276.

in the physical body, but as part of the subtle body as more of a conduit or a sort of energy current than a tangible, material element of the body like veins or arteries.²⁷

It is the goal of Kundalini Yoga, then, to activate this creative energy – this cosmic power – through two of its main components: *kriya* (yoga action or ritual)²⁸ and *naad* (the use of *mantra* to elevate consciousness). The *kriya* is usually made up of a number of different exercises – the “orchestrated pattern of movements” mentioned above – with each part of the pattern, or each exercise being acted out for a certain number of minutes. Movements may isolate certain parts of the body, such as the head and neck or the arms only, or they may involve the entire body in the exercise. These exercises are accompanied by one or all of the following: a spoken or silently contemplated word or phrase (in Sanskrit or sometimes in English), a specific yogic hand position, or *mudra*, and a set *pranayam* to correspond with the movement. *Pranayam*, or *pranayama*, means “to ‘lead the Life Force’ and “refers to the science of yogic breath control.”²⁹ *Naad* is described as “the Science of Sound and Communication,” or a type of yoga with a focus on “self communication” enacted to “change your state of being.”³⁰ The “self communication” referred to here is the chanting of *mantra*.³¹ Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker discusses the influence of sound on the self when the act of listening assumes a preeminent role.

³² Although her discussion focuses on spirit possession activities, like Kundalini Yoga,

²⁷ Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 467.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 605.

²⁹ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 137. For a discussion of the ambiguity of the term “science” in the context of yoga, see Joseph Alter’s *Yoga in Modern India*.

³⁰ GMK Web Design, “Mantra and Naad Yoga,” Kundalini Yoga: Yoga of Awareness, http://www.kundaliniyoga.mobi/pb/wp_07fe70f5/wp_07fe70f5.html (accessed January 8, 2010).

³² Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 106.

participants' sensitivity is directed toward their surrounding soundscapes. She explains that the music "...invokes a realm of unseen power and limitless extension... The listening self in these ceremonies may be the same body, but may not be the same self as that inhabited in more commonplace life activities. Music, for many listeners, opens pathways of being not ordinarily experienced in everyday life."³³

Each of these elements of Kundalini Yoga (the exercises, body postures, breath control, and chanting) are joined together in the overall sensory experience for the practitioner. While not all *kriyas* contain exercises accompanied by *mantra*, those that do are markedly different. Since participants' eyes are generally closed as they do each exercise, the recitation of a particular *mantra* in rhythm with a particular movement becomes at once a sort of sensory anchor and fuel for the exercise. More rapid or vigorous movements seem to be propelled forward by the driving force of the vocal utterance and the accompanying expulsion of air. Alternatively, the relaxation and sense of relief that is evident during slow-moving or stationary segments of a *kriya* may be augmented by the use of *mantra* as well. These impressions of the nature of *mantra* in Kundalini Yoga classes are based on my own observations as a class participant, although I would make the argument (using the vocabulary of the regular yoga participants at SY in Shadyside) that the "energy" in the room is quite clearly influenced by the *mantra* sounds which participants make in particular. The atmosphere of the yoga class takes on a different character when participants are chanting, in contrast with the settings created by music from a CD or moments of silence. This is a concept that I aim to illuminate in subsequent sections. Since chanting is an emphasis that is especially highlighted in Kundalini Yoga, it is important to ask: how is chanting tied to the physical experience in this context? How is sound physio-sonically experienced, or rather, how

³³ Judith Becker, "Listening Selves and Spirit Possession," *World of Music* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2000), 45.

are the senses of hearing and feeling related or even conflated when sound is produced from inside one's body and vision is restricted?

1.1.3 “Tuning In”: The Role of Mantra in Yoga Classes

Kundalini classes (as formulated by Yogi Bhajan) always begin by “tuning in,” or chanting the Sanskrit “*Adi*” *mantra*, “Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō.” “Tuning in” is used to suggest the matching or connecting with a particular level “of intelligence or consciousness.”³⁴ It is tuning in because the *mantra* is meant to facilitate the direction of awareness inwards, in order to then connect with the spirituality of the instructor, and by extension “the long line of Spiritual Masters who have handed down yoga teachings.”³⁵ The *Adi mantra* is translated from Sanskrit as “I bow to the creative energy of the Infinite; I bow to the Divine channel of wisdom.”³⁶



Figure 1. *Adi Mantra*

The transcription above is a replication of how the *Adi Mantra* is graphically represented in a descriptive and prescriptive book called *The Kundalini Yoga Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together*. This book is intended to introduce the yoga form and provide information for a newcomer to begin practicing Kundalini Yoga on their own.³⁷ The directions

³⁴ Ibid., 13.

³⁵ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 14.

³⁶ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 122.

³⁷ As mentioned in reference to KRI product approval, this book was recommended to me by the SY instructor, Kendell Romanelli, as information about Kundalini Yoga that she has used as a teaching resource. It was co-written by a former student of Yogi Bhajan, Dharam S. Khalsa, and one of Khalsa’s students, Darryl O’Keeffe. It is likely that this book is considered by Kundalini instructors and practitioners to be a legitimate source because of its connection to Yogi Bhajan and its approval by KRI. The book is also one of the top five results that appear after a

for initiating the “tune-in” *mantra* herein are very specific, dictating the position of the body and the way to breathe. The position demonstrated below, for example, “Easy Pose” (sitting cross-legged) and “Prayer Pose” (the placement of the hands together at the heart level) is prescribed for “tuning in.”³⁸



Figure 2. Easy Prayer Pose³⁹

The initial directions given in *The Kundalini Yoga Experience* tell the practitioner to chant the *Adi mantra* three times in a row, using one breath per chant. As might be expected, however, variation inevitably occurs in actual practice. For example, in Schoolhouse Yoga’s Sunday Kundalini class the *Adi mantra* is chanted with one breath per repetition, although this

search for “kundalini yoga books” on Amazon.com, suggesting its wide availability for purchase. Furthermore, each of the ten reviews posted on the Amazon website are generally favorable, save one which makes reference to the speculation that the 3HO organization is a cult (a concern that is more prominent in Amazon reviews of the other book Kendell suggested to me).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Photo of the author, taken by the author. For a discussion of the problems regarding self-representation as part of an ethnographic project, see Chapter 2, Section 3.

may not be the case in all Kundalini classes. Further on in the book mentioned above, *The Kundalini Yoga Experience*, another set of directions for “tuning in” suggest “If you are unable to chant the whole *mantra* on one breath, take a sip of air after ‘Ong Namō’ and continue.”⁴⁰ In the class I attend with the instructor Kendell Romanelli, I have never heard her direct the participants’ use of breath in this specific way during the *Adi mantra*. Kendell does, however, intone the *mantra* with one breath for each repetition. Each Sunday Kendell’s class generally chants this *mantra* faster than is suggested by the transcription given above, intoning the long, sustained notes for about half of the duration of this particular prescribed version. In Kendell’s Sunday class it is repeated three times before the start of that day’s *kriya* – essentially, a set of exercises carried out in order to achieve greater balance among the various energy centers (to be described in further detail below) of the body-mind. Having never heard “Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō” before, it was difficult at first to distinguish the syllables of the *mantra* – it is not written down anywhere for students, but learned aurally. This type of learning process would account for any deviation from written *mantra* notation in practice.⁴¹ It also suggests that perhaps analysis of *mantra* transcription does not reveal what is most significant about Kundalini *mantra*.

After a few classes I knew what to expect when it was time to “tune in.” I could anticipate where the pitches changed, when one pitch in particular slid into another, and what the consonants and vowels were. I came to know “Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō” much in the way that anyone comes to know Kundalini Yoga practice – gradually, and through shared personal experience. As I became more familiar with the Sanskrit words and the melody, I began to listen more carefully to the sound of everyone chanting in unison. It can be a powerful, warm and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 122.

⁴¹ The book from which this transcription was taken was recommended to me by Kendell, although she first learned the *Adi mantra* taking Kundalini Yoga classes herself in Los Angeles.

richly resonating sound which I have experienced as at once filling and surrounding my body with vibration. As I “tune in” I feel connected to this greater body of sound – I feel that I have become a part of the group in a different and more personal way. Each participant contributes a part of him- or herself by creating vibrations with the voice and adding them to other peoples’ vibrations.⁴² *This* is where meaning is created in Kundalini Yoga - in the phenomenological account. Kundalini Yoga either becomes or does not become meaningful to participants in each of their specific and personal experiences of the practice, whether Kundalini Yoga creates for someone a feeling of connectedness, group membership, or unity, or of a deep, serene, isolated sense of content. Whether or not a participant can verbalize or reflect aloud on their experience, the nature of their intimate encounter with this activity is what either draws them to the class week after week, or causes them to try Kundalini Yoga only once.

“Tuning in” during the opening *mantra* is just one example of how *sound*-related words pervade the language used to talk about Kundalini Yoga. During much of Kundalini Yoga practice, exercises are done while restricting visual stimulus. Participants’ eyes are usually completely closed, partially closed, or focused on a fixed point. This restriction activates and enhances participants’ attention to sound and directs their awareness inward. For example, a Kundalini Yoga participant with her eyes closed will not have any reason to compare her abilities to other people in the room. She becomes focused only on herself and how she feels. This is an explicit goal of the Kundalini Yoga classes at Schoolhouse Yoga (SY) in Shadyside. As a part of most classes, Kendell encourages the class to “listen to yourself.” Kendell explains that you should do the exercises as you can, allowing yourself to rest if you need to. She encourages the class attendees to challenge themselves, but to stop if they experience pain. In

⁴² Classes at SY in Shadyside are largely composed of female participants – anywhere from six or eight to almost twenty, although since January 2010, one to three men regularly attend classes.

this context, “listening to yourself” places an emphasis on “listening” to your body, or taking note of your physical sensations.

1.1.4 The Study of Sound in Relation to Metaphysical Experiences of Music

In a similar way to numerous ethnomusicologists and other scholars within the field of sound studies, I believe that an exploration of sound can provide a uniquely powerful way of understanding what is meaningful in Kundalini Yoga practice in particular, and why it has been assigned value in a country on the opposite side of the globe from its origins in India. Steven Feld has recognized “...the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world.”

⁴³ For Kundalini Yoga, sound is a powerful modality of knowing, cultivating, and “being in” the *self*. The creation of sound vibration through *mantra* is a vital aspect of Kundalini as well as other yoga settings. Following Feld’s “primacy of sound,” then, it is necessary to study the aural elements of yogascapes in order to fully understand the nature of yoga practitioners’ experiences.

A brief survey of yoga literature reveals that very few scholars discuss the sonic aspect of yoga practice. Georg Feuerstein is one of these few, dedicating a chapter to *mantra* in his book on *Tantra* (1998) - “Mantra: The Potency of Sound” – and briefly addressing *mantra* in reference to various branches of yoga in his book, *The Yoga Tradition* (1998). Feuerstein’s focus is on the philosophy behind *mantra* and its historical uses as opposed to how *mantra* might be experienced by practitioners today. Medical anthropologist Joseph Alter provides a more specifically contextualized look at *Yoga in Modern India* (2004), although he does not discuss the importance of *mantra* or the yoga soundscape to practitioners’ experiences. Historical and

⁴³ Steven Feld, “A Rainforest Acoustemology,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black (New York: Berg, 2003), 226.

anthropological works about yoga, then, tend to either limit or omit an analysis of the yoga soundscape which is such a prominent feature of the tradition.

In contrast, medical ethnomusicologists such as Marina Roseman (1991) have pointed to the significance of sound not only as a defining feature of a healing tradition, but as a way for people to mediate and understand the self in relation to one's surroundings. In her monograph, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine*, Roseman shows that the study of song and dance used in Temiar healing ceremonies can illuminate the relationship between "humans and their...environment, as well as relations among self, society, and cosmos."⁴⁴ Ethnomusicologist Judith Becker also highlights the importance of musical sound and its ability to modify human beings' ways of being in the world in her work, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (2004). She suggests how sound can affect people's experiences of time and can even present the possibility for music listeners in particular to experience a "different self."⁴⁵ In these ethnomusicological studies as well as others, the embodiment of sound is a central concern. Embodiment is especially relevant to the creation of vocal sound as in yoga *mantra*, since participants produce sound vibration from inside their own bodies.

An analysis of Kundalini Yoga is a particularly useful contribution to ethnomusicological work that is based in phenomenological and embodiment theory because of what it can add to an ever continuing discussion of our reliance in the West on the separation of the concepts of mind and body. It is not just the thinking and perceiving self that may be shifted in Kundalini Yoga practice, but inevitably the body that is made different as part of the changing self. The

⁴⁴ Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

⁴⁵ Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington, I.N.: Indiana University Press), 147.

anticipated opportunity to transform the body is likely to draw participants to practice Kundalini Yoga as much as an expectation to experience mental or even spiritual transformation and rehabilitation.

As is evidenced by the nature of the language in this very discussion, it is difficult to escape the Cartesian legacy even when talking about yoga. The yoga studio placed at the center of this study, Schoolhouse Yoga, for example, displays the following motto on their website: “Healthy Body, Healthy Mind,” still portraying a separation between body and mind.⁴⁶ In her work, Becker also grapples with the Cartesian mind/body duality, making the argument that knowing and feeling *can* happen simultaneously.⁴⁷ Ethnomusicologist Steven Friedson, too, attempts to express the experience of new mind-body states through his own personal engagement with movement and sound.⁴⁸ Friedson’s work on Tumbuka healing rituals reveals how he came to experience the absence of a conceptual split between mind and body: “My conscious awareness seemed to be much more diffused throughout my entire body, as opposed to being centered in my head.”⁴⁹ This is where the study of Kundalini Yoga can contribute greatly to the discourse (particularly within the field of ethnomusicology) about how sounds are physically experienced. Sound in Kundalini Yoga practice is also diffused throughout the physical – it is both created and experienced in the body. Listening in Kundalini Yoga becomes, through the language that is used to explain Kundalini Yoga exercises during the practice (specifically, those which involve the production of *mantra* sounds) and personal, phenomenological experiences of chanting with closed eyes, a distinctly embodied activity.

⁴⁶ Schoolhouse Yoga, <http://www.schoolhouseyoga.com/> (accessed December 1, 2010).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁹ Steven Friedson, *Dancing Prophets: Musical Experience in Tumbuka Healing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19.

It seems that we must look to scholar-musicians who can more comfortably approach musical analysis in order to encounter in-depth discussion of the soundscapes which characterize metaphysical therapeutic practices such as yoga. It is not necessary to rely solely upon traditional Western music analysis to elucidate the role of *mantra* within yoga practice. Scholars in the field of sound studies employ phenomenological approaches which are useful for zeroing in on the embodied experience of sound.

Julian Henriques applies the concept of “sonic dominance” to his study of reggae sound systems – an idea that is particularly relevant to the investigation of the yoga soundscape. Henriques uses “dominance” to “suggest the material substance and the imminence of the sound.”⁵⁰ Henriques’s dominant sound subject is the overpowering volume of reggae sound system sessions (described as sensory “overload”), which he places in opposition with the example of *mantra* (a quieter, smaller scale phenomenon he describes as sensory “underload”). Henriques argues that while overloading leads to “grounding, ‘into body’ experiences,” underloading tends to lead to “floating, out of body experiences.”⁵¹ I would argue that the *mantra* with which participants engage in Kundalini Yoga can lead to both types of experiences.

Many Kundalini Yoga exercises encourage participants to direct their awareness towards their contact with the floor – through their hands, their feet, their pelvis, and their sits bones, for example. Such exercises prepare participants to notice their rootedness and their stability, and often lead to their experiences of chanted vibrations as a grounding sensation. Participants, however, may also be familiar with what Henriques describes as “floating, out of body experiences” if they engage with *mantra* for extended periods of time. When a single *mantra* is

⁵⁰ Julian Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black, 451-80 (New York: Berg, 2003), 457.

⁵¹ Julian Henriques, “Sonic Dominance and the Reggae Sound System Session,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black, 451-80 (New York: Berg, 2003), 458.

repeated over and over, for twenty or thirty minutes, as in Kendell's Tuesday Mantra class, students have commented that they feel as though they have lost their bodies, or that they have no body – that they've floated beyond a somatic experience of chanting.

As Henriques asserts, "the sonic dominance... draws attention to our intimate and multiple connections not only with our body, but also with your spatial and temporal environments."⁵² The yoga *mantras*, background music and breathing which are the focus of this study make each of these kinds of connections. Each of these sonic elements involves individual participants in group yoga soundscapes, which are amplified or made dominant because participants spend the majority of each class session with their eyes closed.

Kundalini Yoga soundscapes may also be considered in terms of Henriques's appropriation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology from the field of philosophy. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty, he points to the "particular spatiality attaching to the sonic," or "acoustic space." For Henriques, "acoustic space" is "a kind of space you are inside as well as outside and it is inside you as well as you being inside it."⁵³ This approach may serve as a starting point to explore the specific phenomenon within Kundalini Yoga classes where sound is experienced through what might be described as a blending of senses. Participants make and feel sound vibration inside their chests, nasal cavities, and throats, experiencing sound inside their bodies. They can simultaneously hear and *feel* sound – it is material and imminent. At the same time, participants are surrounded by others who collectively create a body of sound that can be experienced as if participants are inside of it. It is from this type of experience the soundscape of Kundalini Yoga must be understood as an acoustic space where embodied sound influences the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

way participants understand their relationship to their immediate surroundings and even to the cosmos.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

In order to approach varied experiences of Kundalini Yoga and its soundscapes from as many perspectives as possible, I attended weekly yoga classes as the basis for my fieldwork, also attending related workshops sponsored by Schoolhouse Yoga. I read various forms of literature about Yogi Bajan and his version of Kundalini Yoga from non-academic sources (3HO affiliated and otherwise), in addition to academic sources as a way of better contextualizing my specific case study in Pittsburgh. Internet research also aided in procuring information about the 3HO organization, Yogi Bajan, and yoga chant recordings that are used in Kundalini Yoga class settings. I also conducted interviews to gain a better perspective on other participants' experiences of Kundalini Yoga, which presented a number of challenges to be explained below.

In addition to attending weekly yoga classes as an observing participant, I attended workshops once a month or more, when possible. Schoolhouse Yoga hosts a number of workshops in addition to their regular class schedule. Two of these workshops: a Mantra workshop and one called "The Yoga of Drum and Chant" also encourage group participation in vocalized sound.

Mantra workshops are held monthly on Saturday afternoons from twelve to two pm.⁵⁴ Kendell leads these workshops, incorporating *mantras* that are used in Kundalini Yoga classes as

⁵⁴ Beginning in the summer of 2010, through the fall of 2010, mantra workshops are now being held in the evenings (6-8pm) at the Squirrel Hill location, rather than in the afternoon at the Strip District location.

well as Kundalini warm-up exercises.⁵⁵ The Yoga of Drum and Chant workshops are held in Schoolhouse Yoga studios much less frequently. Just one such workshop was offered there during my fieldwork in September of 2009. Jim Donovan, a professional percussionist and teacher, creates and facilitates these workshops. Jim teaches at the nearby Saint Frances University and is known for offering many of his workshops at other venues in the Pittsburgh area. Additionally, he gives workshops out of state in North Carolina, Virginia, Indiana, New York, and West Virginia. Each Yoga of Drum and Chant workshop incorporates drumming, breathing, and *mantra* exercises and is meant to be “an interactive and energizing experience designed to renew your spirit and accelerate personal growth.”⁵⁶

I have used my experiences as a participant in these yoga classes and workshops as a starting point to explain from where meaning comes in Kundalini Yoga, also employing informal interviews with the instructors and other participants to better understand how Kundalini Yoga is experienced on a larger scale (although still specific to this particular class and highly personal for each participant). This particular Kundalini yoga setting, however, presented a number of issues regarding the openness of practitioners to participate in an interview. While Kendell and Jim were quite open about their experiences teaching and practicing yoga, it was much more challenging to get a better understanding of how other participants experience *mantra*. The main reason behind this difficulty was the fact that Kundalini Yoga classes as well as the Drum and Chant workshops’ central activities invite participants to become more vulnerable than perhaps many people are used to being in the presence of others. Participants are asked, for example, to close their eyes and chant out loud foreign-sounding Sanskrit syllables that they may have just

⁵⁵ Since the duration of my field study SY has added a weekly Mantra Meditation class at their Squirrel Hill neighborhood location, also taught by Kendell R.

⁵⁶ Jim Donovan, “The Yoga of Drum and Chant Workshop,” Jim Donovan Music, <http://jmdbird.webs.com/yogaofdrumandchant.htm> (accessed March 26, 2010).

heard for the first time. Some feelings of unease or apprehension are likely to be present to at least some degree in every Sunday yoga class because newcomers drop in almost every week. Kendell in turn, is very dedicated to maintaining an environment that is as welcoming and as “safe” as possible, and therefore requests that no audio recordings be made of the chanting in either the *mantra* workshops or the weekly classes.

As a way to explore the Kundalini soundscape further and to obtain some sort of audio sample of Kundalini *mantra*, I set up a recording project outside of the Schoolhouse Yoga studios in April of 2010. In a number of ways, the resulting recordings aligned with my observations, although they involved a completely different group of participants than the Schoolhouse Yoga classes. These results, along with the problems and issues raised by such a project will be analyzed in Chapter 4. Three excerpts from these recordings are offered as a reference along with one additional recording made separately from the April 2010 project to further contextualize the Kundalini soundscape (see appendix for list of recorded examples).

In terms of interviewing other participants, those people who I came to know as regulars still did not necessarily come every week, even if we had planned to do an interview after class. Outside factors such as bad weather or participants having to travel for work added to my inability to control whether or not participants would show up for class and a possible interview. In a few cases I relied upon phone interviews, suggested by the interviewees themselves. Phone interviews seemed to be somewhat less effective because of my limited ability to respond with body language and facial expressions, and likewise my inability to read such communicative gestures from the interviewees. The ways in which Kundalini Yoga is conceived of as a very private and personal activity will also be discussed below in Chapter 3.

1.3 MANTRA AS INTENTIONAL VIBRATIONS

The way in which *mantra* is described during Kundalini Yoga classes has the power to influence participants' experience of it, so it is important to consider how *mantra* is framed for this case study in Pittsburgh. Consideration of Kendell Romanelli's background illuminates her understanding of *mantra* and its purpose. Kendell is a practitioner and instructor of Kundalini Yoga, and teaches multiple classes at Schoolhouse Yoga's various locations around Pittsburgh. In contrast with other instructors, Kendell may have a slightly different perspective on the *mantra* that is so much a part of Yogi Bajan's Kundalini Yoga because she is a professionally trained singer and voice teacher. The way Kendell experiences and discusses chanting is very much influenced by her training as a vocalist. When asked what the difference is between singing and chanting, she explained: "I'm most at home when I'm singing or chanting ...for me, there *is* no difference. Singing is the same. So, it always brings me home."⁵⁷ Still, Kendell qualifies this by conceding that her conception of *mantra* is an individual one, noting that her background causes her to approach singing from a "different viewpoint"⁵⁸ than perhaps someone who has not spent so much time using their voice in various settings.

Despite this bias, Kendell describes *mantra* as *vibration* in her class. In conversation, she commented: "So the *mantra* is not about beauty in sound, it's not what other people think. It's

⁵⁷ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

⁵⁸ Kendell Interview (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, December 3, 2009.

about you feeling the vibrations.”⁵⁹ This idea tends to be the dominant description of *mantra* in those books approved by the KRI. One such general instructional text, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (written by Yogi Bhajan’s first American student, Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa) does not use the word music or song to talk about *mantra*. She describes *mantra* as chanting: “...chanting is not singing. It is not speaking. It is vibrating.”⁶⁰ The authors of another KRI-approved book which draws upon the teachings of Yogi Bhajan defines *mantra* as:

“...two words Man and Tra. Man means mind and Tra means the heat of life. Ra means Sun. So *mantra* is a powerful combination of words which, if recited, takes the vibratory effect of each of your molecules into the Infinity of the Cosmos.” Yogi Bhajan, 1997⁶¹

Here the translation of the Sanskrit word “*mantra*” into English seems only to complicate the concept. This is in part because there is no comparable word in the English language, and so the resulting translation will inevitably fall short of the exact meaning from Sanskrit.⁶² *Mantra* according to this translation consists of thought, or words which, when uttered, transmit mental and bodily energy to the rest of the universe.

In consideration of all of these slightly varied definitions of *mantra*, it appears that the English language cannot properly account for the way in which *mantra* seems to drift between thought, speech, and song. Looking at the many different ways in which *mantra* is described in yoga discourse does lead to the discovery of a common thread: even though it may be unclear which category *mantra* fits into as sound, this is much less significant than what *mantra* does. In this vein, *mantra* can be explained as “...a sound that alters, elevates, or modifies the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 17.

⁶¹ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 121.

⁶² Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 67.

consciousness through the repetition of its rhythm, sound, meaning, or tone.”⁶³ The sound – the vibrations – created by the recitation of *mantra* and the physical experiences of these *mantras* are at the core of what is valued in Kundalini Yoga practice.

While Kundalini Yoga is performative in the sense that it involves the creation of (musical) sound in the presence of others, it is not intended to be a performance. Kundalini Yoga *mantra* is done for one’s self. Chanting is an essential part of this personal focus, as it guides participants’ focus inwards. During an interview Kendell herself said “singing you do for other people; chanting, you do for yourself.”⁶⁴ This idea is echoed within the ongoing discourse among Kendell and the regular Kundalini Yoga participants. Some of the participants articulate a deeply personal experience of the sessions, expressing their understanding of Kundalini Yoga as a profoundly important means (essential, even) to become a more balanced, grounded person. For one particular student, this is achieved by first abandoning one’s ego and surrendering control to Kendell as she navigates the Kundalini *kirya*. This student suggested that in order to be a better version of herself in everyday life, she felt it was essential to let go of her thoughts about the yoga class (and everything else) and to allow herself to be guided, or carried through the *kriya*. Respect for, and trust in the yoga instructor is a central feature of Kundalini Yoga in practice as well as in literature about Kundalini Yoga. It is invoked in the very opening segment of Kundalini Yoga practice, as practitioners “tune-in.” In order to help yourself, you must tap into a purer, higher stream of intention – at SY, a spoken narrative created in the moment by Kendell.

⁶³ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 121.

⁶⁴ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, December 3, 2009.

I would argue, however, and I believe that Kendell would agree on some level, that most Kundalini Yoga participants are probably unable to completely separate their approach to reciting *mantra* from the way they would sing. It is possible that this is why Kendell feels so strongly that the presence of recording equipment would be too invasive and intimidating. Singing inherently involves an expression of the self, exposing the unique voice of each person, and in participants' minds, could be associated with unpleasant or uncomfortable experiences from the past. Very often, Kendell will say something like, "Remember that chorus teacher from middle school who told you to stop singing so nasally? Well forget that!"

In this sense, talking about *mantra* as singing as opposed to vibrated sound may create powerful associations with certain stereotypes about what it means to sing properly or to sing well, with expectations that leave open a possibility for participants to fail in some way.

2.0 YOGI BHAJAN'S TEACHINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the conditions behind Yogi Bajan's teachings and to compare how they were initially received in the 1970s with how they are received today. This chapter is meant to get to the root of which people living in the United States might be drawn to Kundalini Yoga and why. In order to illuminate the reception of Yogi Bajan's teachings, it is helpful to look at how Yogi Bajan's Kundalini Yoga (and his emphasis on sound) has been influenced by the nature of his personal background. Although Yogi Bajan died in 2004 and neither Kendell nor the regular Kundalini participants in Pittsburgh had ever interacted with him, it is possible to glean some information about how and why he formed his own version of Kundalini Yoga from the wealth of materials published about him. Central among this literature is an extensive collection of essays about Yogi Bajan by many different members of his organization, 3HO. This biography, *The Man Called The Siri Singh Sahib*, was clearly written by people who loved, admired and respected Yogi Bajan – people with an agenda to promote and grow their organization. With this in mind, the information provided therein still reveals a good deal about the persona of Yogi Bajan and how people viewed him, hinting at what some of his motives might have been when he developed his own version of Kundalini Yoga practice in America.

2.1 KUNDALINI YOGA AND RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

From a young age, Yogi Bhajan is said to have been quite spiritual. This spirituality was fostered by the role models who surrounded him during his formative years, among them his “saintly grandfather,”⁶⁵ a very religious man. Similarly, his grandmother’s dedication also served as a model - she woke up at three o’clock each morning to carry out her devotional rituals as a Sikh, continuing to chant as she made breakfast until the children woke up.⁶⁶ Yogi Bhajan also became involved with yoga at a young age, and continued on to follow both Sikh and Hindu yoga masters during his lifetime. As a devoted Sikh, Yogi Bhajan recognized the way that Hindu teachings were transmitted through yoga, deciding in turn to use yoga himself as a way to “...propagate the precious and peerless wealth of [his Sikh] Guru's teachings.”⁶⁷ Although it was not unheard of for Sikhs to practice yoga, it was not a mainstream Sikh practice because of its close connection with Hinduism. In fact, theologian Alan Tobey’s study of 3HO asserted in the late 1970s that since “In India the Sikh religion and the many traditions of yoga have nothing to do with each other; in this country some native Indian Sikhs denounce Yogi Bhajan for attempting to join them.”⁶⁸ Still, Yogi Bhajan eventually gained great recognition both in India and in the United States for his role in promoting Sikhism.

Adding to Yogi Bhajan’s experience with *mantra* as a dedicated Sikh, his faith in the utility of *mantra* must have been reinforced by his encounter with *mantra* from a Hindu tradition. Yogi Bhajan was a practitioner of Tantra Yoga, through which yogis had used *mantras* to

⁶⁵ M.S.S. Sardarni Premka Kaur Khalsa and S.S. Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa, Ph.D., eds, *The Man Called The Siri Singh Sahib* (Los Angeles: Sikh Dharma, 1979), 20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁸ Alan Tobey, “The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization” in *The New Religious Consciousness*, ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, 5-30 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 26.

cultivate the kundalini long before the development of Sikhism in India. A Hindu tradition, *mantra* made up a part of the oldest known form of yoga – “the practice of disciplined introspection, or meditative focusing, in conjunction with sacrificial rituals,” and has its origins in the Vedas (ancient Hindu texts written in Sanskrit).⁶⁹ Each of these rituals “...has its own prescribed formulas and words of power appropriate for the occasion, and great stress is laid on the proper recitation of *mantras*, for much of the efficacy of a rite depends on their correct use.”⁷⁰ Such an emphasis on proper pronunciation and recitation can also be found in the KRI-approved literature. It is difficult, however, to now distinguish the extent to which Yogi Bhajan truly drew upon Hindu forms, since Sikh tradition is infused within his published teachings. Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan today incorporates Sikhism by specifically using *mantras* written in *Gurmukhi*, a script used for the Punjabi language, especially among Sikhs, whose development is credited to Sikh gurus.⁷¹ Furthermore, in her book *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power*, Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa refers to Kundalini Yoga *mantras* as *Gurbani*, or compositions of Sikh Gurus.⁷² In addition to the use of the term *Gurbani* to refer to *mantra*, many of Yogi Bhajan’s devotees and published writers on the topic of Kundalini Yoga are Westerners who have become initiated Sikhs.⁷³

⁶⁹ Ramesh Chander Dogra and Dr. Gobind Singh Mansukhani, *Encyclopaedia of Sikh Religion and Culture* (New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House, 1995), 306.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs, Volume 2: 1839-1964* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), 309. Also, as explained in *The World’s Writing Systems*, “Gurmukhi evolved from the ancient Brahmi system, but it received its present definitive form from the second Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Angad (1504-1552); hence the nomenclature Gurmukhi, literally ‘from the mouth of the Guru’.” This script was used by Sikh Gurus to write hymns. Harjeet Singh Gill, “The Gurmukhi Script,” in *The World’s Writing Systems*, eds. Peter T Daniels and William Bright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 395.

⁷² Ibid., 328-29.

⁷³ American Sikhs receive a spiritual name (in this case initiates may write to Yogi Bhajan to receive their name). “Like their Indian counterparts, women share the middle name Kaur and men share the middle name Singh. Unlike their Indian counterparts, almost all American Sikhs also share the last name Khalsa.” http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/05/20/banking_on_yoga/

Reflecting the standards to which *mantra* was held in descriptions of the Hindu tradition mentioned above, Kundalini Yoga literature that presents the teachings of Yogi Bhajan (i.e. *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power*) stresses the importance of proper diction and the physical formation of the *mantra* words. Kundalini *mantras* in such literature are explained as powerful formulas for transmitting positive energy. There is, however, slightly less emphasis on the magical or secret power of *mantra* in Yogi Bhajan's construction, which may result in part from the influence of Sikh philosophy. Unlike the Hindu model of *mantra* being used by an elite group (Vedic priests) or an isolated ascetic, Sikh *mantra*, or the "practice of *Nam*, is done in a normal family-life, and not by renouncing the world."⁷⁴

2.2 KUNDALINI YOGA IN THE UNITED STATES

Yogi Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga formulation was influenced not only by his religious background, but by the circumstances in which he began to teach yoga in the United States. He brought his interpretation of Eastern philosophies to America to teach yoga in California during the late 1960's – a certain social context characterized by the people and ideas Yogi Bhajan came in contact with. As a way to begin understanding how Kundalini Yoga came to appeal to Americans in the first place, it is necessary to look at characteristics of the countercultural movement of the time and why a new set of religious beliefs may have added to the potency and desirability of this yoga practice.

⁷⁴ Ramesh Chander Dogra and Dr. Gobind Singh Mansukhani, *Encyclopaedia of Sikh Religion and Culture* (New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House, 1995), 328.

It cannot be assumed that Yogi Bhajan did not consider the advantages of tailoring his product (Kundalini Yoga) to appeal to the perceived needs of the audience he met with once he arrived in California. On the one hand, Yogi Bhajan's resulting product was positioned as accessible and easy to incorporate into newcomers' lives. Partly due to Sikh ideas against asceticism, Yogi Bhajan was able to cater to the "householder," or "those with families and jobs as opposed to a renunciate's path of celibacy and removal from society, which was the usual path of a yogi."⁷⁵ In this way he made a point of sharing a new spiritual practice with people without requiring them to renounce the material world. As his followers' books proclaim, Yogi Bhajan also brought what was considered a secret tradition to America. Yoga has historically been taught privately, rather than publicly: "The heritage of Yoga was handed down from teacher to pupil by word of mouth."⁷⁶ It is likely that this aura of mystery and exoticism was used to the advantage of Yogi Bhajan and his organizations to market a doubly enticing product. Not only had this yoga tradition from India been carefully guarded for hundreds of years, it was being made available there and then in the United States. And, it did not even require conversion to a particular religion – participants could just show up to the public classes.

In this way, Yogi Bhajan made a point of conveying the message that anyone could do Kundalini Yoga. Yet, it should also be noted that Kundalini Yoga as prescribed by Yogi Bhajan is available to everyone today as long as they can pay for the price of instruction.⁷⁷ The exception to this rule would be instructional videos that have been posted on YouTube, which

⁷⁵ "About Kundalini Yoga," The Teachings of Yogi Bhajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAAboutKY.htm> (accessed January 6, 2010).

⁷⁶ Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 35.

⁷⁷ As a participant at Schoolhouse Yoga, I had to pay \$8.33 per class session (the lowest rate for classes if a 12-class pass is purchased for \$100). Workshops were more expensive at \$25 each. Since I paid to attend classes out-of-pocket in the same way as the other regular participants, I benefited to an extent from my positioning as somewhat of an inside-outsider. Of course, my motivations for spending this money included the production of my master's thesis, although I was aware that I held some notion throughout the course of my fieldwork that the exercises involved in each class provided health benefits both physically and mentally.

are free (the potential cost of internet access notwithstanding). In general, however, Yogi Bajan's Kundalini Yoga has become a commodity – one that requires not only a certain amount of money, but a certain amount of leisure time as well. In this sense, Kundalini Yoga is not exactly widely available to everyone, and in this way too it continues to retain a feeling of exclusivity. Yogi Bajan's original American students were for the most part, young (in their early to mid twenties), white, members of the middle-to-upper class who were disillusioned with the mainstream way of life and with American society as a whole. They were people to whom Yogi Bajan's teachings greatly appealed, and for whom adopting an alternative lifestyle would be not only attractive, but a feasible option financially. Interestingly, the profile for Kundalini Yoga practitioners in the twenty-first century remains similar, although my field study suggests that the majority of practitioners at least in Pittsburgh are female, and at least ten to twenty years older than members of the countercultural movement would have been when they began practicing Kundalini Yoga.

Yogi Bajan's intention and his reason for traveling to the West in the late 1960s seems to have been specifically to share his religious beliefs through yoga. Those elements offered by Yogi Bajan's yoga, such as its openness to householders, functioned for him as a brilliant and subtle way to slowly introduce Sikh ideology to groups of people. Alan Tobey was one of the people who became involved with 3HO in the 1970s who also contributed an article describing his ethnographic study of the organization to *The New Religious Consciousness* (1976). As Tobey noted, "It is all quite benevolent and also very conscious, an effective way of building a Sikh Aquarian nation out of a sympathetic post-hip generation."⁷⁸ According to this ethnographic account of 3HO, "Yogi Bajan came to the United States in 1969, not really

⁷⁸ Alan Tobey, "The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization," in *The New Religious Consciousness* ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 21.

intending to found a movement.” Yogi Bajan “...originally left India to take up a teaching position in Canada; but when that unexpectedly fell through, he was brought to the United States through the hospitality of people connected with the East-West Center of Los Angeles. There he began teaching classes in kundalini yoga.” ⁷⁹ Although this account suggests that Yogi Bajan’s first students were “middle-aged housewives,” he soon attracted young people who were taking part in the countercultural movement, the “hippies’ and ‘flower children’ who were flourishing in Los Angeles at the time.” Yogi Bajan was able to take advantage of the apparent similarities between the “hippie” and the Sikh ways of life such as long hair, “interest in cosmic harmony,” or vegetarian diets, offering a new and slightly different yoga-centered life-style into which young people could transition fairly easily. ⁸⁰

Stephen Kent offers some insight into the related phenomenon of “hippie” religious converts in his article, "Slogan Chanters to Mantra Chanters: A Deviance Analysis of Youth Religious Conversion in the Early 1970s." Kent argues that members of the social movement in the late 1960s who were concerned with numerous causes such as “...university reform, the Vietnam war, student representation and community power” became disillusioned when they realized they had not enacted as much change as they had been working for. ⁸¹ As a way to continue their struggle against the status quo, former protestors redirected their focus towards the individual as opposed to society more broadly. As Kent states, “transform the self of each adherent, the new logic went, and the heavenly sanctified revolution would immediately follow.”

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6-7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁸¹ Stephen A. Kent, “Slogan Chanters to Mantra Chanters: A Deviance Analysis of Youth Religious Conversion in the Early 1970s,” in *Sights on the Sixties*, ed. Barbara L. Tischler, 121-134 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 123.

⁸² Alan Tobey's study of the 3HO organization also confirms that most of its early members had been a part of the countercultural movement, finding that in general, 3HO members were "more experienced with drugs and demonstrations" and more likely to have experienced "... an earlier period of active involvement in several aspects of a life opposed to the values of the dominant culture." ⁸³ Another similarity between Yogi Bajan's Sikh yoga practice and the activities of young people in the countercultural movement was their focus on altering one's state of consciousness. For Yogi Bajan, these alterations were achieved through the practice of Kundalini Yoga exercises, breathing, meditation and *mantra* recitation, while for many hippies or protestors, drug use accomplished a similar goal. As Stewart Burns explains in his book about *Social Movements of the 1960s*:

"Marijuana and, much less common, psychedelics (LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin) facilitated uninhibited explorations of the self at the same time that they fortified feelings of community and solidarity, the connectedness embellished by the shared rituals of partaking. Drugs amplified, if not stimulated, the sense that 'everything is possible' and enabled one to visualize the texture of such possibilities. It made it easier to dream to savor ideals, to envision alternatives, and to live these out in the moment, thus intensifying the prefigurative ethic of immediacy..." ⁸⁴

Yogi Bajan took advantage of this desire or need to experience new kinds of possibilities and new states of being that was so pressing and so apparent among many young people in the late 1960s. He provided a new way for people to perceive themselves and the rest of the universe that was also drug-free. It seems as though his timing could not have been better; according to Alan Tobey's account, "Most people had come through a 'hippie' period and were ready for some sort

⁸² Ibid., 129.

⁸³ Alan Tobey, "The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization," in *The New Religious Consciousness* ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 21.

⁸⁴ Stewart Burns, *Social Movements of the 1960s: Searching for Democracy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 97.

of discipline. But it is a longer step from hippie to Sikh - and in one sense that is what 3HO is all about." ⁸⁵

Tobey's suggestion that 3HO provided a gradual pathway into Sikhism for disillusioned hippies seems to be the best description of Yogi Bhajan's methods for accomplishing his goal of sharing Sikh teachings in the West. Initiation into Sikhism seems to have been embraced or even encouraged, but not forced. Rather than being marketed as an opportunity to convert to a new or different religion, Kundalini Yoga and its accompanying teachings were presented in the 3HO context more generally as a way of life. This, in combination with the fact that yoga alone does not stand as its own religion has unquestionably contributed to gray areas regarding how spiritual Kundalini Yoga classes are in Pittsburgh (and probably elsewhere). It seems that lines between Kundalini Yoga's depiction as a religious activity and/or as a wellness activity have been somewhat blurred since the beginning of Kundalini instruction in the United States.

Today, ideas about *mantra* or yoga in general which stem from Hindu or Sikh philosophy are not typically elaborated upon in the Schoolhouse Yoga context in Pittsburgh. Rather, they tend to emerge as innate qualities of the practice that are not obviously religious in nature. For example, as mentioned previously Yogi Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga is marketed as yoga for the "householder." This form of Kundalini Yoga is essentially a casual practice for people with many other commitments, where its accessibility to "householders" parallels the Sikh value of living as part of the material world over living as an ascetic. Here the application of Sikh tradition seems to appear as anything but a religious practice.

⁸⁵ Alan Tobey, "The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization" in *The New Religious Consciousness*, ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, 5-30 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 19.

Despite the wide reach and influence of the 3HO organization during its first decade in existence and its success in initiating Americans as well as Europeans into a Sikh way of life, not all instances of Yogi Bhajan's brand of Kundalini Yoga are tied to 3HO. To reiterate, Kendell Romanelli, the instructor at Schoolhouse Yoga in Pittsburgh, was not trained by the 3HO organization, nor does she have any affiliation with them, although she does use resources written by 3HO members in her teaching. Kendell references Yogi Bhajan as the creator of this form of Kundalini Yoga, though she does not subscribe to his Sikh doctrine or promote it to the students in any intentional or explicit way as Sikhism.

It is interesting to note that according to Kendell, in Pennsylvania yoga instructors are not required by the state to acquire any particular certification in order to teach.⁸⁶ Since Kundalini Yoga materials based on the teachings of Yogi Bhajan are widely available for sale around the world, in the right circumstances essentially anyone could teach Kundalini Yoga, drawing upon ideas put forth by Yogi Bhajan and the members of 3HO at their own discretion. Even though the KRI may withhold a stamp of approval from a particular Kundalini Yoga product, KRI staff cannot control who uses the final products (and how), whether they are approved or not. Similarly, while the KRI establishes standards for teacher training, they cannot ensure that everyone who disseminates Yogi Bhajan's teachings has undergone their brand of training. Individual Kundalini Yoga instructors will inevitably interpret and disseminate information each in their own way, therefore shaping the extent to which the practice may be explained in non-religious (or only vaguely religious) terms and concepts, as well as through references and illustrations from American popular culture.

⁸⁶ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

Creating such a culturally specific instructional style and rapport with participants is something that Kendell does very naturally, and in a very effective way. As an instructor, Kendell is extremely popular among students and seems to be well respected and well recommended by other yoga instructors in Pittsburgh.⁸⁷ Excerpts from my field notes reveal some of my own initial impressions, which, in the year or so following the start of my research in September 2009, seem to emerge within the discourse of other participants as well:

“During class Kendell’s manner creates a very informal environment. She has a very warm, vibrant, welcoming personality. Students chime in and comment about particular portions of the class, there’s laughter and questions if someone doesn’t understand what to do. She constantly reassures the class that whatever you are able to do is okay... There is a warmly offered assertion that whatever and whoever we are, it’s okay.”

Part of how Kendell achieves this atmosphere of camaraderie and acceptance is by revealing her imperfections in a way that allows participants to feel that she is in the middle of the very same endeavor. Kendell cultivates a sense that rather than being a more enlightened, superior yoga practitioner than the participants, she comes up against the same stumbling blocks as she strives to lead a healthy, balanced lifestyle. She often cites habits that many people have, talking about maybe having a drink after a hard day’s work. But she always mentions these habits without applying judgment, just acknowledging that these are things that humans do, and that it is okay.

The effect Kendell’s approach has on students is profound. One of Kendell’s regular Sunday students proclaimed that their devotion to her and their appreciation for her teaching style was so great, they were like followers in a cult. Her unique style and the way she is able to connect with students makes her not only employable, but irreplaceable among Pittsburgh yoga

⁸⁷ Kendell began working at Schoolhouse after substitute teaching there, when she was asked after the opening of the Squirrel Hill location to teach her own class. In an interview, she described the way she acquired various teaching jobs as the result of networking with friends who either practiced or taught yoga, which eventually led these friends and acquaintances to invite her to come teach a class at places like the Community College of Allegheny County, Breathe Yoga Studio (BYS, LLC.), and Schoolhouse Yoga. Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

studios, even when she has not had official (KRI approved) Kundalini teacher training. In this vein, as it is transposed into a twenty-first century, American context, the local iteration of Kundalini Yoga sheds many – but not all – of its associations with Sikh religious beliefs and objectives.

Although today the socio-political climate is much different than when Yogi Bajan began teaching in California, there remains a strong sense that Kundalini Yoga provides an escape from the problems of the world and a way to counteract the stress and the conflict participants experience each day. Essential to this activity of going elsewhere by going to Kundalini Yoga class is the soundscape of the studio.

3.0 A PITTSBURGH YOGASCAPE

Kundalini yoga provides and creates an opportunity to be with others – to experience “we-ness”⁸⁸ but even more of the practice leads to focusing inwards and going deep within yourself. On January 1st, Schoolhouse Yoga hosted a *mantra* workshop at their Strip District location, led by Kendell. The group of about twenty participants chanted the “healing” *mantra*, RA MA DA SA, SA SAY SO HUNG. The *mantra* was accompanied by the *mudra*, or hand position shown in Figure 3.

⁸⁸ Michael Bull and Les Black, “Introduction: Into Sound,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black (New York: Berg, 2003), 6.



Figure 3. Example of a different *mudra*⁸⁹

The *mudra* was modified, however, such that the participants (seated in a circle) moved close enough together to place their right hand beneath the hand of the person to their right, and their left hand on top of the hand to their left. Before we began the *mantra*, Kendell offered an alternative *mudra* to use during the thirty-one minutes we would be chanting, suggesting also that we place one hand on top of the other over our hearts, if we felt inclined. When I opened my eyes more than halfway through the allotted time for the *mantra*, almost everyone had moved their hands to their heart.

During a Kundalini class, at the heart of the exercises, in the middle of a set of repeated movements, the participants experience a unique sort of isolation. While participants are surrounded by other people, as well as an almost constant stream of verbal encouragement from the instructor, the instructor never touches the participants. Nor does Kendell typically correct participants' movements from the front of the room. She explains how to properly do each

⁸⁹ Photo taken of the author, by the author.

exercise before we begin, and then leaves the students to do them, more or less in their own way. Even more significantly, participants go through almost all of a given Kundalini Yoga class with their eyes shut. This adds to the feeling of being alone, while enhancing the senses that remain unblocked.

This characteristic of Kundalini Yoga – a feeling of aloneness while being in a group is why it is important to give a (personal) phenomenological account. The experience of Kundalini yoga is meant to involve a deeply personal, sensory encounter. Unlike in other musical practices or situations, my argument is that while a Kundalini yoga participant's perception of sung *mantra* used during classes includes both a group and an individual experience, the personal experience may ultimately be the more profound of the two.

3.1 SPACE WITHIN A KUNDALINI YOGA STUDIO



Figure 4. Shadyside Studio⁹⁰

The Kundalini Yoga class at the Schoolhouse Yoga Studio in Shadyside is isolated as a distinct physical space and as a special social environment that is only for yoga practice. Both the nature of the physical space in this Kundalini class and the social rules that govern it create an oasis apart from the outside world. When Kundalini participants arrive, upon entering the studio they are expected to remove their shoes. While this is an action that many people likely take upon entering their own homes, it is not a regular practice in (American) public spaces. This is the first way in which the Schoolhouse Kundalini Yoga space is immediately set apart. Then, as

⁹⁰ Photo taken by the author.

participants walk into the main room they begin setting up yoga mats, claiming a spot they will occupy for the duration of class. Some participants use the mats supplied by Schoolhouse Yoga while others bring their own personal mats. Some participants make this their first stop, even before signing in. These participants tend to be the regulars who place their mats in the same places each week. As shown in the picture below, though it is fairly narrow, the main room is clean and bright, and unadorned until it becomes peopled with anywhere between five and twenty participants on a Sunday morning.



Figure 5. Shadyside Yoga Space ⁹¹

⁹¹ Photo taken by the author.

The yoga mat is where each participant carves out their niche, around which personal belongings like extra layers of clothing, purses, and water bottles are usually arranged. While yoga props like blocks or straps ⁹² are not typically part of this Kundalini class, blankets are always used. Throughout the *kriya* segment of class many participants sit cross-legged on the edge of a folded blanket to help them stay in a tall seated position with a relaxed, yet straight back and elongated spine. It is used as a little bit of extra support and cushioning while sitting on the floor. At the end of the class, many participants also unfold their blankets, covering themselves during the period of rest, or *savasana*. ⁹³ Since everyone has stopped moving for this segment of class and each person lays on their back on the floor, participants may feel their bodies cool down enough that they would want a blanket to stay warm and comfortable. The consistent incorporation of blankets (as many as each participant wants to use) is just one of the ways in which Kundalini Yoga can be seen outwardly as a nurturing, comforting practice. During class all of the participants sit facing Kendell (as in the perspective of the photograph above), one or two feet from one another, depending on the number of people in attendance. In a typical class, there will be roughly three rows of three people. The class size, however, constantly changes from week to week.

The Kundalini Yoga space and also class time is also assigned significant reverential treatment. Students who arrive early may not enter the studio until they hear that the

⁹² A yoga block is a rectangular prop (about 9"x6"x4" or 9"x6"x3") made of foam or wood which used to enhance practitioners experience of poses. A less flexible person who cannot bend over and touch the floor (with their feet spread apart slightly wider than their hips) might reach down to touch the top of a block placed in front of them. In a way, the block brings a stable surface closer to them and enables them to lean into the pose. A yoga strap is much like a long belt which is usually made of cotton, and typically comes in 6', 8', and 10' lengths. It is used as an extension of the limbs, or as a way to modify poses that require you to touch or hold onto your feet, for example. If a practitioner cannot bend forward and touch their toes in a sitting position with their legs stretched out in front, they can wrap the strap around the balls of their feet and grasp onto the ends of the strap to pull their torso closer to their legs. (Measurements and prop materials taken from products available on amazon.com.)

⁹³ Also known as "corpse pose." Here the spelling is taken from Alter: Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India : the Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2004), 25.

previous class has ended; similarly, students who arrive late (after the tune-in and warm-up are over) are not allowed to enter, and will be turned away. As one of the regular Sunday morning participants expressed, coming into a class once it is in process “disrupts the energy” of the practice.

3.2 CONSTRUCTIONS AND CONCEPTIONS OF TIME

Time in Kundalini Yoga classes is measured both by the instructor and by the participants. The longest segment of class which features the *kriya* is made up of short periods of exercise from one to three minutes in duration. Three minutes, for example, is a frequently prescribed length of time for a given exercise.⁹⁴ Kendell uses a timer and measures each exercise to the second. The importance of such prescribed durations is articulated over and over within Kundalini Yoga literature, although reasons supporting the strict measurement of time are largely absent from discussions of how to perform various *kriyas*. In *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power*, Shakti Parwa Kaur Khalsa cites instructions given by Yogi Bhajan “on November 18, 1991” to “Set a timer, or watch a clock, because the time is to be exact. Not less, not more.”⁹⁵ Providing more in-depth research on this issue is beyond the scope of this study, although it is possible that such measurements were given to Kundalini Yoga practitioners and Yogi Bhajan devotees as a

⁹⁴ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

⁹⁵ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 267.

While each participant begins an exercise together with the group, many exercises consist of a motion that is repeated over and over for the allotted time, and therefore can be done at varying paces. This is, in fact, one of the ideas that Kendell emphasizes on a regular basis – take your time, go at your own pace, listen to your breath. For a participant, breath marks time within each measured *kriya* segment, forming a different, freer kind of rhythmic element within the *kriya* segment which takes the place of the silent, constant movement of the seconds in each minute of the exercise. Many of the *kriya* movements are meant to be done in coordination with the breath. The images below show the *kriya* exercise called the “Frog, or the “Frog Pose,” which begins from a squatting position (see left-most image). Participants inhale as the legs are straightened (right-most image) and exhale as the knees are bent and the spine straightens as they return to the original squatting position.



Figure 6. Frog Pose ⁹⁶

When this exercise is used in class, participants are told to do twenty-six repetitions. Kendell makes a point of telling the class that while twenty-six is the goal, it is acceptable for participants to do fewer repetitions. She often says if eleven, or fourteen, or some other number is your “twenty-six,” that is okay. For Frog Pose in particular, the exercise is very personal. As it is explained in Kendell’s class, it is meant to be done in your own time, with your eyes closed, at your own pace.

After having included a number of photographs meant to demonstrate elements of Kundalini Yoga in a clear and simple way, the process through which these photographs were produced deserves some explanation. In order to bypass requisite permission requests to use other people’s images, I took photographs of myself to provide visual examples of the Kundalini

⁹⁶ Photographs of the author, taken by the author.

Yoga practices discussed herein. While I did not think about it until after I had taken the pictures, this process of self representation was influenced by my exposure to books, websites and print advertisements about yoga, as well as my observations of other yoga participants. I chose to present myself in a minimalist setting because my aim was to demonstrate the relevant positions and shapes created with the body without telling other, unrelated contextual stories - what my home office looks like, my usual style of dress, etc. In general, my intent was to use my body as if it was not me, but just a model. To an extent, I wanted my personality and identity to remain absent from the photographs by eliminating clues like furniture, jewelry, etc. By doing this, I was essentially mirroring the style of representation used in books about yoga (as well as advertisements printed by Schoolhouse Yoga for display at each of their studio locations), which tend to display similarly minimal settings and anonymous yoga practitioners in simple, monochromatic attire. My choice to wear all black was based partly on a desire to show the positions clearly against the backdrop at hand, a light colored wall. It is interesting to note, however, that books on Kundalini Yoga advise practitioners to wear all white. Yet, none of the students at Schoolhouse Yoga adhere to this aspect of the practice – in fact, it is likely that more of them wear black clothing than white. Kendell does not dress in *all* white either, although she sometimes wears some white. It is possible that in my attempts to become a part of the regular group of participants at Schoolhouse Yoga, I subconsciously mimicked the other participants' style of dress.

Despite my efforts to appear as an anonymous model, the photos inevitably convey various qualities of my personality and how I present myself on a daily basis. The way that I wear my hair, for example, and the fact that I prefer to practice yoga barefoot, even though some participants at Schoolhouse Yoga choose to wear socks, can be gathered from the photos in this

thesis. At the same time, Figure 6 still represents a private, personal experience of Kundalini Yoga in the way that my face is hidden from view. Even though taking these photographs required careful use of the “self-timer” on my camera as I pressed a button and hurriedly got into position, these images suggest that I could have been practicing Kundalini Yoga.

4.0 MANTRA AS YOGIC SOUNDSCAPE

4.1 SOUND

The nature of Kundalini Yoga soundscapes, within which *mantra* holds a central place, make Yogi Bhajan's formulation exceptional in contrast with the rest of a practitioner's daily life. The idea of sound as power permeates each Kundalini class and supports the reasons for using *mantra* and for how it functions. This is an important concept – sound is understood as a phenomenon which influences humans as much as humans influence sound. The basis for this understanding of sound comes from the idea that all things in the world possess an inherent vibration. The representatives from the Kundalini Research Institute assert through the Yogi Bhajan website, for example, “Everything that is a part of creation is vibrating at some frequency. While a rock vibrates at a slower frequency than a sound current, it is vibrating nonetheless.”⁹⁷ As human beings and “part of creation” we are also involved in this vibratory universe, and when we make a sound, it is thought to greatly affect the surrounding environment.

As described on the Yogi Bhajan website:

“Any time that we think, speak, chant or utter a sound, we set a new vibration into motion. That thought, word or sound may be a vibration of high frequency that serves to elevate us and those around us or may be one of a lower vibration that diminishes us and others.”⁹⁸

⁹⁷ GMK Web Design, “Mantra and Naad Yoga,” Kundalini Yoga: Yoga of Awareness, http://www.kundaliniyoga.mobi/pb/wp_07fe70f5/wp_07fe70f5.html (accessed January 10, 2010).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

In this way, humanly organized sound has a function of transforming a person's mood, emotional state, or consciousness.

4.1.1 Intention in Sound

The power of sound, then, can be attributed not just to the vibrations themselves, but also to the *intention* behind them. Information given by the KRI on the Yogi Bajan website elaborates the importance of words in conjunction with the energy stimulation that is the target of Kundalini Yoga: "One of the first signs of the awakening of the kundalini is a new awareness of the power of our words."⁹⁹ In Kundalini class, a person's attitude or motivation behind the formation of a thought or a statement spoken aloud is understood to have an effect on other people. Shakti Parwah Kaur Khalsa also explains in her instructional book, "Each word we think or say literally starts a creative process in the universe. Don't underestimate your power of the Word. Be careful what you say."¹⁰⁰

The closing segment of class provides an example of the way this idea manifests in Kundalini Yoga practice as prescribed by Yogi Bajan. At the end of every class all participants are invited to join in singing the "Sunshine Song." This closing song is both a consistent signal that the class is coming to an end, as well as an opportunity to think about transmitting the energy cultivated during the session to others. Kendell explained to me that this song is an old Irish blessing, although how it came to be incorporated into Kundalini Yoga by Yogi Bajan is

⁹⁹ "About Kundalini Yoga," The Teachings of Yogi Bajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAboutKY.htm> (accessed January 6, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 38.

not clear. The lyrics are simple, and in Kendell’s class, are always repeated twice, followed by the chanting of a long “Sat” and a short “Nam”:

*“May the long time sun shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you
Guide your way on.”*¹⁰¹

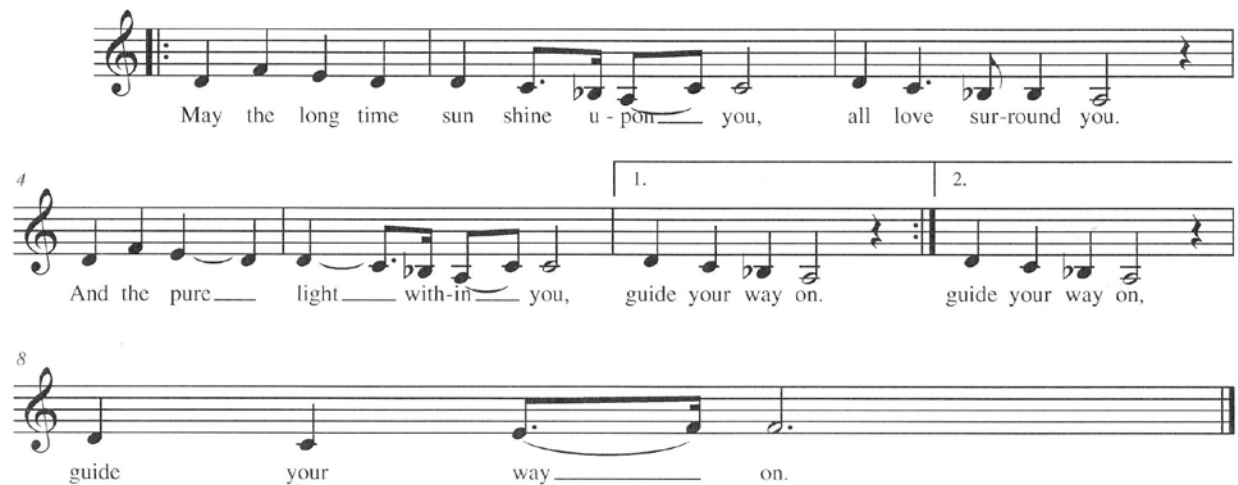


Figure 7. Sunshine Song¹⁰²

The “Sunshine Song” is very different from the other sounds that are part of Kundalini classes. Its hymn-like melodic quality and phrase structure along with the English lyrics provide a strong contrast with the Sanskrit *mantras* that are also a prominent part of a class session. Perhaps this song is meant to aid participants’ transitions from the very insular Kundalini class back to the outside, everyday social environment.

Just before this final song Kendell tells participants to think of someone with whom they want to share their “light” or positive energy. Kendell encourages participants to imagine sending this light or energy from within themselves to the person in their minds as the song is

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰² Transcription by the author.

sung. Although Kendell never discusses this segment of class as prayer, the segment reflects the fact that yoga developed from a religious tradition, and could easily be practiced in such a devotional way. The Yogi Bhajan website, however, also steers quite clear of any words that may act as red flags to non-religious participants – like “prayer” or “God,” for example (quite a turnaround from Yogi Bhajan’s supposed motivations for teaching Kundalini Yoga in the first place). The exception to this rule is in the categorizing of the Sunshine Song as a “blessing.”¹⁰³ This is, in fact, exactly how Shakti Parwah Kaur Khalsa also describes the song in her aforementioned book, declaring “It is a positive affirmation bringing blessings to all.”¹⁰⁴

What is emphasized most is the concept of infusing sound with a particular intention. Much of Kundalini Yoga, as a part of the process of enhancing one’s sense of awareness, leads or encourages some participants to reevaluate or to understand in a new way the power their thoughts and actions have in everyday life, even outside of the yoga studio. During an interview, Jim Donovan, the drum workshop facilitator I interviewed as part of my fieldwork, hinted at how the awareness of intention can fit into everyday life:

“Whenever we speak to someone ... we hold an energy about what we’re trying to communicate. So behind our words are beliefs; behind our words are ideas that we’re trying to get across. And so, this is a way of demonstrating that our words ... carry a charge ... Just like I’m charging my words right now with the intention of stating a belief ... But when you break it down to how you really communicate in life, you can see really clearly how we *always* do it every day when we communicate. We have our motives behind our words. Whether they’re good or they’re not good, or somewhere in the middle.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ “About Kundalini Yoga,” The Teachings of Yogi Bhajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAboutKY.htm> (accessed January 6, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 193.

¹⁰⁵ Jim Donovan (Professional musician and workshop facilitator), interview with the author, February 23, 2010.

4.1.2 Organization and Sound

Overall, sound has been assigned a significant role in establishing the structure of Kundalini Yoga classes. This assignment was initially made by Yogi Bajan when he established a program for Kundalini Yoga practice. The structure of each class is always organized in the following order: tuning-in, warm-up, *kriya*, relaxation, and finally the closing song.¹⁰⁶ While *mantra* may occasionally be used as a part of the *kriya* and/or the segment of meditation that sometimes comes before relaxation, sound as part of Kundalini Yoga practice is most prominent in the fixed opening and closing sections of a class.

Yogi Bajan, then, has played a great role in organizing sound. In a similar way, Kundalini instructors also organize the sounds of Kundalini Yoga practice when they choose where additional *mantras* may be added into a class each time they prepare to teach. Instructors may also choose to add background music to their class – a CD or music from an iPod. Sound frames Kundalini practice, signaling to participants that it is time to either enter into the session or time to end it and return to the rest of the day.

In a Kundalini Yoga, sound not only organizes the overall structure of a class, but is also believed to affect the internal workings of participants' body functions. As described in one guidebook, "the practice of Kundalini Yoga balances the glandular system, strengthens the 72,000 nerves in the body, expands the lung capacity, and purifies the bloodstream."¹⁰⁷ Practicing Kundalini Yoga is thought to affect and redirect the body's energy by stimulating

¹⁰⁶ "About Kundalini Yoga," The Teachings of Yogi Bajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAboutKY.htm> (accessed January 6, 2010).

¹⁰⁷ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 11.

various organs or areas – for example, bending or moving in a way that might stretch out, release tension, or even put pressure on a certain area such as the abdomen or the lower back.

In the Introduction, Yogi Bhajan’s translation of the Sanskrit term (via the KRI) was given as a way to begin unpacking the many layers of meaning that can be implied by the word “*mantra*.” To summarize, Yogi Bhajan describes *mantra* as a combination of recited words. Uttering these words activates vibratory energy within a person and leads to the transference of this energy to the rest of the universe.

The comments Kendell makes regarding the nature or definition of *mantra* in her SY class are along the same vein, yet she does not make as many connections between what is happening in the class and the cosmos. Throughout a class period Kendell provides guidance with brief directives: “listen to the sound vibration and allow it to tune you in,” for example. As I have used “energy” to illuminate Yogi Bhajan’s explanation of *mantra*, Kendell also uses the word “energy” to talk about the embodied, yet invisible product of Kundalini Yoga practice – or how and what one feels during and after chanting or doing the *kriya*. There is no further explanation given during her class for the nature, origin, and destination of the energy that is meant to be stirred up through *mantra*. Kendell might say “feel the energy,” or “send the energy to your dear person.” In this way, participants are encouraged to note the sensations they are experiencing during the class. Similarly, during the closing song participants are encouraged to think about sharing these sensations with someone they care about – their “dear person.”

Part of the reason for this simplification by omission of some of the theory behind Kundalini Yoga in Kendell’s class is quite possibly the reality of a limited time-frame within which to both teach and do each week’s *mantra*, exercises, and relaxation. This aspect of Kundalini Yoga via Yogi Bhajan – a minimal time commitment – is promoted on his website.

Under the question, “What makes Kundalini Yoga unique (that is, different from other styles/schools of yoga)?” the following reply is given:

“It’s [sic] efficiency and effectiveness—its power. Kundalini Yoga is quick. Because it’s a system built for the householder, the changes you want to affect in your life happen much more quickly with Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan® than many other styles of yoga.” ¹⁰⁸

Yogi Bhajan’s Kundalini Yoga consists of many small, timed or specifically measured segments of activity – two minutes for one exercise, five for another, twenty-six repetitions of another. On top of this, in the Schoolhouse Yoga setting each class is further measured into a particular session duration. As Kendell has noted, “...we only have an hour and fifteen minutes. And that’s about what people in our culture want. People don’t have two and three hours to spend in a yoga class ... They don’t want to do that. They’re busy ... So my responsibility as a teacher, I think, is also: appreciate my students’ time.” ¹⁰⁹

When considered in this way, the mode of learning and experiencing Kundalini Yoga at SY just does not lend itself to any comprehensive philosophical discussion about the inner workings of the practice. Nor does it seem that the majority of students are even interested in learning about and understanding these inner workings – some students tend to linger after class to talk about what they liked or did not like, to talk about the class overall and how it works, but it is usually the same two to three regular practitioners. Some linger afterwards, just listening in to these conversations, without contributing their own thoughts. Meaning for participants in Pittsburgh, then, might not necessarily align with the complicated (and largely unknown to a Western population) Hindu or Sikh philosophies from which this yoga tradition arose. In fact, I

¹⁰⁸ “About Kundalini Yoga,” The Teachings of Yogi Bhajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAboutKY.htm> (accessed February 4, 2010).

¹⁰⁹ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

would suggest that for many participants, what keeps them coming to Kundalini Yoga class is simply the fact that it makes them feel good. Dwelling on why seems to be unimportant to them.

4.2 FORMS OF *MANTRA*

In order to move closer to an understanding of *mantra* as experienced in Kendell's classes, it is necessary to look more closely at the particular context of this Kundalini practice. Meaning for participants must be created first through an acceptance of the particular language used in Kundalini Yoga classes (energy, "tune-in," sound vibration) even if it does not correspond to any other known experience. Second, this practice-specific language must be connected to participants' personal experiences of Kundalini Yoga class. *Mantra* is used in Kundalini Yoga as a medium for cultivating the self, and therefore lies at the heart of these individual experiences.

The word refers to both the chanted units (i.e. Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō) and the chanting itself. The concept of *mantra* as motto, however, also has a place in Kundalini Yoga. The *mantra* that is present in Kendell Romanelli's Kundalini classes, then, can be described as chanted *mantra*, spoken *mantra*, or silent *mantra* in which words are only contemplated and not uttered.

4.2.1 Chanted *Mantra*

The previously cited *Adi Mantra*, or the *mantra* for “tuning in,” is an example of chanted *mantra*. I use the word “chanted” to make a distinction with spoken or silent *mantra* because chanted *mantra* is more like the physical act of singing. As expressed previously, however, the word “singing” is often avoided in yoga discourse because the goal of *mantra* in this context is not just to make a vocal sound for one’s own or other people’s pleasure, but to enact a specific result – to activate and stimulate the *kundalini* energy and to access a higher level of not only personal but cosmological awareness. Singing can also affect a person’s energy, their awareness, and their emotional state. It is only that “chanting” seems to better portray the particular formulation of Kundalini Yoga *mantra* as it is likely to create immediate associations with for example, religious music, Gregorian chant, pure vowel sounds, and ancient languages.

In a discussion about how chanted *mantra* affects Kundalini practitioners, Kendell pointed out that the elongated pronunciation of specific phrases in Sanskrit (and written in the *Gurmukhi* script) leads to particular kinds of resonance in the body. For example, chanting “Sat Nam” produces very different effects than chanting an equally simple English alternative, “I am.” Kendell explained, “‘I’ is a diphthong... And ‘am’ in the English language is nasal. It’s not Sat Nam. It’s not the same sound vibration... ‘I am’ becomes much more nasal (in comparison), as opposed to a lot of openness through the back of the throat.”¹¹⁰ Chanted *mantra*, then, creates certain sensations and vibrations not only in the throat but also in the head, chest and back. These sensations result from the way the body forms pure-sounding vowels such as the round, open

¹¹⁰ Kendell Interview (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, December 3, 2009.

“ahh” sound in “*Sat Nam*” that can be found in ancient languages such as Latin, or in this case, Sanskrit.

In essence, chanted *mantra* is made up of words uttered with musical inflection. Musical inflection in Kundalini Yoga *mantra* appears in slides or stepwise-moving grace notes to and from particular pitches within the *mantra*, as well as through an overall melodic contour with a perceivable melodic climax. The musical details like the slides and the melodic contour, however, are less important than the physical actions involved in the creation of the *mantra* sound. Neither is the chanter’s voice quality (whether it is rough, breathy, or clear) or their ability to match pitches the central focus of chanted *mantra* (whether they are sharp, flat, or even singing the same pitches as anyone else). What is considered to be most important at least for publishing Kundalini Yoga devotees is the creation of vibration and the formation of the syllables that make up the *mantra*. As Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa proposes in her book,

“When we chant a *mantra* we are choosing to invoke the positive power contained in those particular syllables. Whether it’s for prosperity, peace of mind, increasing intuition, or any of the other multitude of possible benefits inherent in *mantras*, simply by chanting them we are setting vibrations into motion that shall have an effect. It doesn’t actually matter if we understand the meaning of the sounds or not.”¹¹¹

Since the formation of syllables used in *mantra* are an explicit concern it is important to examine them in detail. The seed or *bija mantra* (the recitation of the following seven words: *Lam, Vam, Ram, Yam, Ham, Ong, Om*) is one *mantra* in particular which Kendell described as an effective way to influence the chakras as a result of the way each syllable is formed by the body. Seed or *bija mantras* are the product of a “...flair for abbreviation among *mantra* creators,” where “...single phonemes such as *om, hum, or phat* [are] thought to be the ‘seed’ for a far more complex reality and corresponding spiritual experience. They stand for a whole cosmos of

¹¹¹ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 37.

ideas.”¹¹² For the *mantra* “*Lam, Vam, Ram, Yam, Ham, Ong, Om,*” each one-syllable word is meant to correspond with each of the *chakras*. *Lam* is meant to correspond with the root *chakra* (at the perineum at the base of the spine), *Vam* with the sacral *chakra* (at the sacral spine), *Ram* with the solar plexus *chakra* (at the navel), *Yam* with the heart *chakra* (at center of the chest), *Ham* with the throat *chakra*, *Ong* with the third eye *chakra* (at the center of the head between the eyes), and *Om* with the crown *chakra* (at the center of the head, projecting up).¹¹³ During Kendell’s November 1st class, she expressed that we would truly be able to notice as the sound of each word resonated in the particular area of the body it was meant to affect – to vibrate, stimulate, and bring into balance. Even though the vowel sound is the same for the majority of these words, Kendell explained that the consonants affect where the sound is able to resonate. She asserted that as each part of the *mantra* is chanted, moving from *Lam* to *Om*, the motions needed to create each sound inside the mouth move further and further back, from the inside of the teeth (with the pronunciation of *Lam*) towards the throat (with the pronunciation of *Om*).

Besides the sound vibration itself, the movement of the tongue is a very important part of chanting *mantra*:

“In addition to the vibrations set in motion, something else happens when you chant... There are eighty-four meridian points, or pressure points in the roof of the mouth. Every time you speak you stimulate them with the tongue. By stimulation these pressure points on the upper palate in a particular sequence ...you increase the secretion of the hypothalamus gland and actually bring about a change in the permutation and combination of your brain cells. You affect the chemistry of the brain.”¹¹⁴

As Yogi Bhajan asserted,
 ““You can feel the upper palate with the tongue and experience its different surfaces. There are two rows of meridian points on the upper palate and on the gum behind the upper teeth. The tongue stimulates those meridian points, and they in turn stimulate the hypothalamus which

¹¹² Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 231.

¹¹³ Dharam S. Khalsa and Darryl O’Keeffe, *The Kundalini Experience: Bringing Body, Mind, and Spirit Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 35-41.

¹¹⁴ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 39.

makes the pineal gland radiate. When the pineal gland radiates, it creates an impulsation in the pituitary gland. When the pituitary gland gives impulsation, the entire glandular system secretes and a human being obtains bliss. This is the science.””¹¹⁵

These two descriptions show that chant is intended to activate specific processes in the body that may be roughly translated as the “science” of *mantra* in Kundalini Yoga. In these kinds of descriptions the sound quality assumes a secondary role to the way in which the sound is created. From a participant’s standpoint, however, it is also important to consider those aural and musical characteristics which accompany the formation of syllables, since they too are part of a Kundalini chanting experience. The nature of the vibrations being created, including the nature of the melody are inherent characteristics of Kundalini *mantra* which must be taken into account in an exploration of why chanted *mantra* is an important, affective element of the Kundalini Yoga soundscape.

One version of the *mantra Ra Ma Da Sa Sa Say So Hung* illustrates well the significance of the affective components that make up chanted *mantra*. These components include the character of the melody, repetition, duration, as well as the pronunciation of syllables. Although this *mantra* was presented in a special workshop led by Kendell on January 1st, 2010 and not in her regular Sunday class, the character of the *mantra* and how it was employed is still pertinent to Kundalini Yoga practice at Schoolhouse Yoga more generally.

During the workshop, Kendell introduced the *mantra Ra Ma Da Sa Sa Say So Hung* by playing an excerpt of a recorded version set to a simple melody.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 39.

¹¹⁶ Snatam Kaur, "Ra Ma Da Sa," *Grace*, 2004, Spirit Voyage Music.



Figure 8. *Ra Ma Da Sa*

Kendell then turned off the recorded music and everyone joined in chanting the melody together in unison. While Kendell only taught the group the single melody, she suggested that everyone was welcome to add any sort of harmony they liked during the chanting of the *mantra*. Throughout the workshop multiple harmonies did emerge, creating a richer and fuller sound in the chant. This gradual filling out of potential harmonies, in fact, reflected the character of the recording Kendell used, in which different voices or instruments enter with each repetition of the *mantra*. Yet, a personal account provided by an Indian yoga practitioner, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, suggests that "India has always recognized the human voice as the most perfect instrument of sound. Hindu music therefore largely confines itself to the voice range of three octaves. For the same reason, melody (relation of successive notes) is stressed, rather than harmony (relation of simultaneous notes)." ¹¹⁷ In the case of the *mantra* CD, the inclusion of variation and harmony may be a result of the desire to make yoga *mantra* aesthetically appealing to an even wider audience – a result of the commodification of yoga *mantra*. Kendell's desire to include harmony as an option for workshop participants in such a fluid, expressive way was inspired by her own experiences of chanted *mantra* and her ideas about what participants should be able to get out of

¹¹⁷ Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1946), <http://www.ananda.org/autobiography/#map> (accessed March 20, 2010).

a chanting session – both an outlet to express one’s creativity and an opportunity to feel connected to other people.

Kendell described to me how she often ends up singing a harmony while chanting at first to help keep her focus: “I start listening not to myself but to everyone ... It’s so beautiful that everybody’s singing together and connecting together ... then you start to feel that you’re not one, you are part of one ... then I just start to feel this gratitude and appreciation for everyone who’s there.”¹¹⁸ Kendell asserted that since harmonies are present in the overtones of the chanted *mantra*, many participants will tend to hear them as possibilities to enrich the overall group sound in an instinctive or impulsive way. Since she has experienced the desire to sing in harmony while chanting herself, Kendell encourages it as a way of fostering a similar freeing feeling in the experiences of other participants. She stated in an interview, “I feel when you give people freedom to express who they are, they then find their truth and their joy.”¹¹⁹

In this case the overall *mantra* workshop is significantly modified to the taste of the instructor. She chose the CD used to teach the *mantra*, which presented one particular melody as opposed to, say, the one provided in Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa’s book for the same *mantra* phrase. By extension, Kendell’s modifications to the *mantra* workshop were enacted to meet the anticipated needs or desires of the participants. One of the goals of chanting *mantra* is to shift one’s state of consciousness, or to transport one’s awareness from the immediate, earthly surroundings to a higher, more distant state of consciousness. In this particular case, the *mantra* was introduced by recorded music that has been steeped in a commercial production process and was then perpetuated by participants who were given the freedom to embellish and harmonize

¹¹⁸ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

the melody as they wished. The resulting sound was a truly a hybrid product influenced by many different factors. The singer/songwriter on the CD, Snatam Kaur, is an American who spent much of her life making Sikh devotional music in America, but who has also lived and studied in India.¹²⁰ Participants in the *mantra* workshop first listened to her multiply-influenced music, and then began repeating it on their own, while slowly adding more and more of their own musical ideas. These ideas manifested in the form of harmonies, some melisma, and even echoes of the melody that were sounded slightly after other participants. The resulting sound was not a simple *mantra* chanted in unison, but a many-layered sound collage.

Here the *mantra* may be divested of some of its “exotic” quality (being made up of foreign words – Sanskrit, from an ancient foreign religious tradition – Hinduism), since it has been appropriated first by Snatam Kaur and then by the *mantra* participant group. It is, in a sense, owned by the participants as it is created anew with this particular group’s composite sound. Though it may seem less exotic or strange after all of this, the resulting version of the *mantra* still creates the possibility for a sort of “transportation” via sound. It is possible that through the workshop, Kendell and the group created a more familiar, and with its multiple voices, a more encompassing soundscape – and in this sense, a soundscape more likely to transport participants from the more immediate reality of the workshop.

Besides the melodic quality of *mantra*, the components of repetition and duration in the context of chanted *mantra* go hand in hand. During this particular workshop exactly thirty-one minutes (measured by a digital timer) were allotted for chanting the *mantra*. Each repetition of the *mantra*, “*Ra Ma Da Sa Sa Say So Hung*” took approximately fifteen to twenty seconds, meaning the group repeated the *mantra* around one hundred times during the workshop. These

¹²⁰ “Biography,” Snatam Kaur, <http://www.snatamkaur.com/web2.html> (accessed March 21, 2010).

elements, in contrast with the other musical details are included in prescriptive information (such as Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa's work).

4.2.2 Spoken *Mantra*

What I have labeled as spoken *mantra* is also different from ordinary speech. Spoken *mantra* is not characterized by longer, sustained tones as chanted *mantra* is, nor is it characterized by any particular melody. Rather, spoken *mantra* is more like regular speech in terms of its shorter duration of syllables and in the sense that it creates a rhythmic flow which yields to the speaker's necessary pauses for breath. Spoken *mantra*, however, can be quite different in the production of sound required for a particular *mantra* and the diction that results from it. Aside from the fact that spoken *mantras* used in Kendell's class are in Sanskrit, and therefore call for an unfamiliar sort of pronunciation, they can also incorporate movements that further manipulate the resulting utterance. One particular class featured a very simple spoken chant that consisted of one word repeated continuously for seven minutes: *Har*. The pronunciation of *Har* sounds like "Hudda" as the tongue moves towards the front of the mouth to touch the roof just above the teeth, flipping the "r". With each repetition of the word, participants are instructed to pump the navel inwards. For some participants the resulting sound had a muted, breathy quality, while for others the continuous stomach movement in conjunction with the simultaneous expulsion of air and sound created a loud, clear "Hudda". (Listen to recorded example number 1 for a demonstration of the *Har mantra*.)



On one hand, this exercise can be viewed from a physiological standpoint – it engages the abdominal muscles, creating heat and energy as a result of the work, ultimately strengthening to a small extent the aerobic abilities of participants. This *mantra* is meant to release stress, and it actually feels like a release in the sense that the expulsion of air required to form the syllable is similar to a sigh.

Ong So Hung was another spoken *mantra* used in Kendell’s class which is used for a particular end. Participants uttered this *mantra* during one of the kriya exercises. Each person is meant to sit cross-legged on the floor, hands clasped together behind the back. While saying “*Ong*,” each participant leaned forward, keeping a straight back and neck, until they faced the floor, and then sat upright again as they said “*So Hung*.” This *mantra* is meant to be empowering and heart-opening. Kendell described the *mantra*, however, as also serving as a sort of distraction from the work needed to perform this activity, for example in the abdominal region. In a sense, “...a *mantra* is that which saves the mind from itself, or which leads to salvation through the concentration of the mind.”¹²¹ *Mantra* then, can act as a point of focus which directs the mind to the task of repetition and ideally, to the meaning of the words being uttered as a means to transcend one’s physical limitations or discomforts.

4.2.3 Silent *Mantra*

The third sort of *mantra* that is used in Kundalini class at SY is thought *mantra* – *mantra* that is only imagined in the mind and not given voice. Even though this form of *mantra* is not audible,

¹²¹ Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 67.

it too is considered to be vibration – vibration of thoughts.¹²² As Shakti Parwa describes this concept,

“Every word has its own wavelength, or frequency of vibration. Every word is a sound current (even if inaudible) which sets energy into motion. This energy goes out in ripples or waves and (to switch analogies in mid-ocean) the vibrations eventually return to us like a boomerang, bringing more of the same. There is power in positive thinking and positive affirmations!”¹²³

While this particular imagery (either ocean or boomerang) is not invoked during Kendell’s classes, silent *mantra* is used as “positive affirmation.” At SY, silent *mantra* is presented both as a focusing aid and as a motivational tool.

As focusing aids, these silent *mantras* can help practitioners, especially newcomers, to keep their minds from wandering during a class session. The Yogi Bhajan website claims: “*Mantra* also supports those new to meditation, who find silence and absolutely stillness very challenging. In this way it is a ‘beginner’s practice’ and can be used by anyone to attain clarity, balance and equanimity.”¹²⁴ Silent *mantra* can help a participant to focus on her breath, while thinking “*Sat*” on the inhale and “*Nam*” on the exhale. Kendell often tells the class to think of this particular *mantra* and its meaning right after tuning in and before the *kriya*. This *mantra* means “I am truth; truth is my identity.” The task of focusing one’s mind on a single word or a short phrase is meant to help participants from thinking about anything beyond the Kundalini practice in that moment. Kendell will frequently tell participants to let go of any thoughts about their trip to the yoga studio – busy traffic, a broken parking meter, bad weather. She also tells the class to release all thoughts about what is going to happen after class – lunch plans, whether or

¹²² Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa, *Kundalini Yoga: The Flow of Eternal Power* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1996), 60.

¹²³ Ibid., 69.

¹²⁴ “About Kundalini Yoga,” The Teachings of Yogi Bhajan, <http://www.yogibhajan.com/YBAAboutKY.htm> (accessed February 6, 2010).

not a parking ticket will be on the car, what needs to be done at home, etc. In this sense silent *mantras* like *Sat Nam* (which can also be uttered aloud) act as an anchor to keep participants' thoughts in the present and to keep their awareness directed towards their bodies.

Silent *mantras* in Kendell's classes also very often serve as positive affirmation for participants, acting as a sort of motto, or as motivation during more challenging segments of the class. During her January 31st (2010) Sunday session, Kendell told the class to think like the Little Engine that Could, telling participants to recite in their heads, "I can, I can, I can; I do, I do, I do; I will, I will, I will."¹²⁵ This was a way for participants to motivate themselves to do the *kriya* exercise for its entire duration – this particular exercise, for example, really challenged the abdominal muscles. During some classes Kendell offers many different *mantras* to think about throughout the *kriya*. In her November 1st (2009) class, Kendell told participants to think of the phrases, "I have everything," "I am abundant," "I release," and "I am so strong." One of these *mantras* was given right before each exercise, and participants were told to repeat it silently as they completed that segment of the *kriya*. These silent *mantras* are different from chanted or spoken *mantras* in that their rhythm is not determined by the group. Nor is it necessarily determined by Kendell; although there is some sense of rhythm present when she first utters a *mantra*, she usually only says it one time. Participants alone decide the pace at which they will think of the *mantra* silently, if they decide to do so at all.

When describing her Kundalini class, Kendell has said that it is made up of chakra work, endocrine work, and affirmation work. Affirmation is a persistent theme which runs through every Kundalini class with Kendell. During a session, as the class moves through the day's *kriya*

¹²⁵ Reference to a popular children's story about a personified train engine who recites the mantra, "I think I can, I think I can" over and over again. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_little_engine_that_could (accessed January 24, 2010).

Kendell narrates how to perform each exercise and what to think about while doing it. She almost always encourages the class by telling participants what a great job they are doing and by telling them how much longer they have to do a particular exercise. Phrases like “Beautiful!”, “You’re almost there!”, “You guys are doing great!”, or “Just thirty more seconds!” become the soundtrack to the *kriya*.

4.3 ORIENTING MANTRA AND “SONIC DOMINANCE”

Instances of chanted *mantra* described in the previous section, like the *mantra* workshops held at Schoolhouse Yoga, provide the most intensive encounters with the production of vocal sound for Kundalini Yoga participants. In order to analyze the nature of group Kundalini chanting more deeply, I made a plan to record the way *mantras* often used briefly in Kundalini classes may be elaborated upon for use in a workshop setting. While various *mantras* may be used for up to five, seven, or more minutes within Kundalini Yoga *kriyas*, or sets of exercises, Schoolhouse Yoga *mantra* workshops involve chanting a given *mantra* for about 30 minutes. The *Adi Mantra*, or the “tuning in” *mantra* described in Chapter 1 was adapted for the *mantra* workshop in Pittsburgh on April 3, 2010. Rather than using the traditional melody employed for “tuning in,” however, Kendell presented the *mantra* in the style of the “New Age” recording artist Snam Kaur. Snam’s version of the *Adi Mantra* (“Ong Namo Guru Dev Namo”) is an original melody with vocal harmonies, additional lyrics and instrumental accompaniment which makes up one ten-minute track on her CD *Grace* (2004). Within the workshop, the Kundalini Yoga instructor Kendell Romanelli played Snam’s recording for participants and taught them the main melody,

encouraging those in attendance to add any harmony or countermelody that occurred to them throughout the chanting session. Then once the recording had been turned off, the group began to chant the *mantra* a cappella.

Since Kendell considered the recording of class sessions or workshops inside the yoga studio to be too invasive, especially for newcomers who might be self-conscious about chanting *mantra* in front of other people, she did not allow me to document the April 3rd *mantra* workshop. As an alternative form of fieldwork, I decided to create a workshop solely for the purpose of recording. The workshop was a smaller scale gathering which I modeled after the April 3rd workshop that I attended at SY as a participant. Therefore, in order to begin investigating these uses of *mantra* on a deeper level I invited students from the University of Pittsburgh to participate, making clear my intention to record the session for the purposes of transcription and analysis. There, I led participants through the series of exercises and chanting which Kendell directed at the SY workshop.¹²⁶

This project has made it possible to examine the importance not only of musical, but also of paramusical (incidental sounds from inside and outside of the yoga studio that occur amidst musical sounds) elements of the Kundalini Yoga soundscape while using this mini-*mantra* workshop as a case study. A follow-up study in a commercial yoga studio that *would* allow recording could provide even more insight into the particular nature of the Kundalini Yoga soundscape. Most factors in this recording session were inevitably different in comparison with the conditions I experienced in the field at Schoolhouse Yoga (SY) between October 2009 and April 2010, as I attended Sunday morning Kundalini Yoga classes and *mantra* workshops. For

¹²⁶ Kendell offered to help by leading this recording-specific workshop that was to be held at my apartment, but she was not available to attend on the best day for the other participants. Instead, she provided me with a description of the exercises to be used.

this project the demographic was younger (twenty-four to thirty-five versus late twenties to mid-fifties) and with a greater percentage of men. Sunday classes at SY usually involve ten to twenty-five participants, with up to four men in attendance. The workshop and recording session discussed here consisted of six participants besides the author, four women and two men. It was also held in the author's living room for convenience rather than in the yoga studio, with the author leading the session instead of Kendell. The order of activities in the workshop was maintained, and the same recording was used to teach participants a second melody to go with the *Adi Mantra* (to be discussed below).

Below is my transcription in western notation of the *Adi Mantra* used to “tune in” as recorded in the session I hosted in April 2010 (just the second of three phrases is given here). The opening bar of the phrase represents the audible inhalation before the *mantra* begins and corresponds with the faint grey column that precedes the subsequent frequencies captured in a spectrogram by the music analysis program *Sonic Visualiser*. In the graphs below, the y-axis shows pitch frequency in Hz while the x-axis shows time. To the left of the frequency values on the y-axis is a decibel key to show that the loudest sounds are darker, while the quietest sounds are lighter. (Listen to recorded example number 2.)



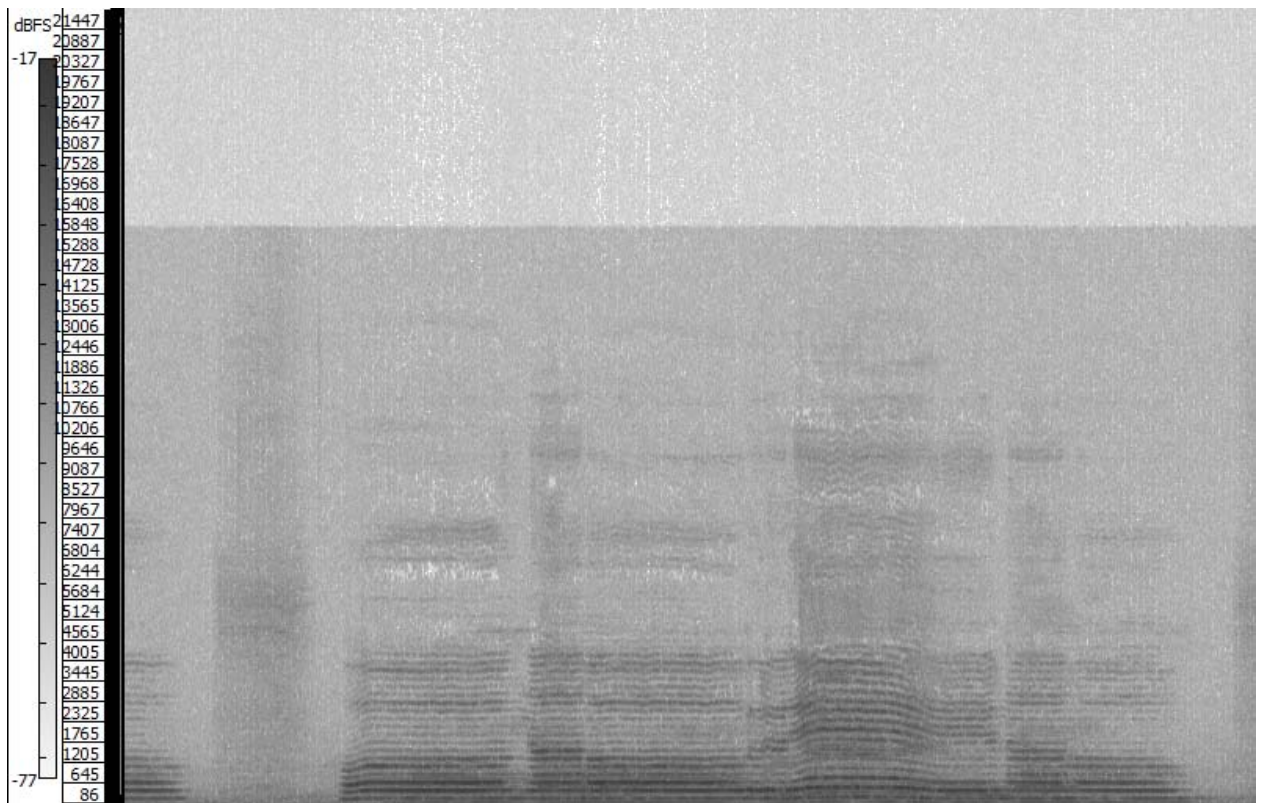


Figure 9. *Adi Mantra* (Phrase 2)



Figure 10. Transcription of *Adi Mantra* (Phrase 2)

Here the use of the spectrogram in conjunction with the transcription in Western notation improves the representation of the *mantra* by showing more descriptively the fluid connections or slides between notes and the breaths between phrases, which are not as easy to notate on a staff. First, these details are suggestive of the nature of Kundalini Yoga as a loosely

institutionalized yoga form in the United States, and second, they are an important part of Kundalini Yoga as a “healing” practice.¹²⁷

While 3HO has been influential in spreading knowledge of Yogi Bhajan’s Kundalini Yoga and in working with the KRI¹²⁸ to protect and preserve Yogi Bhajan’s ideas and teachings, it does not and cannot regulate the specific uses and iterations of *mantra* in Kundalini Yoga practice across the country. Individual expression through chant and music making, in fact, seems to be an element that has been embraced since the conception of 3HO and Sikh Dharma. Yogi Bhajan encouraged American Sikhs and 3HO members to write and make music, and asserted the value of original songs as a medium for chronicling the American Sikh “nation’s” history and growth.¹²⁹ The widespread application of musical creativity in a Kundalini Yoga setting goes back to its founding years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since many early 3HO members had participated in the countercultural movement of the time, they were more likely to have experienced music as a tool for chronicling and supporting a cause.¹³⁰

Expressions of spirituality and the promotion of Sikhism are not the only reasons behind the variation and flexibility in the incorporation of new melodies (an alternate melody used for the chanting of the *Adi Mantra* will be discussed below) or personal style into the chanting of *mantras* (i.e. slides and grace notes). In the classes at Schoolhouse Yoga, variation and flexibility

¹²⁷ On the Schoolhouse Yoga website under class descriptions Kundalini Yoga is described as “renown [sic] for its ability to heal students emotionally.” (<http://www.schoolhouseyoga.com/classes.aspx#descriptions>) Also within discourse about Kundalini Yoga among not only the instructor but also class attendees, the term “healing” frequently arises as a way to describe the experience of this brand of yoga.

¹²⁸ The Kundalini Research Institute is a non-profit corporation staffed by thirteen Yogi Bhajan devotees who work to archive and preserve his teachings, establish standards for yoga teacher certification, and award the “KRI Seal of Approval” to products that use Yogi Bhajan’s teachings and are deemed worthy upon review. <http://www.kriteachings.org/about.htm>

¹²⁹ M.S.S. Sardarni Premka Kaur Khalsa and S.S. Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa, Ph.D., eds, *The Man Called The Siri Singh Sahib* (Los Angeles: Sikh Dharma, 1979).

¹³⁰ Alan Tobey, “The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization,” in *The New Religious Consciousness* ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 21.

are expected to emerge from this discipline which is regarded as a healing practice for individuals. During SY Kundalini Yoga classes, participants are instructed to focus their attention inward, making note of how they feel and “listening” to the needs and limitations of their own body-minds.¹³¹

Self expression and release are constantly emphasized as main goals of Kundalini Yoga as a healing practice in the classes at Schoolhouse Yoga. In an interview I conducted during the time I acted as an observing participant at SY, Jim Donovan, a percussionist and chant workshop facilitator who has given workshops at Schoolhouse Yoga, compared chanting to the feeling of release that can accompany stretching one’s muscles:

“If you’ve ever just stretched your body and you’ve felt that wonderful release of just opening the muscles, your mind, your spirit and your emotions benefit in exactly the same way as your body ... chanting is a wonderful way to achieve this. Breathing deeply is a great way to achieve this – this stretching and releasing of restricted energy.”¹³²

In this sense, many uses of *mantra* in Kundalini Yoga are intended to be freeing, to allow for an opportunity to let go of tension and emotional frustration and to induce a more relaxed state of being. The general tone implied in the classes at Schoolhouse Yoga is that this opportunity to relax and release is a luxury. It is assumed that the daily lives of regular practitioners do not generally allow for such self-centered activity and attention towards one’s feelings and physical sensations. Creativity to express oneself musically through the addition of

¹³¹ The term “bodymind” is used here to better represent the yogic conception of the physical body as closely connected with the subtle or spiritual body (the mind). Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition* (Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 1998), 465.

¹³² Jim Donovan (Professional Musician and Drum Circle Facilitator), interview with the author, February 23, 2010.

harmony and vocal ornaments as mentioned before seems to also be a part of this goal of freedom in Kundalini Yoga as a healing practice.

Kendell always encourages participants in her *mantra* workshops to feel free to add harmonies as they chant, and to forget about worrying whether or not what they produce sounds good. She explained, “I feel when you give people freedom to express who they are, they then find their truth and their joy. Right? And, because harmony is all part of the sound, you start to hear them.”¹³³ Kendell’s comment suggests that being homophonically creative while chanting *mantra* is a natural process, one that emerges organically from the inherent harmonic quality of vocal sound and therefore ought to be encouraged.

It is in these longer chant segments that we might be able to better explore Henriques’s concepts of overloading and underloading, or floating and grounding, and the general experience of chanting that is such a significant part of Kundalini Yoga practice. Since there is more time for the participants to engage with the *mantra*, this example can also serve as a more thorough look at the possibility for creativity and release in chanting as well as the nature of participants’ relationship to their surroundings.

In this longer example of the *Adi Mantra*, a different melody is used (see the alto line of the first phrase in Figure 11 below).¹³⁴ As mentioned above, this melody is taken from a CD, *Grace*, by the American Sikh recording artist Snatam Kaur, who grew up amidst followers of Yogi Bajan and his teachings. In the mini-*mantra* workshop the group chanted *Ong Namo* to

¹³³ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

¹³⁴ The original recording is one whole step higher – throughout the eleven minutes of chanting the group gradually drifted down in pitch. Where the starting pitch of the melodic phrase was C (Snatam Kaur’s track being in C major), by the end of the segment we recorded the group was beginning each phrase on an A. The excerpt transcribed here does not account for the downward shift in pitch that occurs through the segment. The last phrase of the recording which corresponds to this example is about one half step lower than the beginning phrase.

Snatam's melody for eleven minutes. This duration was suggested to me by Kendell, who explained in her April 3rd workshop that durations for chanting are based on biological phenomena, established by the first yoga gurus in India.¹³⁵ As Kendell did, I encouraged participants to add harmonies as we chanted.¹³⁶ The excerpt here (see transcription in Figure 11) shows approximately minute seven to minute nine of the eleven-minute chanting segment. I chose to transcribe and analyze this excerpt further because there is a quiet moment that occurred during these few minutes of chanting which could be described as contemplative. This moment begins in the third phrase of the example (bar 8) and is most demonstrative in the fifth phrase (bar 12). The differences are subtle, but there are a few characteristics of the resulting sound (to be discussed below the transcription) which may be described as the underloading phenomenon Henriques cites. Although seven people (including myself) participated in the chanting, three distinct melodic lines are audible in the recording, as represented by three voice parts shown below in Figure 11. (Listen to recorded example 3.)



¹³⁵ During the workshop Kendell cited an example wherein the time necessary for one cell to travel from the heart throughout the body and back again is supposedly three minutes. She did not, however, give any further information about how an eleven or seven minute segment may be related to similar phenomena. Many exercises are repeated for three minutes, however, in Kundalini Yoga *kriyas*.

¹³⁶ I also chanted with the group, adding harmony fairly frequently. My intention was to make the participants feel more comfortable about doing so themselves, although one might argue that trying to guide participants to chant in harmony in this way takes away from the natural character of the chanting. Although, Kendell also chants along with the group during her mantra workshops, adding harmonies and returning to the original melody at the end of the chant segment – in essence, leading everyone back to unison.

3

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

5

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

7

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

9

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

11

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

13

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.

Ong Na - mo Gu - ru Dev Na - mo.



Figure 11. Transcription of chanting among University of Pittsburgh participants.

First, as is evidenced by the excerpt above, there was not a great deal of variation that occurred during the eleven minutes of chanting. To account for this, it is important to note two factors in particular. Some of the grace notes and slides that were applied to the *mantra* during the chanting segment appear to be an imitation of the vocal style of Snatam Kaur, so listening to a particular recording before chanting seems to have influenced the outcome to a significant degree. Also, since only two of seven people present during the recording of the mini-*mantra* workshop had participated in a similar activity before, it is possible that participants felt too insecure or unsure to take too many risks by standing out from the overall sound of the group. The group cohesiveness that is apparent in the transcription and the spectrogram suggests that the participants' attention must have been directed largely toward their surroundings.

A number of details from the above representation of the *mantra* point to the high degree of outward listening (as opposed to listening inwards to oneself) that seems to have occurred. Throughout the eleven minute segment, harmonies which were introduced earlier on were later imitated by other voices – for example, the “G” that appears on the syllable “Na” in the first phrase of the bass line (as well as the alto line) was previously introduced by the alto voice (prior

to the beginning of the excerpt given here). Furthermore, the dynamic contour of the excerpt seems to have been influenced by a group awareness. While my role leading the chant undoubtedly influenced participants' tendencies to sing more or less loudly depending on the volume of my voice, outward listening would have been involved if and when the participants followed my initiative.¹³⁷ There is still some sense, however, that the dynamic contour was created by the entire unit, not just the leader. The return to unison at the end of this excerpt confirms an increased awareness among participants of the sound creation of the group as a whole.

On the other hand, even for newcomers who may not have felt completely comfortable chanting a variation of the melody, there seems to have been at least an independent sense of peace or quietude that resonated among those present during the recording. While the recorded excerpt generally gives the impression of a cohesive melody with minimal homophony, the beginnings and endings of phrases are not at all executed in perfect unison. These uneven entrances and occasional lingering notes suggest that at least some of the participants were engrossed enough in their individual recitation of the *mantra* to take their time or to savor a moment here or there. This is particularly evident in the fifth phrase of the example above (bar 12).

These sonic details, along with the fact that the group seemed to complete a cycle from a louder, bolder sound to a more quiet and contemplative one and back again suggest that perhaps it is more accurate in the case of Kundalini Yoga *mantra* to say that there is a balance between

¹³⁷ Although I was not conscious of it at the time of this recording workshop, the idea of manipulating dynamics (in addition to adding different harmonic lines to the chanting) came from my experience of the mantra workshops at Schoolhouse Yoga. If I had not adjusted the volume of my own voice during the recording workshop, it is possible that the other participants may have maintained an even more constant dynamic.

inward and outward focus while chanting. When asked whether chanting is meant to help participants turn their focus inward to the sound of their own state of mind, their own voices, and the vibrating sensation chanting creates or outward to the sound of the overall group and their participation in it, Kendell explained that it is meant to balance both perspectives. As she pointed out in an interview:

“They chant the *mantra* and, especially when you connect to your heart center, what the thing is is that you’re connecting to your truth *inwardly*. So that you can express that truth at all times *outwardly*. So it is both. It is both. And it’s meant to bring you balance... It’s for you to connect more to your true essence, the truth of who you are, so you can *be* that person always, to *every* person and in *every* situation.”¹³⁸

While Henriques’s description of underloading – an inward, floating, out-of-body sensation may be part of some participants’ experiences of chanting *mantra*, it seems to be more accurate to acknowledge in this case that the outward direction of one’s attention is also likely to make up part of the experience. Chanting with a group of people with whom you are encouraged to harmonize inevitably leads to some sense of connecting outward and joining with the composite group sound, as well as a sense of being united with other people and perhaps even the long tradition of yoga more broadly.

This idea of being aware of and connected to one’s surroundings ties in again with Henriques’s concept of acoustic space. Kundalini Yoga practice creates an environment in which sound is so much a part of the exercises and the overall experience of the activity that participants both construct and reside in the acoustic space. The majority of musical as well as

¹³⁸ Kendell Romanelli (Kundalini Yoga Instructor, Schoolhouse Yoga), interview with the author, February 18, 2010.

paramusical sounds that make up the Kundalini Yoga soundscape originate in the bodies of the participants. Since a main goal of Kundalini Yoga is to enhance one's awareness of one's state of being, it is necessary to consider not just the aural – the pitches, timbre, rhythm, unison – but the way in which the body is intimately involved in the creation of the aural. Kundalini Yoga participants' consistent bodily involvement with sound in turn affects their perception of their environs, and can lead to a grounding sensation *or* a floating one.

Spectral analysis is helpful in addressing the connections between participants and their environs, and the potential for grounding through *mantra* chanting. The greatest benefit to using such technologies is that they can inherently show the paramusical elements that may involve the participants bodies – the paramusical sonic elements with which they physically engage. This may include breathing, hands rubbing together, or sighing. Even audible actions like nose blowing or sneezing frequently accompany the sounds of Kundalini Yoga during regular classes. This, again, reflects the recurrent theme of release that characterizes Kundalini Yoga. As a healing practice, it is considered a way to release or clean out stress, toxins, anger, and frustration.

The way Kendell leads Kundalini Yoga practice at SY is very self-aware in terms of the way she depicts the relationship of the class to its surroundings. Quite often Kendell emphasizes the fact that class participants can hear the sounds from outside – passing cars, delivery trucks, passers-by. These outside sounds also form an important, contrasting part of the Kundalini Yoga soundscape, contributing to the way participants understand their relationship to their surroundings.

The melodic range spectrogram of an exercise segment from the mini-workshop (also captured by the *Sonic Visualiser* program) is a great example of the true complexity of the

Kundalini Yoga soundscape (see Figure 11 below). During this brief minute of the workshop, participants were told to take their two fists and gently tap their chest around the heart and sternum. As participants beat their chests they were also encouraged to sigh. While some exercises are meant to be carried out with some sense of rhythm, or a certain amount of times, this beating-of-the-heart exercise was unregulated. Participants could tap and sigh at whatever pace they wanted as a way of directing stimulus towards the heart *chakra* and providing some degree of emotional release (the beating of one's breast and sighing being two actions which are powerfully associated with emotional expression). Snatam Kaur's album was playing in the background (the thick, horizontal line that is fairly constant across the window) while the low rumble of pounding fists appears as short spikes of sound across the bottom of the window. The large wave that emerges halfway across the image window is the sound of a passing vehicle outside, and the cascading lines that begin towards the end of the engine sound are the sighs of the participants as they perform this exercise for the heart *chakra*, or energy center. (Listen to recorded example number 4.)



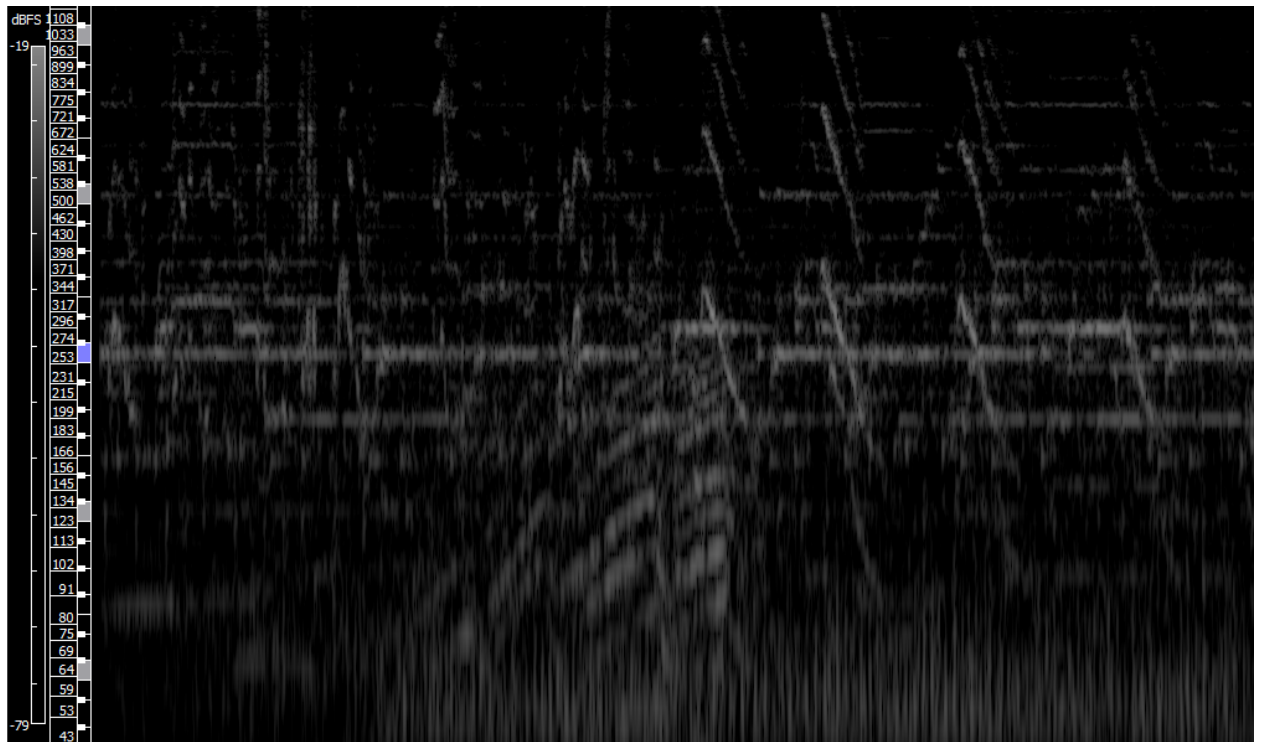


Figure 12. Melodic Range Spectrogram of Heart Chakra Exercise

This exercise in particular demonstrates how Kundalini Yoga can be both introspective (participants' attention is drawn inwards as they simultaneously create two types of sound within their upper bodies – tapping and sighing) and externally orienting (as intruding sounds from the environment influence participants' sense of place) because of the way in which participants engage with the total sonic environment. Even though there is no live *mantra* chanting in this excerpt, it provides a rich example of the ways in which Kundalini Yoga participants cannot help but interact with sound in their practice, allowing each person an opportunity to mark out, or to come to an understanding of their position in a particular, yogic, acoustic space.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Within the Kundalini Yoga soundscape, *mantra* plays a number of different kinds of roles which have emerged during the course of this study. My initial research question then, “what is the role of *mantra* sound?” would be more appropriately phrased, “what are the possible *roles* for *mantra sounds*?” Along with the many other sounds which characterize a Kundalini soundscape – breathing, recorded background music, the instructor’s narrative, and even sounds that come from the street – *mantra* has the potential to affect the studio environment in a variety of ways which depend in large part on who perceives these effects. After chanting one participant might share that they experienced a great sense of calm, while another might say that they felt elated.

¹³⁹ Observing and participating in Kundalini Yoga classes at SY as well as recording an experimental *mantra* workshop has also suggested that the *mantra* and the paramusical sonic elements with which participants engage in Kundalini Yoga can lead to both “grounding” and “floating” experiences. Furthermore, this study of Kundalini Yoga classes has shown that participants’ articulations of their experiences are usually quite varied, and that it may not always be possible to discover what it means for Kundalini Yoga participants to add to the soundscape with their own voices. In other words, while some participants *have* thought about this

¹³⁹ These comments were made during Kendell’s Mantra Meditation class (which incorporates Kundalini Yoga) at the Squirrel Hill studio location on September 28, 2010.

phenomenon, it is just as likely for participants to be hesitant or to have no interest in sharing their experience as it is for them to do so.

This was one a few difficulties I faced while carrying out research on Kundalini Yoga in Pittsburgh. As an observing participant, I repeatedly found myself in a complicated position of open access to the yoga activities at SY on the same level as any other participant, yet with restrictions which limited my ability to document certain aspects of the Kundalini Yoga experience to present here. Unable to make recordings (audio or visual) of the classes and workshops at SY without disrespecting Kendell's wishes, I made the decision to insert myself even more overtly into the field environment as a way of demonstrating the sounds and sights that might be typically encountered in one of Kendell's Kundalini classes.

As mentioned earlier in regard to my presence in the photographs used for this study, I have had to consider the nature of my participation not only in creating images to represent Kundalini Yoga, but in creating a *mantra* workshop as well as a significant portion of the sounds that I recorded in an attempt to explore chanted *mantra* even further. In the context of the *mantra* workshop, I was simultaneously taking on the roles of yoga instructor and Kundalini Yoga devotee. My goal was to foster a safe, open, and welcoming environment for the students who volunteered to participate in the recording of the workshop in the way that Kendell does in her classes. While I knew that it was not possible to recreate the conditions of Kendell's *mantra* workshops and their resulting soundscapes, I hoped to encourage a similar quality of participation – namely, that participants would add to the soundscape as they felt inspired to do so in the moment. Acting as an instructor allowed me to reconsider the way in which Kendell verbally guides students through a set of exercises and chanting, and to see how important it is to participants. Kendell's in-the-moment narration seems to be greatly influenced by her personality

and the way she tends to interact with others – it is an essential and unique aspect of this iteration of Kundalini Yoga.

As mentioned in the preface, my previous experiences with Swasthya Yoga also informed my understanding of how the overall environment of a yoga studio is constructed, and how it can affect participants. During my time in Brazil I struggled with my identity as an *estrangeira*, a foreigner – an outsider. The difficulties I encountered during my “cultural immersion,” however, were less pronounced in the secluded yoga setting. Yoga practice is a mode for gaining a deeper knowledge of one’s self and one’s body, or, one’s bodily self. I think that I accepted yoga so whole-heartedly because I felt that during these classes which directed participants to reflect inwards to our own kinesthetic, phenomenological experience, surely I could not be an outsider to my own mind-body-spirit. Swasthya Yoga provided me with an opportunity to feel a sense of authority, expertise, and of control over something. At times, I noticed that my progress in yoga reinforced my confidence outside the studio, helping me to feel more comfortable taking chances as I navigated a new country with newly acquired and far from fluent language skills.

Through observation of the ways in which regular Schoolhouse Yoga practitioners engage with Kundalini Yoga, it has become apparent that a number of regulars also think about how the approaches to yoga activities learned in class can serve as a model for how to approach life in general. The physio-sonic experiences encountered in Kundalini Yoga have even been interpreted as a way to appreciate the benefit of remaining silent at times and listening, especially as a way to approach social situations in life outside the yoga studio. In her Kundalini Yoga classes, Kendell Romanelli encourages participants to devote their complete attention to the moment at hand. The yoga studio then becomes a special, affective timespace in which

Kundalini participants are presented with the opportunity to take note and reflect upon their emotional and physical states, to experience new and different body movements, to actively participate in the creation of the soundscape, and to generally surrender control of their activities to the guidance of a narrator. Each of these elements of Kundalini Yoga practice at Schoolhouse Yoga provides an avenue for the physio-sonic experience of what Judith Becker would call a “different self.”

Finally, beginning with the body as an intersection where the creation of sound meets the engagement of the body with various Kundalini exercises may serve as a model for future ethnomusicological analyses. In this vein, future research could also reposition the body at the center of a phenomenological account. Such a theoretical approach may facilitate the study of other manifestations and uses of yoga and yoga sound, or serve to illuminate examinations of performance, musicianship, and the embodiment of sound. The approach used herein could also lead to an exploration of the implications of yoga practice for musicians, including the ways in which they use their bodies to engage with sound.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF RECORDED EXAMPLES

Example 1. *Har Mantra*

Example 2. *Adi Mantra* (Phrase 2)

Example 3. Excerpt of *Ong Namō Guru Dev Namō*

Example 4. Heart Exercise

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