Buying Spirituality: Commodity and Meaning in American Kirtan Music

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ABSTRACT

The practice of call-and-response devotional chant, known as kirtan, has been transformed from its original religious contexts and has found new meaning in secular communities throughout yoga studios across North America. Participants of this American kirtan often find deep connections of internal, interpersonal, and spiritual natures through the experience of communal chant. This experience is a commodity, one that is sold to potential consumers in the marketplaces of spirituality, and health and wellbeing. Within these marketplaces there is a tension between the sincerity and integrity of participants and their experiences, and their collective representation in advertisements. This thesis explores the complexity present in the relationship between participants’ highly personalized experiences and the way these experiences are commodified, marketed, and sold to consumers, as well as how often there is a disjuncture between the spiritual connections felt by participants and the way they are represented in kirtan advertisements and commodities that share similar consumer bases.

I propose that the most productive way to analyze the kirtan experience as a commodity is first to understand ethnographically the role of kirtan in participants’ lives, and then view the kirtan experience as situated in both the marketplaces for spirituality, and health and wellbeing. From this perspective, I discuss the various forces that make the experience more or less valuable, I observe how these forces are exemplified in specific advertisements, and I critique whether such marketing is disingenuous to the personal and sincere nature of these kirtan participants’ experiences. Ultimately, those that have the greatest role in promoting and selling kirtan to potential consumers often create advertisements that simultaneously are reflective of their personal beliefs and exploitive of both potential consumers’ and their own notions of the idealized kirtan experience.
INTRODUCTION

As I walked up the two flights of stairs to the site of my first kirtan chant, I was immediately bombarded by the very distinct smell of incense. I entered the small but well kept yoga studio and noted its charm. It was a space that had been recently renovated with new paint and upholstery, done in a way to preserve the integrity and historical ambiance typical of southern Boston buildings. All around me were posters and flyers for various yoga and kirtan events as well as brochures for nature retreats, hair salons, music festivals, dance parties, and somatic healing sessions. There were already eight or ten people in the studio by the time I sat down. I cautiously observed a few of them talking with neighbors, while some were chanting to themselves, and some sitting silently. I noticed all kinds of people, some in yoga attire, others in jeans and even one man in a suit and tie. Initially, I felt like an outsider, as if everyone there was on a first name basis with each other. I had come to observe, participate, and take notes, but I was not sure where to listen, with whom to speak, what I was looking at, or how to feel. Then the musicians entered, and everyone prepared themselves for what was to come. While we appeared to come from different backgrounds and have different levels of familiarity, we were all here to share in the same collective experience, and our journey began with a single “om.”

Kirtan is call-and-response devotional chant that originated in Hindu and Sikh communities within India. In its original religious context, kirtan seeks to keep the mind at peace, open and ready to receive deliverance through the chanting of mantras, however, kirtan has taken on a new meaning and purpose in American yoga communities.¹ Here, kirtan enables participants to relax their bodies, compose their minds, and open their hearts in order to build connections to themselves, others, and the Divine.² Discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, these kirtan participants often make a distinction between religion and spirituality, and kirtan’s lack of organized religious institution and codified dogma allow it more flexibility. Kirtan is thus more often viewed as a spiritual, not a religious experience, and when kirtan leaders speak of a connection to the Divine, the implication is a more general, personalized connection to a higher consciousness.

The way practitioners use kirtan to strengthen the mind, body, and spirit has heightened its perception of being health beneficial. Additionally, kirtan’s intimate association with yoga has

resonated with American consumers who seek kirtan and incorporate it as a part of their healthy lifestyles. This study focuses on kirtan performed exclusively within these yoga communities, primarily through participant observation-based research with kirtan artist Mike Cohen, as well as his fellow musicians and chant participants.

Mike began his career as a kirtan artist in the fall of 2006, shortly after completion of his Master’s degree in Adult Development. While many of his sessions are traditional call-and-response kirtan formats, his graduate research is also evident as a primary component of his career, as Mike also offers sessions on somatic healing, kirtan leadership training, and “Connecting Through Kirtan,” a program designed to facilitate community building through personal reflection and interpersonal action. As a musician, his 2009 album *Om Dattatreya: Journey to the West*, was praised in *LA Yoga Magazine* and *Yoga Chicago Magazine*. Mike tours most of the year, and his livelihood is tied to his career as a kirtan artist, as well as the other events and sessions he has created in conjunction with kirtan chanting, such as adult development and somatic healing workshops, and kirtan leadership training programs.

I first became acquainted with Mike through a mutual friend, my tabla teacher Geoff. Whenever Mike tours through the northeastern United States, Geoff accompanies his kirtan sessions. My relationship with Mike has sparked in me an interest to study kirtan and its effects on participants. I am particularly interested in the relationship of this experience to the marketplaces for spirituality, and health and wellbeing, because of the ways in which the commodification of this experience and advertisements for kirtan both cultivate and exploit its benefits. I believe that given Mike’s unique background as a musician, kirtan leader, and somatic healing coach, he is perfectly positioned to afford me valuable insight and provide solutions to my research questions.

As the central figure of my research, Mike’s is the main voice present in my work, but his is by no means the only one. My study is grounded on research at several kirtan sessions during which I participate in different ways. By chanting alongside other participants, as well as performing with Mike and the other musicians, I obtain a well-rounded perspective of the kirtan experience. At each event I interview the participants, focusing my interview questions on their experiences and perceptions. I interview Mike extensively, as well as the musicians in his band.

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4 For this project, my interviewees have chosen to be identified by their first names. For an example of my Human Subjects Committee waiver, see Appendix B.
and the organizers of the various events that I attended. In this way, Mike is the thread between the multiple research sites, as well as the center by which all of the other participants’ experiences are connected. While Mike is not always at the forefront of this story, his position as the hub of this proverbial kirtan wheel assures that his influence is always present. There is one person in particular, Shannon, who has a unique position as an avid kirtan participant and consumer, as well as someone who has an active role in hosting, promoting, and building a community based in part around kirtan. For these reasons, a large portion of Chapter 2 is devoted to Shannon, her story, and her mediatory role between Mike and other kirtan participants.

While there are studies that explore this relationship of kirtan and personal meaning, I am interested in how this relationship is negotiated between kirtan leaders and participants, and how the kirtan experience is commodified, marketed, and sold to consumers. What is missing from the current discourse on kirtan music is a study that connects these deep, personal, sometimes religious, and very often spiritual connections of kirtan with the marketplace for these experiences. Specifically, I hope to illuminate how the kirtan experience fits into the larger marketplaces of spirituality and health and wellbeing, and the extent to which kirtan’s role as a commodity warps its intents and purposes.

Like anything that people desire, there are certain factors that govern the supply and demand of commodities. In this way kirtan music is a commodity, and kirtan musicians, promoters and participants are all members of this marketplace. As a key component of my research, I collect and analyze websites, promotional videos, flyers, brochures and other materials. This information is compared to the experiences of both musicians and participants, through which I show a complex relationship between promoter, musician and participant. Using theories on commodities and value, I explore how these actors shape the value of kirtan as a commodity, and how their actions influence the perceived value of kirtan. These results are then compared to the original goals of kirtan and the supposed intentions of kirtan artists, asking whether the commodification of kirtan has in some way affected the meaning and personal connections gained by participants.

Despite the fact that my research is concentrated on the role that kirtan music has in participants’ lives, it is equally important that I understand the ways in which the music is

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5 For more on my analysis of studies that examine the personal meaning obtained through kirtan performance, see Chapter 1.
marketed to the participants, and the effects this marketing has on their experiences. The kinds of questions I ask in this regard are:

- What are the effects of the kirtan experience on participants?
- How does this experience fit into their overall conceptions of health and wellbeing?
- How is kirtan portrayed in advertising?
- In what ways do the actors in the kirtan marketplace shape the value or perceived value of kirtan?
- How does this commodification change the original goals and intentions of kirtan participation?

Using Arjun Appadurai’s theories of commodification and the politics of value, as outlined in his introduction to the 1986 publication *The Social Life of Things*, I address the above questions by analyzing the kirtan experience as it is negotiated between leaders and participants, and highlight the forces that make this interaction more or less valuable. From there, I analyze the way these forces manifest themselves within advertisements for kirtan, as well as similar ethnocommodities. I offer many examples of kirtan in advertising, both advertisements for kirtan and advertisements that use kirtan to sell another commodity, and offer criticism focused on the perception of the advertisement, and how it intersects with larger perceptions of the various marketplaces.

Ultimately, I believe that kirtan’s unique characteristics enable it to both fulfill the spiritual and health conscious needs of its practitioners, and that the inevitable commodification and marketing of kirtan do not detract from the kirtan experience, but instead serve as tangible reifications of deep and complex experiences, which eventually serves to drive more consumers to kirtan and reaffirm its positive impact on participants’ lives.

In the following chapter, I discuss briefly the history of yoga and kirtan, with special attention paid to the developments in the United States in the 1960s as well as its resurgence in the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter 1 also serves to elucidate previous literature that has been published on the topics of yoga, kirtan, Krishna consciousness, and American spirituality. Chapter 2 is largely ethnographic in nature, in which I share my encounters working with Mike Cohen and the experiences of his kirtan participants. I discuss the communal and experiential

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7 “Ethnocommodity” is a term found in John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Here, the authors discuss how notions of ethnicity have infiltrated different marketplaces, and how this results in different conceptions of identity. For a more detailed discussion of how I use this idea, see Chapter 4.
nature of kirtan and how Mike facilitates these experiences. Chapter 3 stresses the various political forces that make the kirtan experience more or less valuable. Drawing heavily on the experiences explained in the previous chapter, I highlight the way the kirtan experience is negotiated between leaders and participants. In Chapter 4, I focus on the way in which kirtan is marketed to consumers within various marketplaces. I concentrate on kirtan as a commodity within the marketplaces of spirituality and health and wellbeing, and show examples of how the politics examined in the previous chapter are utilized and sometimes exploited, as well as the ramifications for kirtan’s spiritual power operating within this setting. The final chapter offers my conclusions.
CHAPTER ONE

KIRTAN IN NORTH AMERICA

As a yogic practice, kirtan’s history follows the lineage of yoga, and can be traced back to India more than 5,000 years ago. The Sanskrit word for “yoga,” meaning “to unite” or “to pull together,” is found in the Rigveda. The Vedic texts, as well as the Upanishads and the Puranas form the scriptural basis of Hinduism. These texts outline philosophies as well as practices for worship. Among these are yoga, meditation, and the practice of chanting. Meditation on the gods, dhāyna, is presented in the Upanishads, and are “effective means (sādhanas) to the realisation of Brahman.”\(^8\) As yoga and Hinduism developed in India, so did this practice of meditation on the gods, through the chanting of mantras.\(^9\) The call-and-response chant known as kirtan evolved from these mantra and meditation practices.

Kirtan came to the forefront of American popular culture during the 1960s. Political and social unrest, stirred by the Civil Rights and antiwar movements, created a climate among youth populations that fostered an interest in many Eastern religious and philosophical practices, including kirtan. Popular cultural icons such as The Beatles famously traveled to India, incorporating many Indian instruments and styles as well as chant into their later music. Prominent cultural figures, such as Allen Ginsberg, as well as other musicians, writers, and artists, fueled American interest in kirtan singing and yogic practices. These events in the 1960s, together with the formation of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), commonly known as Hare Krishnas, pushed kirtan into the limelight.

Srila Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON traveled to the United States from India in 1965 with the intention of spreading the teachings of Lord Krishna. With many thriving communities of believers already in India, Srila Prabhupada sought to form similar communities in the Unites States. Shortly after his arrival, in the summer of 1966 he formed ISKCON. Its members adhere to Vedic and Hindu traditions, and practice bhakti or devotional yoga, focusing

on the veneration of Krishna. As a part of this bhakti tradition, Hare Krishnas chant the name of
god and use kirtan as a primary form of worship.\textsuperscript{10}

Much has been published about the involvement and ramifications of kirtan in places
outside of India. In \textit{Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna}, five scholars in Hinduism and Indian
philosophies are interviewed about their work, the role of the Hare Krishna movement in the
West, as well as the development and influence of the International Society for Krishna
Consciousness (ISKCON). They debunk the ideas that the Hare Krishna movement is involved
in “brainwashing” and “deprogramming” its members.\textsuperscript{11} Kirtan’s development in the West is
also chronicled in \textit{Krishna Consciousness in the West}, edited by David G. Bromley and Larry D.
Shinn. The main focus of this work is ISKCON, the Hare Krishna movement, and its history and
involvement in the United States. Some topics in this work include ISKCON’s perception in the
public sphere, as well as attitudes towards Hinduism throughout much of the twentieth-century.
Of particular note here is Robert Ellwood’s essay in which he places ISKCON within the
spiritual environment of the 1960s, and discusses its role in relation to various other movements
of that time, including the works of Kerouac, Zen aesthetics, the hippie movement, drug use,
popular music, and the counterculture movement.\textsuperscript{12} This history of ISKCON is vital to
understanding the proliferation of kirtan throughout the United States and also for tracing these
bases to the present day. These histories provide context for kirtan’s perception and role within
the United States popular culture, and offer me a basis to build my study.

More recently, during the 1990s and 2000s, the increased popularity and proliferation of
yoga has created a new demand and market for kirtan artists. Yoga has been praised in the West
for its health benefits, and has been offered in many settings as a form of exercise. Yoga
instruction is relatively easy to obtain, and its lack of bulky equipment, as well as the plethora of
instructional books and videos has rocketed it to the top of many health enthusiasts’ daily
routines. When yoga instruction caught on in the 1990s, many yoga instructors were more
interested in the physical benefits of yoga, but today many more instructors are becoming versed
in yoga’s origins, and are using it in conjunction with meditation and chant. This shift in

hhttp://iskcon.org/founder-acharya#.Tya0-SPq65I.
\textsuperscript{11} Gelberg, Steven J., editor, \textit{Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in
the West} (New York: Grove Press, 1983).
\textsuperscript{12} David G. Bromley, and Larry D. Shinn, \textit{Krishna Consciousness in the West} (Lewisburg: Bucknell University
philosophies has led instructors to use kirtan music in their classes and host kirtan chanting at their studios. This rise of kirtan chanting has resulted in more live performances and an increased market for kirtan artists.\textsuperscript{13}

**Kirtan and American Spirituality**

The formation of ISKCON in the 1960s and the rise of yoga in the 1990s have certainly raised kirtan’s public profile. Although they share many common elements, the types of kirtan practiced in these two communities as well as the goals of the kirtan leaders and participants within the communities are vastly different. There have been studies that focus on ISKCON and the Hare Krishna movement including the kirtan music heard within those groups. My study is situated differently, however, because I focus my research within yoga studios and retreat centers. Within these spaces, there is a different demographic of people. This audience of kirtan enthusiasts are not Hare Krishna; they are not Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, atheist, or any other type of specific religion or belief system, although they could align themselves with any of those traditions, or none at all. The point here is that within these yoga communities, there is a vast mix of religious and spiritual diversities that separate the collective group from Hare Krishnas and Hindu devotees, which creates a host of diverse issues specific to these enthusiasts. The only unifying element among these participants is the kirtan experience.

Several sources discuss the role of kirtan in the spiritual lives of the participants, and also the ways in which they make these spiritual connections. The various musical elements found in a typical kirtan performance have been shown to achieve specific goals within that performance. These musical elements contribute to the intensity and overall affect on participants.\textsuperscript{14} Different kirtan artists have different techniques used to evoke positive reactions from the participants. One common theme among them is the belief that, “The powerful practice of kirtan can help ignite your spiritual life…[and] the yoga of chanting is an almost effortless way to deepen your experience of the Divine.”\textsuperscript{15} Even within India each kirtan artist has specific contextual particulars that show unique understandings and meanings of the greater kirtan tradition. The social organization and interpersonal relationships among kirtan gurus and devotees, show a


\textsuperscript{15} Linda Johnsen and Maggie Jacobus, *Kirtan! Chanting as a Spiritual Path* (Saint Paul: Yes International Publishers, 2007), 11.
deep connection between the musical, social and spiritual aspects of kirtan. Kirtan has also been studied for its healing capacities outside the strictly spiritual, including aiding addiction recovery.

The search for spiritual experiences is exemplified in the work of Wade Clark Roof. He explains how the baby boomers had a great impact on much of the American marketplace. When they reached adulthood, they redefined the marketplace for spirituality, often creating the desire for a “quest” to find religious and spiritual fulfillment. These sources demonstrate the power of the kirtan experience, and show how its participants seek out similar experiences in other aspects of their lives. Ideas of the spiritual marketplace and American spirituality have been explored in other capacities.

Robert Fuller’s analysis of the motivations of Americans who engage in religious and spiritual activities is presented in his book *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*. “Unchurched” Americans, as they are described, make a distinction between the spiritual and the religious. Their desire to connect with a higher power forces them to sift through elements of different beliefs and rituals, and select which practices seem most appropriate and meaningful to their lives. These interlocutors eventually have a more individualized spirituality, rather than a collective, denominational religion.

The subject of American spirituality has also been explored in Robert Wuthnow’s work. Through over two hundred interviews, Wuthnow argues that Americans find a connection to spirituality rather than religion. He explains that a “complex social and cultural environment in which Americans live” has forced them to seek out spirituality in place of religion. He offers further suggestions for the reasons that participants find meaning in this way including the notions and understandings of the physical *dwelling* (his emphasis) of religious spaces, as well as the *practice* of religious rites and rituals. These elements of religious life enable searchers to make individual spiritual

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21 Wuthnow.
connections without the necessity of a religious connection. The incorporation of various religious and cultural elements can be seen in kirtan. The climate of the American spiritual marketplace enables kirtan to thrive. Because of the reasons outlined in these sources, spiritual seekers find that they can take different elements of kirtan and apply it to their own spiritual lives in unique ways.

There have been a few studies of kirtan music as it pertains to, and is implemented into other religious contexts. Sara Black explores the transformational and spiritual aspects of kirtan, and also the personal connections and sense of community that chanting “Hare Krishna” fosters in a Utah community. Her M.M. thesis focuses on kirtan as a unifying medium between Hare Krishna devotees and the predominately Mormon communities that surround them.\(^{22}\) The incorporation of kirtan into other religious contexts is reversed in Rachel Zuckerman’s article, “Kabbalistic Kirtan: Just Replace Hindu with Hebrew.” Here, Zuckerman follows Susan Deikman, a kirtan leader who incorporated Hebrew names in place of the traditional Hindu, and began performing at Jewish synagogues. The article explains Deikman’s transformation from someone who was raised only “culturally Jewish” to a more devout member of her Jewish community through the practice of kirtan. This transformation not only speaks to the power of kirtan music, but also speaks to a strong sense of individualism and personal connection to the divine through kirtan participation.\(^{23}\)

The above publications outline various contexts in which kirtan has been studied (e.g., religious and healing), but my research is situated differently. My research revolves around kirtan events that take place in yoga communities, similar to Jubilee Q. Cooke’s 2009 Ph.D. dissertation.\(^{24}\) Cooke follows kirtan communities in Seattle yoga studios, referring to the participants as “unchurched” and spiritual as opposed to religious.\(^{25}\) Cooke concludes that the experiences of participants are highly personal, and the reasons for participation in kirtan cannot be essentialized into a singular dogma. More importantly, the individual connection between participant and a higher power, and the desire for an open heart unify kirtan participants and

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\(^{22}\) Sara Black, ““Chant and Be Happy”: Music, Beauty, and Celebration in a Utah Hare Krishna Community” (MM thesis, The Florida State University, 2008).


\(^{25}\) Here, “unchurched” is taken from Fuller.
This notion of a personal, individualistic connection is one that is perpetuated throughout the existing literature, but what is missing from the current discourse is a study that compares these deep, spiritual connections of kirtan with the marketplace for these experiences.

Musically, kirtan is situated in a very precarious position between Indian and Western styles. Most kirtan artists lead the chant, and often accompany themselves on harmonium. Despite the complicated history and appropriation of the harmonium, I believe it is fair to say that most Western audiences would categorize it as one of the Indian elements of a kirtan chant. A more easily decided Indian element of kirtan is that the language most often used is Sanskrit. The format of kirtan chanting is call-and-response, where the leader chants a line of text and the other singers (if there are any) and the audience responds. Each chant generally builds in tempo and intensity and reaches a climax before descending down to a meditative state. While kirtan here is not affiliated with any religion specifically, the chants do invoke distinct Hindu deities, and the music is often composed to accompany the mood or feeling of that particular deity. To this end, kirtan leaders in the United States write music based on Western harmonies and rhythms, as opposed to Indian ones. Additionally, Western style instruments such as a drum set, guitar, bass, piano, and electronic instruments are often added to complete the ensemble. This mixture of Indian and Western styles of music is important, not only to understand the sound of kirtan, but also to understand the participants’ interactions with kirtan music. A blend of the familiar and the foreign, the mundane and the exotic, offers an experience that can unite participants of all sorts of religious and spiritual backgrounds and mean something different and personal for each one.

Kirtan music in America has morphed from its Indian roots. It is a blend of traditions that uses community music making to achieve personal goals and individual openness. Despite kirtan’s appropriation of Indian practices into new contexts, I view this not as a culturally imperialistic practice, or a loss of ‘Indian-ness,’ but as something new, something appropriately transformed. Here, I draw on Marshall Sahlins’s assertion that anthropologists must escape the idea that “…when we [anthropologists] change it’s called ‘progress,’ but when they [indigenous cultures] do—notably when they adopt some of our progressive things—it’s a kind of

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26 Cooke.
adulteration, a *loss* of culture.”

Although Sahlins is discussing indigenous cultures’ appropriations of Western concepts and sensibilities, and I am discussing American appropriations of Indian, I share the same sentiments. Kirtan in America is not a loss of culture, but rather a progression. From this perspective, I observe the deep spiritual connections participants make through kirtan, and the desire for this experience manifest within the spiritual marketplace as an American cultural phenomenon, not as an American practice exploiting Indian sensibilities of religion and spirituality within this globalized marketplace. The popularity of kirtan in recent years has lead to an increase of kirtan artists, including the central figure in this study, Mike Cohen.

**Summary**

Kirtan has seen a rise in popularity over the past two decades. From its humble roots in India to the visibility it gained through the counterculture movement in America during the 1960s and 70s, kirtan has always sought to align the mind, body, and spirit, and enable connections between them. ISKCON has done a great service to kirtan, demonstrating its effectiveness not only to Hare Krishnas, but also to participants of all religious and spiritual denominations. Those who seek kirtan as a part of their spiritual lives have been studied in a number of contexts, both as a part of traditional religious contexts, as well as those which take place within yoga studios. The unifying factor for all of these distinct groups of participants is the power of the kirtan experience.

These participants use kirtan for many reasons, but most participate as a form of yoga. As a part of the bhakti yoga tradition kirtan is devotional and has religious elements, which, among the many people that I interviewed, often associate with a general spirituality, rather than a specific religious tradition. On the other end of the spectrum, because of the huge increase in popularity of other types of exercise-based yoga, kirtan has seen a marked boost in status. Kirtan participants, if polarized into two separate categorizes, find kirtan through these two paths: those seeking spiritual connections, and those seeking exercise or health benefits. Often, participants would not characterize themselves as falling distinctly into one group or the other, but have a more holistic approach, and often speak in terms of different energies. Energies can come from

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many forms, of the divine, mind, spirit, interpersonal, corporeal, or experiential. Through this type of ambiguous language, participants are able to share personal experiences with one another, placing a group dynamic to an individual experience.

Musically, kirtan draws on both Indian and Western traditions. Kirtan leaders combine these traditions in ways that both make kirtan easily accessible, and provide a sense of otherness, often heightening the overall kirtan experience. Chants are most often in Sanskrit, providing this sense of mystique and etherealness. Participants are encouraged to explore their own voices, listening to themselves singing and how their voice combines with the group’s collective voice. This type of communal atmosphere is one of kirtan’s greatest selling points, especially present in the American yoga studios examined in this study. This type of kirtan is not a contorted version of an Indian practice, but a distinct American practice, descendent from Indian traditions. One current practitioner of this new American kirtan is Mike Cohen.
CHAPTER TWO

THE KIRTAN EXPERIENCE

Mike Cohen

Mike Cohen, with several years as a performing kirtan artist and over twenty as a professional musician, sends me a text message. It is 4 o’clock in the afternoon on a mildly sunny Boston day in early May, 2011. “Be there in 15 mins, GPS got us turned around. How does the parking look?” I read Mike’s text aloud to myself. I arrived early. Thirty minutes early, in fact. Although I had been speaking with Mike on the phone for months by this point, we had never met, and I was determined to make a good impression. As I awaited Mike’s arrival I went inside the yoga studio to scope out the space for the upcoming dress rehearsal. A rehearsal, that it appeared, would already begin late. I meandered around the studio, noticed the space, and said hello to some of the yoga teachers. I perused the advertisements for various yoga and kirtan events, as well as nature retreats, hair salons, and dance clubs. I made my way down the hall, past the carefully placed row of shoes, which yoga participants had removed before their session. I sat down outside the studio, and as I contemplated buying the five-dollar bottle of designer water glaring at me from inside the glass of the refrigerator, I recalled about my conversations with Mike in anticipation of meeting him for the first time.

Mike’s life as a kirtan leader is firmly rooted in his background as an accomplished musician. In high school, Mike received many awards for his distinguished jazz saxophone playing. Mike was passionate about music, and this passion led him to continue his education at the Eastman School of Music. After college he toured internationally playing saxophone in jazz groups, as well as groups that, in his words, exploited “the whole Kenny G, R&B saxophone phenomenon” that was in vogue at that time. While on tour with an R&B artist in 1991, Mike was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant to study with esteemed saxophonist and jazz musician Jerry Bergonzi.

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28 Mike Cohen, in discussion with the author, May 5, 2011.
Three years later, however, after a freak accident that left him with severe elbow problems and intense physical therapy as a result, Mike was unable to play saxophone for some time. Within this medical leave of absence, Mike decided that being a saxophonist left him feeling unfulfilled, and he took a leave from his life as a touring musician. In this space, Mike was afforded other opportunities, and among these he found yoga and kirtan. Shortly after this, following brief jobs working in politics and in business with his brother, Mike became interested in adult development and leadership, as well as Integral and Somatic Coaching. In 2004, Mike was awarded his master’s degree from Antioch University with a self-designed “concentration in
leadership and adult development.”29 Within this degree, Mike “explored the topics of leadership, organizational development, integral coaching, adult development, epistemology, ego development and more.”30 His critically acclaimed 2009 debut album was well received in the kirtan community and was reviewed by leading yoga magazines.31 Today he tours around the United States and Canada facilitating kirtan events.

My cell phone rings. It’s Mike calling to let me know that he and his fellow band musician, Joni, have arrived. He asks if I would mind carrying some equipment out of his car, up the stairs, and into the studio. When I finally meet Mike, his calm, collected demeanor makes an immediate impression on me. This attitude persists throughout the night, as it becomes obvious that he is upset by various events as they transpire. Mike and Joni arrived late, their drummer arrived even later, and the yoga studio scheduled a class right up until the time they were supposed to start a dress rehearsal, cutting sharply into their warm up time. After I help set up and observe the short, albeit efficient, dress rehearsal, I take my seat among the first kirtan participants to enter the studio. Over the course of the next two hours I sat and observed, striving to take in as much as possible. I knew that over the next few weeks I would have the opportunity to film other kirtans, and also had spoken with Mike about playing at a session a week later. So for this moment, I absorbed everything I could, without a camera. I noticed the way the musicians interacted with the participants, the smells of incense and rose water, and the way Mike spoke softly into the microphone in between chants. It seemed almost as if he spoke quietly as to not wake someone in the back who had perhaps fallen asleep. I found myself enthralled with the intensity and fervor of the climactic moments of the music, and the various ways participants chanted, swayed, danced, meditated, muttered, and sat silently. For now, I was an observer.

**Kirtan: It’s a “We” Thing**

Like many other American kirtan artists, Mike incorporates a blend of instruments and styles of both Indian and Western origin. He composes his music using Western notions of melody, harmony, and rhythm, instead of the Indian constructs of raga and tala. Thus, his version

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29 Mike Cohen, “Mapping the Contours of the New Ventures West Approach to Integral Coaching” (MA thesis, Antioch University, 2004), 17.
30 Ibid.
31 Mike Cohen, “About Us.”
of the kirtan experience can be thought of as a phenomenon in which Hinduism and Western understandings of Hinduism are negotiated and successfully coexist.\textsuperscript{32}

When Mike leads a kirtan, his goal is to enable participants to “open the heart.”\textsuperscript{33} Participants attend Mike’s kirtans, in his estimation, because they love to sing, and find a healing power through their singing. Mike caters to their needs. He told me that he allows participants to


\textsuperscript{33} Mike Cohen, “What is Kirtan?”
“pay attention to what’s in their phenomenology, in their body,” the energies in the room, the people around them, how things are different when they chant, as well as what is happening in their heads and hearts.\textsuperscript{34} He describes kirtan as an experience, one where success means following the path that leads you to pay attention to your own inner thoughts.\textsuperscript{35} When kirtan participants open their hearts through chanting, they become receptive to love and a communion with the Divine.

The musical elements of Mike’s chants foster the communal aspects through simple call-and-response formats, which simultaneously give each individual a voice and allow everyone to become part of a larger group atmosphere. Mike’s chants are in Sanskrit, and pay reverence to various Hindu deities such as Shiva, Kali, Durga, Vishnu, Hanuman, Rama, and Ganesh. Rather than a literal prayer to a specific deity, however, Mike explains to his audiences a desire to foster the divine energy and qualities of that particular deity. For example, in the chant “Shiva Om”:

\texttt{Om Shiva, Om Shiva, Om Shiva Shiva, Shiva, Shiva, Shiva, Om Namah Shivaya}\textsuperscript{36}

Mike elaborates in the liner notes from his album that, “Breaking forms and cutting through illusions, Shiva brings freedom and bestows Grace. The Tryambakam Mantra is a prayer for immortality associated with Shiva.”\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, during a chant to the deity Ganesh, Mike explains that because Ganesh is the remover of obstacles, participants should focus on what the problems of their lives are during the chant, and use the time as a way to meditate on ways to remove them from your path. Some of Mike’s chants focus on praising his teacher, or guru, and expressing gratitude for the knowledge his guru has bestowed on him. The lyrics from “Guru Om” are:

\texttt{Om Jaya Guru Om, Jaya Guru Om Guru Om, Guru Om, Guru Om, Jaya Guru Om}\textsuperscript{38}

Mike explains, again in the album liner notes, “Victory to the guru, the dispeller of darkness.”\textsuperscript{39}

Because Mike makes a point to explain the chant content, and also provide pithy explanations of complex Hindu philosophies, he is able to connect easily with his participants, and provide an

\textsuperscript{34} Mike Cohen, in discussion with the author, May 5, 2011.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Mike Cohen, \textit{Om Dattatreya: Journey to the West}, Shiva Datta Music, compact disc, released in 2009, liner notes.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
immediacy and personal connection to their lives. Kirtan participants do not need to be Hindu or have a background in it to associate with removing obstacles, dispelling darkness, or cutting through illusions. Mike provides these explanations, which are equally applicable to every person in the room in different, but powerful ways. Kirtan acts as a mirror, reflecting images for each participant that are as different as the participants themselves.

Kirtan participants share diverse religious and socio-economic backgrounds. Kirtan artist Wah! sums it up when she says:

Kirtan is open to everybody. You’ve got healers, you’ve got drug addicts, you’ve got people who are doing yoga so they sit on the floor, and people who need to sit
on chairs. There are people of all religions. Kirtan isn’t a group you have to join. It’s just an experience that you can share. It is open to everybody.\footnote{Jacobus and Johnson, 117.}

The most often recognized motivation for kirtan participation is a connection to Divine energy, albeit in different forms.

At one kirtan session I met Tom, a yoga instructor who says of kirtan chanting, “I feel connected to my physical body, I feel connected to different energies in my body. I feel a focusing and a concentration of the thought waves of my mind and I feel a stillness of those thought waves.”\footnote{Tom, in discussion with the author, May 14, 2011.} Being a yoga instructor, it is easy to see why Tom would make a strong connection between kirtan and his physical body, using it to align his mind with his senses.

I also met Paul, a man in his early fifties going through chemotherapy, who uses kirtan as a way to connect with Jesus. When he chants, he says he always sees a vision of Christ, with his hands raised up to the Father. Paul can see the light energy coming down onto Christ and into Paul himself. Paul is able to use kirtan as a vehicle for his own faith, from which he finds comfort and healing. He enjoys chanting in Sanskrit, and despite his faith, he admits that it would “blow his mind” if he chanted in English or chanted Catholic prayers.\footnote{Paul, in discussion with the author, May 20, 2011.}

Hilary, a young graduate student pursuing a degree in divinity, offered yet another perspective. Her academic background enables her a deep understanding of the origins and meanings behind kirtan, but when she participates she is able to step back and connect to a higher consciousness without over thinking. Hilary’s relationship with kirtan is perhaps spiritual but not religious. She says, “I don’t go into an intellectual space with it…It’s about the feeling for me.”\footnote{Hilary, in discussion with the author, May 14, 2011.} For Hilary, the disassociation with intellectual thought forces her to participate in kirtan in a more subconscious, physical, experiential way. She connects to the physical sounds of the words, as well as the composition of the music, and used the corporeal act of chanting as a way to connect with her inner thoughts and emotions.

In perhaps one of the most straightforward and thought provoking responses I received, Omar elucidates that for him, kirtan is “a ‘we’ thing.” He continues, saying, “We all get a chance to be part of it, you know, it’s not an ego driven thing. You have an initiator, and you have the response, the give and take.” As a musician himself, Omar understands the leader/participant...
dynamic is decidedly different in a kirtan session than in a rock concert. He describes the experience as, “not an ego driven thing where you listen to me, and we rock out. Of course, you need to have somebody initiate something and then there are followers, and it’s nice to be a follower where everybody is focusing.”

My discussion of the participants’ reactions to kirtan is meant to highlight the experiential, communal aspects of kirtan. I propose that it is this experience that kirtan leaders sell to participants and thus kirtan advertisements reflect these communal and experiential aspects. Kirtan acts as a mirror, reflective of the personal position of each individual.

The participants mentioned above are representative of the many that I interviewed. While the subject matter of each chant is very specific, the combination of all elements create an environment that can be interpreted differently by each individual, thus creating unique experiences for each participant. Some critics of kirtan in the United States would criticize their experiences as being cultural imperialistic and destructive of kirtan’s original context. Others similarly mischaracterize kirtan as an avatar of the “New Age” movement. Despite the ramifications that “New Age” is often related to spirituality and commerce, it has been argued that the term is an oversimplification and reductionist, failing to show the vast complexities of the people for which the term claims to be representative. Specifically, Sutcliffe identifies the term as an insufficient catchall for a wide variety of people with different backgrounds and philosophies. Furthermore, use of the term by those claiming to be members of the group is “sporadic and ambiguous” after its initial use in the 1950s and 60s. Second, the people in my study never refer to kirtan as such, and when asked about the term, they offer resentments for its use in describing kirtan. I avoid using the term “New Age” for these reasons.

**Performing Kirtan, a View from the Stage**

Geoff and I began our drive to Saratoga Springs, New York, from Hartford, Connecticut early in the afternoon. We decided to carpool on this sunny May day the near two and a half hour drive to Mike’s next kirtan session. I had not seen Geoff in nearly a year and a half, and we had a great deal of catching up to do.

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44 Omar, in discussion with the author, May 21, 2011.
45 “Oversimplification” is a term used in Cooke. More about how the term fails to show the vast complexities can be found in Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
46 Sutcliffe, 223.
He told me about the slowing business of his day job working in music retail, the variety of nighttime gigs he has been playing, and the recent health concerns within his immediate family. I told him about my schoolwork, what my summer plans were, and my recent musical endeavors. I was excited about the time driving with Geoff, but at the time I was caught in between two competing interests: my desire to reminisce and commiserate with my friend and former teacher, and my need and wish to talk with Geoff about Mike, kirtan, and his experiences in the group. I was there to do research, after all.

I had met Geoff in 2009. At the time I was in music school in Connecticut, studying percussion and searching for someone to teach me how to play tabla. I was introduced to him through another of my teachers, and when we met he was immediately gracious and giving of his time. Without hesitation, Geoff agreed to give me tabla lessons, free of charge. He said that when
he learned initially, he had teachers that did not charge him, and felt it was his duty to do the same. In addition, he saw teaching me as an opportunity to get back into playing tabla himself. Geoff is primarily a rock drummer, but is a renaissance man of sorts, allowing himself to become deeply immersed in many endeavors, including cross country running, biking, South Indian solkattu and kanjira study, and of course tabla, to name a few. The fact that Geoff has the time and patience to pursue his various interests in this manner is one of the qualities that I admire about him the most.

Geoff has played with Mike before, on several occasions, and whenever Mike tours through the northeast, Geoff is his first call drummer and percussionist. Geoff’s ability to play many instruments including drum set, tabla, frame drums, and electronic percussion make him an ideal candidate for these kirtan sessions. On the drive, I had many questions for Geoff. While I had met Mike for the first time a week prior in Boston, Geoff was not at that show, and in the car I was both informing him about how that show had gone, and also asking him about his experiences playing with Mike, comparing it to what I had witnessed previously. This was a special day in other ways too, as I was to perform with Mike and the rest of his group this evening. I was excited to share in this experience, and view kirtan from this perspective.

After we arrived, parked, unloaded, set up, sound checked, and were waiting to perform for a crowd of about thirty in a small, but beautifully renovated yoga studio, complete with hardwood floors and large bay windows, Mike called us together for a talk. First placing a small bit of ash from an ashram in India on our foreheads and spraying our hands and faces generously with rose water, Mike offered a few words before taking the stage. I was not terribly nervous; after all I was only really there to add color, allowing Geoff to really dictate the tempo with his electronic drums as I highlighted the music with frame drums, finger cymbals and other small percussion instruments. As we huddled together, Mike gave a small speech; half prayer and half pregame pep talk likely to be heard from a coach. He asked us to focus our energies, to pay attention to each other and the feeling we received from the crowd.

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47 The kanjira is a small frame drum from southern India, single-headed and traditionally made with lizard skin. Solkattu are the onomatopoeic syllables that correspond to strokes on the kanjira and other percussion instruments. Percussionists train extensively to learn solkattu in conjunction with kanjira.
Then he did something I was not expecting. He thanked me for being there and asked the other musicians to appreciate me on stage tonight, saying that he knew my presence would add a unique dynamic. “Let’s go! Matt on three, one… two… three… Matt!” Needless to say I was taken aback by this gesture of gratitude, and suddenly found myself a bit more nervous than I had been previously. I hope that I lived up to Mike’s expectations. The show went well, and I had a nice time playing. For me, I felt the same sort of reactions that I have when performing any type of music, filled with high points and low points, but generally I came away fulfilled and proud of the performance. In that minute before we took the stage, however, Mike told me more about kirtan, himself, and his philosophies than I could have hoped to learn in hours of interviews.

Figure 3. The stage, preshow, May 20, 2011.
“If you have the opportunity to provide something beautiful, why not?”

Sunday morning I woke up early. After another late night of kirtan and interviewing into the morning, that night’s sleep offered a brief respite between kirtan events. I embarked on the forty five minute drive from my home to the retreat center, ClearPoint, the same center I had left only hours earlier, for Mike’s all day event “Connecting Through Kirtan Workshop!” To be honest, this is the day that I was looking forward to the least. Before I started, I was not sure what to expect during the kirtan chants, not to mention what was to happen during a bodywork session.

When I arrived in the morning, Shannon greeted me with a warm smile. She, along with her husband, Steve, lives in and runs ClearPoint Center. Their home and ClearPoint share the same building, a converted red school bus garage wrapped in vines. Their neighbor’s house was once the schoolhouse, a modest sized building converted into a home. Shannon and Steve’s house has been in Steve’s family ever since his father won it in a poker game, and Shannon has lived there from when they were married a few years back. While still a young woman, Shannon has one of the most interesting life stories of the participants that I interviewed, and her infectious laugh and earnest interest in and concern for others makes everyone around her feel at home.

As we sit down outside, in the back yard on top of a set of massive boulders, Shannon tells me how after she graduated college with a degree in linguistics, she was interviewing for a job with the national security agency. During that interview, she thought about her life and the prospect of sitting behind a desk translating other peoples’ conversations. She said that she was “horrified with the picture that lie before me,” and that it “kind of destroyed all my sense of scholastic trajectory.”

For a long time, Shannon’s mother suffered from fibromyalgia and she watched her search for solutions to her problems.

[My mom] went to this Chinese doctor in a little tiny cottage. He gave her some teas and said, ‘you should try the macrobiotic diet and try some yoga,’ and she did that and it completely shifted her life. I could just see it in her, she could walk around, she wasn’t bed ridden anymore, she had a semi part time job, and I was stunned with it. I had a lot of respect for that technology, and I didn’t really fulfill that curiosity when I was studying linguistics, so when I finished reading books on phonetics, and anthropology books about these small tribes, though interesting,
I was really done. My curiosity was satiated. And so I was really curious about lifestyle and that sort of thing.  

Figure 6. Shannon and her husband Scott chanting along with Mike, May 21, 2011.

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48 Shannon, in discussion with the author, May 21, 2011.
At that point a friend told her about a holistic health counselor school in New York, and it was in school that she met Steve.

I asked Shannon if she viewed kirtan as a part of a holistic lifestyle, and if so how she integrates it into her life.

Yeah. For me, I just know that I actually have to stretch my body, keep it kind of fresh and get good sleep and exercise. [I have to] use my body appropriately so that I feel good during the day, so that I’m productive and I can do the things that I want to do and so I have freedom. I think that yoga of all things is tried and true technology. So I’m less interested in books that say, ‘I can tell you about this
exercise program that I came up with myself.’ I would much rather go with
movements, stretches, exercises that people have been working on for a couple
thousand years. That’s reliable. Maybe more reliable.49

In a flyer promoting Somatic Healing, such as the one I am attending on this day, Mike
lists its benefits as including “Increased energy and overall sense of relaxation, decreased pain,
tension and constriction, access to the untapped wisdom of your body,” and a “greater ability to
stand in your power and express your voice.”50 Mike uses a variety of techniques to accomplish
these goals, including personal reflection, goal orientation exercises, personal action plans, and
of course kirtan. But in this situation, kirtan was not necessarily the primary component. It was
used, in my estimation, as a way to connect the bodywork session with the kirtan from the night
before. Every bodywork participant had been in attendance yesterday, and the kirtan seemed to
provide stability, offering familiar, comforting territory for bodywork activities that often
seemed unsettling and alien.

Throughout the morning, the group of us, about fifteen in total, took part in various
activities. Mike outlined the goals for the day, explained briefly what was to come, stressing that
love does not mean anything when it is not accompanied by action. He instructed the group that
“Connecting Through Kirtan” involves “connecting with ourselves, with others, with the divine,
for the sake of building a community of love and empowered action.”51 We began by chanting a
few rounds of “om,” and slowly but surely, Mike transitioned into “Om Namoh Bhagavat
Vasudevaya,” which loosely translates into “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”52 I glanced
around the room, at all the participants, at the way the light from the mid-afternoon sun reflected
off of the harmonium and onto Shannon’s paintings and thought about why I was here in the first
place, and why such a place would play host to Mike, to these people, to kirtan. The main reason
Steve and Shannon started the center, according to Shannon is curiosity.

We were curious about things. ‘Oh I wanna learn about this, I wanna learn about
that.’ There are so many people that are exploring consciousness, and asking the
question of how can we live a more free human life, and more beautiful one, a
more loving one. Just expanding our potentiality as humans, and just given our
curiosities, we had a number of teachers, presenters, that seem just in line with
our personal flow, there are just so many great people out there.53

49 Ibid.
51 Mike Cohen, in discussion with the author, May 22, 2011.
52 Mike Cohen, Om Dattatreya: Journey to the West.
53 Shannon, in discussion with the author.
Today the presenter was Mike. After we finished chanting, we partnered up for the first activity. This activity was based on reflection, and we read the following paragraph.

Leadership starts with you...how are you leading your life? Are you centered? Present? Open? Connected? Bringing your unique vision into the world for the sake of contributing to your community? How do you generate alignment/connection within yourself? 

From there, we responded to our partners through the exercise titled “Creating a Commitment” and answered the following questions: “What do I care about most right now? What is most important to me right now? What wants to come to form through me right now? And I am a commitment to…” Each person responded differently and personally to each question, but one can probably guess the most typical answers of “family, friends, love, giving of my time, taking time for myself, creating a oneness in my life, placing others needs in front of my own.”

I recalled my conversation with Shannon the day before, as I asked her what she does to ensure that people who come to the center have a meaningful experience? After pausing to let Mike know that he is welcome to enjoy the food she has prepared: polenta, black bean soup and fresh cilantro as a condiment, Shannon responded to my question.

One way I facilitate it, one thing that’s really important to me is to provide the best hospitality that I can, and that’s certainly challenging, because these settings can be emotional and stir up different things. Maybe I’m just tired, but definitely inviting people into an experience where everyone is included. If you put in the time to get here, we are going to help you have a good time. Everyone is responsible for their individual experience, but for Steve and I on the end of hospitality, it’s really important that it’s a calm environment.

And facilitate she did. Around two in the afternoon, we had what had been previously described to me as high tea, but in reality it was closer to a feast, or at the very least an extended lunch. Shannon had prepared a variety of different foods including cakes, sandwiches, lettuce wraps, fruits, vegetables, and samosas, as well as six or seven different varieties of tea. All of these foods were vegan, and although I never asked, I am under the assumption they were part of the macrobiotic diet that Shannon had explained to me earlier. Lunch was delicious. We talked

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55 Ibid.
56 Shannon, in discussion with the author.
about the morning, the events leading up to lunch, and the conversation drifted, as they often do, to other areas of our lives including our own personal connections to kirtan, and the divine.

Figure 8. Samosas, orange slices, chutneys, and teas, May 22, 2011.
When I interviewed people, one of the questions I always asked was whether or not they had a personal religious connection to Hinduism, or indentified with the Hindu deities. Shannon had one of the most interesting responses to my question. “I was raised as a Catholic. I spent time in a number of convents, and I was going to be a nun.” I asked Shannon whether that was before or after college.

Shannon continued, explaining that “When I was 19, after my first year of college, I went to a convent in New York and I spent some time there. And I’m like okay, I’m ready to take my vows, so I went home.” “It’s Mother Teresa’s Mission of Charities,” she interrupts herself. “So I went home and said, ‘Mom, Dad I’m joining the convent.’ And they’re like…” She inhales sharply, almost in a gasp.

My mom was supportive but my dad said, ‘can you please just finish school?’ and I was like ‘well I think that’s reasonable, I’ll do that.’ And then… you know what happens, … or maybe you don’t, I mean for me I fell in love somewhat. In hindsight I can’t say I really did but back then I thought I did. I was like, ‘wow there’s this whole world of relationships and men! And wow! Men!’ I hadn’t really grasped the wonder of it.\(^{57}\)

She laughs and adds with even more laughter, “And there would be none where I was going.”

But then because of the yoga my mom got into, she got a book by Lama Surya Das. We read it together and it talked about… I think it was a lot of Buddhist principles, reincarnation, and different deities. And I was like yeah this seems to make a lot of sense. I’ve never quite understood people that say there is only one, one in the realm.\(^{58}\)

I asked Shannon if it’s sort of a blending of traditions that she picks and chooses and adapts to fit her personal life?

I don’t even want to fit myself, or fit people into me, but like, when Mike did a workshop here last year we did a chant to Ganesha, and Sarasvati. I don’t know a lot about it whatsoever, but I could really feel the different energies. To me humans add names and personalities. I don’t associate names and personalities with divine expression of eternalness or whatever.\(^{59}\)

I ask her if she still practices Catholicism.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
No, I don’t think religion is really too healthy for people. I think that some people have been able to be within a religious tradition and really come from their heart and be exceptionally loving. In that sense it’s beautiful, but I don’t find a lot of value in going to church. I just haven’t met too many priests… well I’ve met one bishop that I said, ‘wow I’d like to hear what he has to say.’

I mention that I think its very interesting being on the brink of the convent and then… “Yeah at one point I was reading, ‘and 9 million women were burned at the stake,’ and I was like… Uh… I feel like I have a conflict of interests!” she said through laughter. “Like that was a real clincher, I don’t know if I can do this anymore. It wasn’t that long ago they were burning women. Something isn’t adding up correctly.”

If ClearPoint Center has a mission, it is to satiate curiosities, to provide Shannon and Steve, as well as the surrounding community, with opportunities for openness and expansion of their beliefs and value systems. Shannon stated her mission more coherently.

I do think that a healthy lifestyle includes social interactions. I think as humans we are really, we’re totally still evolving and…we’re moving back to the things that used to work really well and letting go of the things that we’ve been doing, not for too long, but maybe they’re not so effective. I think that it’s the tribal singing, drumming, you can’t deny it but the body feels right in that setting.

After lunch, we continued to explore the topics we had discussed with our partners in the first activity. As a thread of connection between events, we took the fourth question from the first activity, “I am a commitment to…” and used it as a springboard for an exercise called the “Commitment Based Action Plan.” Here, after we decide what we are committed to, we respond by assessing, “this is important to me because…” and “the cost of not fulfilling on my commitment is…” and from there we build an action plan to achieve this goal. Again with partners, but differently this time, we expressed our own answers to these questions and asked for support from our partners. “Support” in this instance involves bodywork with our partners, or allowing the weight of our bodies to be supported by our partners, as they place a firm hand on our chest. This activity was accompanied by a worksheet, which allowed us to think about our action plans and the necessary steps that we decided to take in order to fulfill our commitments.

60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Mike Cohen, “Connecting Through Kirtan.”
These activities continued throughout the day and were interspersed with kirtan, anchoring the new exercises with the more recognizable.

Events such as the one today take up a lot of time and effort, both on the part of Mike and the part of Steve and Shannon, but they do not really contribute to the couple’s income. Shannon informed me that “Steve sells a cleanse and replenishment system. So he does this a lot on the phone and the Internet. It’s a network marketing company so he does meetings and phone calls and our income is that.” Steve and Shannon used to host people and allow them to stay in the handful of guest rooms that they have in the back of their home, but guests are becoming less frequent these days. “We’re getting away from overnight stays and more towards daytime workshops and events, [because] having people overnight is very labor intensive, but [we’re] still having groups of 10-60 for day workshops like right now.” As it is, they have two people who live with them in the Center. “Heather and Scott live here. Scott does all the gardens. Heather just got here and has been working on the website, she’s building it up.”

For me, the future of the ClearPoint Center seems very clear. Scott’s day job provides all the necessary income for the type of lifestyle that they enjoy. It seems like they will strive to have events like this monthly, weekly, daily even? “No not really,” Shannon responded to my question. “This is a bright fun thing to have people over. It’s just fun, for the sake of enjoying and doing something good. All together this collective works because everyone is putting something good into it.” I ask Shannon how then, does kirtan fit into your mission here?

It’s funny because Steve and I have had so many conversations about what are we doing here. I think, for myself, I’ve never really had an overarching theory of life, or anything like that. I just really want to move towards having purity of heart, and helping people have joy, and I think this brings people joy. They feel good in their bodies and they smile and hug each other, like it doesn’t have to be anything other than that, but to me that’s a beautiful thing. If you have the opportunity to provide something beautiful, why not?

Summary

Clearly, kirtan’s successes in chant events and bodywork sessions are not accidental. The ways in which kirtan is embraced by yoga communities and those seeking to better themselves through exercises such as bodywork are able to identify the deep personal connections they
experience through kirtan and apply these connections in order to make powerful changes within their everyday lives. The participants I spoke to each use kirtan in different ways, but ultimately they see kirtan as a way to connect with themselves and others through chant. Musicians, likewise, are aware that their participation in kirtan sessions provide participants with these opportunities, and despite their own religious affiliations cannot, therefore, view a kirtan as “just another gig.” As I argued in Chapter 1, I view kirtan in this regard as a distinctly American phenomenon, shaped from the Indian traditions, but ultimately characterized by the individuals responsible for its practice.

Those that I spoke with articulated the various roles that kirtan has in their lives. As I illustrated through the interview excerpts I presented, participants make connections in a variety of ways. Whether through connections to the body, as an energetic, almost cathartic release, or through spiritual or religious experiences, the varieties of kirtan reactions is one of its defining characteristics. One question that I have tried to address through these interviews is one that I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter: how can one singular activity account for so many different reactions from participants? For many involved with kirtan, the values expressed through chanting as well as the connections they make through the activity extend far beyond the chant experience itself. For Steve and Shannon, ClearPoint center is a manifestation of this desire to keep these values at the center of their lives. Kirtan, or perhaps more accurately, the aesthetics of the kirtan experience, become central to their lifestyle.

In the next two chapters, I will address how this kirtan-influenced-lifestyle is reflected in advertising, and why marketing the kirtan experience in this manner is not exploitive, but actually supports and promotes kirtan’s distinct values. In order to do this, I analyze the commodification of the kirtan experience in two ways: first, through identifying the factors that govern the value of the experience on an individual, leader-participant level; and second, by examining how kirtan’s portrayal in advertising affects the overarching kirtan experience in relationship to the spiritual, and health and wellbeing marketplaces.
CHAPTER THREE

KIRTAN’S VALUE AS A COMMODITY BETWEEN LEADERS AND PARTICIPANTS

Kirtan and Globalization

Conversations about globalization and questions about cultural imperialism are likely to be argued against my assessment of kirtan in the United States, especially as I evaluate kirtan as a commodity in the following chapters. Martin Stokes has argued that most of the discourse on globalization and commodification has been by academics largely outside the world of ethnomusicology and has therefore mostly focused on the non-musical, social science aspects of these phenomena. He argues that ethnomusicologists should not ignore the specific details of music and dance, upon which we can offer our technical vocabularies in order to understand the globalization of world music.\(^6^6\) Using his perspective, I have studied the commodification of kirtan through an ethnomusicological framework, looking at the music and chant, and its effects on participants. I have attempted to demonstrate how the music and participatory experience of kirtan foster genuine and private reactions through public, communal practices.

Despite these experiences, kirtan is a commodity. It is bought and sold. It is a part of the global popular music industry, and without the proper contextualization, it is easy to classify kirtan as a culturally imperialistic practice, exploitive of Hindu spiritualities. Reebee Garofalo argues against the use of the term cultural imperialism, citing that it is vague and often overlooks individual or societal agency within the culture that are said to be colonized. He also explains that musics from around the world have made their way into American popular music, and equally, American musics have proliferated internationally. There are many ways to look at the flow of these musics from one area of the world to another, but it would be incorrect to view these incorporations as a loss of culture.\(^6^7\) Similarly, Garofalo states that:

> To argue that [the transnational music industry’s] cultural effect is inevitably one of depletion is to misunderstand the social dynamics of what Christopher Small calls “musicking” (1987:50). It is a concept which encompasses not only composing and performing, but dancing, even listening – in short, all the

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participatory activities that cut across the production-consumption continuum. The concept can easily be extended to include appropriations of international pop and the use of advanced technologies. What is important here is the notion that all the members of a given cultural group contribute something of themselves to the creative process and, in doing so, add to the vitality of a culture.\textsuperscript{68}

Kirtan is not only effective and appropriate for American yoga enthusiasts and spiritual seekers, but it helps to expand awareness about Indian sensibilities and promote Hindu spirituality. Far from being a detractive, destructive endeavor, the application and appropriation of kirtan in the United States adds to the vibrancy and influence of kirtan practiced elsewhere in the world.

**The Commodification of the Kirtan Experience**

One of the reasons that Mike is successful as a kirtan leader is because he is genuinely interested in people, and he strives to make his kirtan experiences personal. He understands that the kirtan experience is different for each person, and because of that he asks participants to listen to themselves and what they need in their hearts. He has frequently told me that one of his goals is to help people pay attention to their own phenomenology. This sentiment is telling because it reveals Mike’s opinions on the interconnectedness between kirtan as a personal and often spiritual experience and kirtan as a commodity. Mike is aware that he is selling a product, and helping people pay attention to their own thoughts, values, desires, and goals bridges this gap between experience and commodity, and allows Mike the necessary income to live the life of a kirtan leader.

Kirtan is a commodity that is bought and sold between producers (leaders) and consumers (participants). As such, the kirtan experience is housed within marketplaces that share similar goods and services. The two primary marketplaces for kirtan are the marketplace of spirituality, and the marketplace of health and wellbeing. While each marketplace competes to include kirtan, they both share many of the same consumers, and their interests are often mutually beneficial. By spirituality, and the marketplace for spirituality, I mean that kirtan appeals to spiritual seekers, those looking to perhaps replace or supplement the voids in their lives that would have traditionally been filled by religious institutions. The kirtan experience

appeals to devotees of numerous religious traditions, as well as to participants who do not identify themselves with any specific religion or religious practice. Kirtan is additionally a commodity within the marketplace of health and wellbeing. While there is an overlap between the marketplaces of spirituality and health and wellbeing, the makeup of the latter often comes to kirtan from the yoga community. These consumers are often concerned with uniting their minds and bodies, living a healthy and complete lifestyle, and finding a sense of “oneness,” and they prefer to associate kirtan chanting with energies rather than spirits or religious deities. Analyzing the kirtan experience as a commodity within these marketplaces allows for an application of Appadurai’s theories of commoditization and value, and permits me to highlight the politics that regulate kirtan’s value as a commodity. Furthermore, his model provides a framework for this chapter, as well as a strong link between kirtan participants’ experiences in the previous chapter, and the ways in which the kirtan experience is promoted through advertising in the next chapter.

Borrowing from Arjun Appadurai’s theories outlined in his introduction to the 1986 publication *The Social Life of Things*, I analyze the kirtan experience as it is negotiated between leaders and participants. Kirtan provides a service to its participants, a service that consumers are willing to pay for. There is a market for this service and kirtan is subject to the same laws of supply and demand as similar commodities. Appadurai asserts that commodities have value, and what creates this value is not just the commodities themselves, but their exchange. When commodities are exchanged, it implicates that the sacrifice of one object is outweighed by the perceived value of the other.\(^{69}\) The constraints that govern these commodities and regulate the value of that commodity are what Appadurai calls politics. “Politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities.”\(^{70}\) The exchange of commodities “…would not be possible were it not for a broad set of agreements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable ‘exchange of sacrifices’ comprises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances.”\(^{71}\) Appadurai continues to explain that:

> What is political about it is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension itself has its source in the fact that not all parties

\(^{69}\) Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.
\(^{70}\) Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 57.
\(^{71}\) Ibid.
Politics and political forces, terms that I use interchangeably, give commodities the ability to “link between regimes of value and specific flows of commodities.” The kirtan experience is governed by various sets of politics, including: community, knowledge, authenticity, the perception as health beneficial, spiritual lack, and timelessness. Each of these politics has a distinct affect on the value of kirtan as a commodity, and there are certain aspects of kirtan that are underscored in order to elevate kirtan’s value.

Participants attend kirtan chants because they feel that the leader helps them achieve something that they could not on their own. As outlined in Chapter 2, kirtan participant Omar explained that kirtan is a “we” thing. Omar understands that kirtan is call-and-response, including a leader, which he aptly calls the “initiator,” as well as the community of responders. In Omar’s case, he feels a need to emphasize the differences between attending a kirtan and attending a rock concert, identifying that instead of a rock band singing at its audience, kirtan leaders sing with the audience, a quality that Omar deems “ego.” He explains, “You couldn’t get the experience all by yourself. It really makes the experience where everybody else participates. I like the live factor…it’s the participation thing.” The politics of community and the sense of oneness is one of the driving forces behind Omar’s participation in kirtan. He would not be able to achieve the same experience by listening to a CD at home, and the fact that Mike is leading the kirtan session also has a distinct impact on Omar’s experience. People like Omar perceive the kirtan leader as more knowledgeable, and are thus willing to pay for access to this knowledge.

The perception of knowledge elevates the value of kirtan. The distinction here between kirtan at home and live kirtan is significant. There are specific qualities about the performance that Mike enhances in order to make this live experience special. First, Mike never stops playing the harmonium. In between chants, the slow drone of the harmonium (and electronic tampura softly in the background) can always be heard. Mike tells short stories and explains the purposes of the chants in between the actual singing, vamping on chords and slowly modulating to the key of the next chant. He speaks softly in order to keep with the meditative vibe of the room and

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Omar, in discussion with the author.
plays off of the energies of the room, contributing to the senses of community and knowledge that Omar acknowledges.

For example, Mike frequently tells a story from one of his trips to India where he attended a double wedding. On this occasion, a brother and sister were getting married (not to each other, but each to their respective partners at the same time, he jokes with audience while telling this and they snicker). Mike relays the emotional feeling of being there to witness such an event, and the sense of love that he observed from the brides and grooms and respective family members. He relates these emotions to the lives of the participants and one result from this is strengthened sense of community among the present participants. Two of the main differences, in Mike’s opinion, between chanting in India and chanting in the United States are the setting and the lyrical content of the chants. He says that here, participants attend specified kirtan events, whereas in India the practice of chanting is more integrated into other ceremonies and practices, such as weddings. Also, in Mike’s experience, chanting in India often takes the form of a bhajan, containing greater lyrical content and variety, where at kirtan events in the United States, kirtan lyrics are simplified, truncated, and highly repetitive.

Another politic affecting the relationship between leaders and participants is authenticity. Kirtan music is a blend of Indian and Western elements. Instruments such as the harmonium, tabla, and tanpura create a sense of authenticity. These instruments provide an inherent sense of validity to the music, and by extension to the chant, to Mike, and to the larger experience. Another factor that contributes to the overall sense of authenticity comes from Mike’s storytelling in between chants. Often, while explaining the purpose and goals of the chants, Mike will tell an anecdote from his time spent in India. By mentioning that he has studied spirituality in India, he establishes himself as an authority. While debates rage over the true definitions, how important, and even whether or not someone can be truly authentic and authoritative, the reality is that for these kirtan participants, Mike’s time in India provides him with credibility. I am not suggesting that Mike is acting disingenuously for mentioning this, but what he is doing is explaining his pedigree in a manner that provides personal context for his participants. The third, and probably most indicative sign of authenticity is the use of Sanskrit. Using Sanskrit empowers kirtan leaders by providing a foreignness that will be perceived as authentic. This is not to say that kirtan leaders are not knowledgeable, but that there is an automatic perception of knowledge by chanting in Sanskrit.
Among the participants that I interviewed, most of them said that chanting in Sanskrit was enjoyable and added another layer of interpretation for them. In Hillary’s case, she identified the sound of the Sanskrit syllables as being beneficial to her success while chanting. Paul said that it would blow his mind if he listened to kirtan chant in English. Shannon identified the history and time honored tradition of yoga, kirtan, and Sanskrit as a chief reason for her enjoyment of kirtan. What each of these individuals is pointing to is an authenticity or perceived authenticity associated with Sanskrit, whether through the sound of the syllables, the ancient quality and history of the language, or the foreignness and mystique associated with its use. One reason that chanting in Sanskrit works in this situation is because these kirtan participants are generally not fluent in the language. While Mike makes every attempt to explain the subject matter of each chant, and even projects the lyrics behind him so that participants can follow along, the meaning is often less important that the reaction the participants receive. Due to the spiritual diversity of participants, chanting in a foreign language provides one more level of abstraction, allowing for individual interpretations and applications of each chant. When Mike chants in Sanskrit, he not only honors this tradition and the way that he was taught to lead kirtan, he also fulfills his participants’ important, albeit implicitly so, need to share in an authentic experience.

One more set of politics that regulates the value of the kirtan experience in the United States is the perception of kirtan as health beneficial. Kirtan participants understand how it affects their health, and they seek it out as a component of their healthy lifestyles. This allows kirtan to be beneficial not only on a spiritual level, but also on a health and wellbeing level. Within the marketplace for health and wellbeing, kirtan is often touted as a way to connect the mind, body, and spirit, a way to become one, and provide a holistic stability to the rest of one’s life. This sort of connection is observable in many of the interviews presented in the previous chapter. Tom, the yoga instructor, for example, felt a deep connection from his mind to his body and to energy waves entering and leaving his body.

Most yoga classes in the United States, while heavily focused on stretching, balancing, and strengthening, derivatives of the physical types of yoga such as hatha or astanga, still offer some sort of meditative or chant-like aspect, similar to kirtan and more derivative of a bhakti yoga approach. The popularity of the “exercise” types of yoga naturally led instructors to offer classes of other types of yoga, including kirtan. The mere fact that this study focuses on kirtan
within yoga studios shows the strong connection between kirtan and participants vis-à-vis the yoga and health and wellbeing marketplace.

Shannon spoke similarly about the intimate connections between kirtan and a healthy lifestyle. She sees the value of an ancient tradition, saw firsthand the way her mother overcame physical ailments through non-Western healing methods and allowed herself to be open enough to see the connections between the mind, body, and spirit, and how they each improve through the practice of kirtan.

Mike’s workshop, “Connecting Through Kirtan,” speaks to the natural inclusion within the marketplace of health and wellbeing. In these sessions, Mike uses kirtan as a vehicle to affect positive changes in participants’ lives. Those in attendance did not need to have a religious affiliation to Hinduism, nor did they need to have a spiritual connection to kirtan. These participants simply needed to have a desire to and a commitment to change something in their lives, a strong component and selling point of many health and wellbeing commodities. Furthermore, when paired with a lunch of macrobiotic food, advertised on ClearPoint’s website as, “Afternoon Tea: herbal teas, chai, and espresso served to drink, Tea Sandwiches such as: Goat Cheese & Watercress, Cucumber Mint, Curried Chickpea. Petit fours, fruit, and other little treats,” it is clear that kirtan’s association with healthy eating and drinking is mutually beneficial.75

The politics of “lack” and “timelessness” also affect the value of kirtan, and are highlighted in the work of Deborah Kapchan. In her book Traveling Spirit Masters, she discusses the role of Moroccan Gnawa trance music in the Western world, and she parallels how money and spirituality become substitutes for one another, filling the “lack” in audiences of both Morocco and in the West, respectively. Among kirtan participants, this “lack” is often a religious or spiritual lack, which kirtan participation alleviates. Kapchan also chronicles Gnawa musicians who are aware that their identity as trance musicians is commodified, and the “timelessness” of their music is one of the features which they use to sell to consumers.76 While I concede that kirtan is perceived as timeless, I contest that it is similar to trance. Where trance is used as a way to escape a “world that is often conceived as ephemeral, new, artificial, and corrupt,” kirtan is

intended to connect participants to the present, offering them personal reflection and ways of confronting their lives.\textsuperscript{77} This “lack” of spirituality, and the notion of kirtan as timeless, regulate kirtan’s role between leader and participant and also within the marketplace. Kirtan participants often reported to me that chants that could go twenty minutes or more seemed as if they only lasted a few moments. The timelessness of kirtan allows participants the space to connect with themselves, thus enabling them to build relationships with the others in their lives as well as the Divine. In the previous chapter we saw Paul and the way he uses kirtan as a way to connect with Jesus. Paul is not so much replacing a spiritual lack, but perhaps identifying with kirtan experience as an act of worship. What Paul gains from kirtan is a renewed association with his religion, his God, his own form of worship. Kirtan participants seek to fill the spiritual lack in their lives, and I believe that the comfort found in kirtan often occupies the role traditionally filled by religion. Kirtan’s ability to fulfill so many roles for so many people is one of its most important characteristics.

\textbf{Summary}

As a commodity, kirtan is subject to the same market effects as other similar commodities within the spirituality, and health and wellbeing marketplaces. There are many characteristics of a kirtan performance that causes its value to fluctuate. In terms of Appadurai, these characteristics would be deemed politics. The community aspect of the kirtan experience is accentuated by the participatory nature of the chant. Kirtan leaders portray a sense of knowledge, either explicitly or implicitly, and then when participants interact with leaders, they thereby are sharing in this knowledge. Authenticity, too, has a role in shaping kirtan’s value as a commodity. Similar to knowledge, authenticity is a force that may not be openly expressed by either leaders or participants, but is still one of the underlying characteristics that makes the kirtan experience worth attending.

For many participants, kirtan fills holes in their lives that have traditionally been filled by other means. Kirtan’s perception as health beneficial allows it to draw in participants from the health and wellbeing community that may have otherwise satisfied this need through exercise at the gym, or simply through other types of yoga. Additionally, kirtan fulfills many of the spiritual

needs that would have traditionally been filled by religious institutions, and therefore is a more versatile experience for participants and thus a higher valued commodity.

These political forces regulate the ways in which leaders and participants interact. The interviewees, outlined in the previous chapter, give credence to my analysis in this regard. While each place different significances to the various political forces, participants are united by their love of kirtan. Similarly, based on Mark Slobin’s “Micromusics of the West,” kirtan participants can be characterized as a subculture group based on their kirtan affinity, and thus their interaction within the marketplaces for spirituality and health and wellbeing are mediated by Appadurai’s interactive model of “-scapes.” Because all of these various forces are constantly at play, it allows for each participant to have a different experience. As I have argued elsewhere, kirtan is reflective of each person’s own sensibilities and values. The unifying feature among this group of kirtan participants then, is the power of the kirtan experience itself. While I have highlighted the various politics that make it valuable for participants on an individual level, I should note that not every political force is an important factor for every individual, but collectively they share in the same experience, allowing for an analysis of the group as a whole, through the testimonies of individuals.

These political forces not only shape the relationships between kirtan leaders and participants, but shape the entire kirtan experience. Performance aesthetics, instrumentation, chant content, and chant performance etiquette are all subject to the influence of politics. Kirtan’s value as a commodity affects not only the relationship between leaders and participants, but also the marketplaces in which kirtan is sold. Many of the political forces that I have chronicled in this chapter are also found in advertisements for kirtan and advertisements that use kirtan to sell other products. By analyzing the political forces that regulate and are shaped by kirtan leaders and participants, I will show in the next chapter a clear relationship and a natural progression between the deep, personal and meaningful experiences of kirtan enthusiasts, and the advertisements that emphasize and capitalize on these experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

KIRTAN IN ADVERTISING: USES AND MISUSES OF MARKETING SPIRITUALITY

Advertisers conduct market research in order to effectively sell their products and grow their customer base. Kirtan, as a member of both the marketplaces for spirituality and health and wellbeing, is advertised in ways that reflect the values of the customers of those marketplaces. It is marketed as a component of yoga, as a spiritual healer, as a part of a healthy lifestyle, as a way to promote oneness, and as a way to connect with others. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the various political forces manifest themselves within advertising and ultimately draw consumers to the powerful and often life-changing power of kirtan.

Kirtan in Print Advertisements

The manner in which kirtan is portrayed in promotional materials not only increases kirtan’s value as a commodity, but also elevates the value of commodities associated with kirtan. Promotional materials such as flyers, brochures, and pamphlets provide an overview of the types of associations and pairings that go with kirtan. Themes such as nature, meditation, prayer, strength and conditioning, eco-tourism, dancing, art, health food, beauty, going green, local economy, and community building are just some of the associations made in conjunction with kirtan.

One of the themes most often associated with kirtan is nature. Kirtan’s desire to build connections lends itself well to building a connection with nature, or using nature as a way to further the connections built through kirtan. Because of this association, nature getaways, music and arts festivals, and yoga retreats offer kirtan as a component of their events, and use images of nature to promote it.

Vibrant photographs and images of nature, yoga poses, weight lifting, and even Sanskrit letters are all used to bolster each other’s efficacies. When kirtan is marketed in this manner, as a component of a healthy lifestyle, its value as a commodity is elevated from chant as a divine connection, to chant as a spiritual, emotional, and physical healer, as are the value of the goods and services it is paired with. These advertisements both highlight the political forces that I have
outlined in Chapter 3, as well as serve to appeal to consumers by offering solutions to its participants’ problems.

**Kirtan 2.0**

The Internet has changed the way musicians and audiences interact and connect. Beyond the one-way flow of information of initial web designs, the Internet has created an environment where users can share information on a two-way continuum. In an email newsletter, Mike likens these initial web designs to reading an encyclopedia, but believes developments in the way we interact via the Internet has changed dramatically. Through blogging, video sites, social media, and other streams, this web 2.0 creates an active type of communication between artists, audiences, and other enthusiasts. In this email, Mike discusses the rise of web 2.0 and how its interfaces enable collaboration and interconnectedness, especially as it relates to kirtan. Initially, he uses language that is familiar to kirtan enthusiasts, describing web 1.0 as “passive” and “static,” and web 2.0 as “dynamic, participatory, and collaborative.” The latter adjectives are the same ones that are frequently used to describe kirtan sessions, and are considered to be desirable qualities of a successful kirtan experience. Mike suggests that instead of being “passive recipient” and “listening to CDs, going to occasional Kirtan events,” kirtan enthusiasts could be “active creators.” As an active creator, Mike encourages you to:

- Obtain a harmonium and start your own heart-opening Kirtan practice at home. Empower yourself by overcoming any anxieties about singing or playing music. Add Kirtan to your yoga classes, or those of your friends. Build a community and hold your own Kirtan events, perhaps in your living room. Share Kirtan regionally.

This type of active kirtan participation can be facilitated through web 2.0, or as Mike deems it, Kirtan 2.0. Mike highlights two of the many ways in which these various Internet channels will encourage active kirtan participation: an online monthly harmonium class, and an online training program for kirtan leaders.

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79 Mike Cohen, email message to the author, December 19, 2011.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
The “Bhakti Breakfast Club,” an online subscription service that provides members with a new video every month teaching them to play chants from the most prominent kirtan artists. Through the website kirtancentral.com, teacher Daniel Tucker leads the “Bhakti Breakfast Club.” For a fee of $30 per month, subscribers can learn their favorite chants, as well as obtain the tools necessary to write their own. This online class is representative of many of the politics discussed in Chapter 3. Perhaps the most important of these is the politics of knowledge. For a small amount of money, consumers are able to share in the knowledge and music of some of the most popular kirtan leaders. Furthermore, the “Bhakti Breakfast Club” portrays a strong sense of community among its online participants. This avenue of Kirtan 2.0 is similar to Mike’s own kirtan leader coaching program.

Kirtan Leadership Training Program

As a part of his career as a touring kirtan artist, Mike offers his services to those looking to lead their own kirtan sessions. Although some of these programs take place in person, a vast number of his students either continue to study, or complete all of their sessions through Skype. This Kirtan Leader Training Program is designed to give personal feedback and discuss techniques to aspiring kirtan leaders, the kirtan equivalent of private instrumental lessons. In Mike’s words, those enrolled in the program will learn to:

- Access effective short cuts to building musical competence and confidence
- Empower your leadership presence and skills
- Use storytelling to guide and create a useful context for participants’ experience
- Cultivate and work with the energy of the deities within yourself
- Build the capacity to cultivate, move and play with energy through music
- Develop skill in building community & capacity to hold the space for what arises

Information on this promotional flyer is extremely revealing. Not only does it give evidence to support my argument that Mike evokes various political forces such as creating a sense of community and storytelling in order to create context for participants, it also reflective of similar

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83 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
politics of knowledge and the sharing of knowledge observed in the Bhakti Breakfast videos. Because Mike offers these classes in a variety of ways, through one on one instruction, via Skype, and also in community style teleclasses, this type of endeavor can be very lucrative for someone in Mike’s position. The fact that he can teach via an Internet connection ensures that he will have some sort of sustainable income while touring across the country.

**Connecting Through Kirtan Workshops**

Mike leads various workshops similar to the “Connection Through Kirtan” session described in detail in Chapter 2. These types of activities, including similar sessions that involve somatic healing, are staple fixtures in Mike’s career. Mike is able to use his graduate research and incorporate kirtan in order to generate desired results and help participants achieve various goals within their lives. On a promotional flyer for a somatic healing, Mike introduces the idea as such:

**WHAT IS SOMATIC HEALING?** Throughout life, the body builds up armor from engagement with the world, injuries, trauma and stress. This powerful healing technique de-armors your body to release tension from the cells and tissues, opening your body to new possibilities for thought, action, relationship and energy flow. Disorganizing the historical patterns held in your body allows you to reorganize around who you are being and becoming, rather than whom you have been. You will experience greater freedom of movement, energy flow and possibility. Somatic Healing integrates elements from many styles and teachers including, Rolfing, Polarity Therapy, Reichian Breathwork, Feldenkrais and powerful mantra healing from the Dattatreya Lineage of Swami Kaleshwar.86

For the most novice of customers, those who would be unfamiliar with the various techniques listed in the final sentence, this description says very little about what a session on Somatic Healing will actually entail. If, on the other hand, you are a consumer who is steeped in this culture and well versed in these practices, the description is likely to be very powerful. The same sort of language that is successful in promoting and initiating a kirtan session is used here. “De-armoring,” “action,” “relationships,” and connections with the physical body are all ideas we have seen before. “Energy flow,” an extremely important idea in kirtan, even appears twice in this description. This paragraph also alludes to the same sort of variety of approaches and methods of teaching congruent with Shannon’s own personal views and the views of ClearPoint Center. While I do not believe there to be one secret formula for marketing kirtan and these

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86 Mike Cohen, “Somatic Healing.”
related goods and services, it should be noted how well these advertisements work in conjunction with one another, playing to similar desires, hopes, problems, and fears, as well as utilizing the politics observed within the kirtan experience, to advertise products that work together in a multifaceted approach to health, spirituality, and life in general.

**When Green Girls Go Bad**

One specific advertisement that uses themes of spirituality, health, and the power of the kirtan experience to add veracity to the product being marketed is a promotional video for a company called The Green Girls. Their video, “KIRTAN with Mike Cohen” is available on YouTube, and is primarily an advertisement for their website. This is never explicitly stated, however, and the presentation is likely to leave the viewer wondering what the commodity being marketed actually is.\(^{87}\) The first half of the video shows scenes of mainly women engaged in various activities such as painting, meditating, cooking, dancing, and hula hooping. The images are combined with others such as health food, wheat grass shots, and images of women and children (presumably mother and child). Together, along with the phrases which are displayed throughout the video such as “female sovereignty” “abundance,” “authentic,” “community,” and “local economy,” all serve to portray the independence of the female gender and what is deemed in the video as “radical homesteading.”\(^{88}\)

This video represents many things. At face value, we can see the overt themes of “going green,” “local economy,” and “community building,” but also there are the invented words displayed on the screen such as “mamalution,” “mamalicious,” and my personal favorite “mamaprenuers.”\(^{89}\) These words, and the images behind the words conjure a sense of feminism, motherhood and female entrepreneurship. Ideas of health and wellbeing, spiritual enlightenment, and “sacred sensuality” are also exploited within this video.\(^{90}\)

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
Perhaps the most striking aspect comes when we view the second half of this same video. The second half is Mike Cohen explaining the goals of kirtan and chanting. He describes what kirtan is and how the different Divine energies can be experienced through kirtan, but the second half of the video offers no explicit reasoning as to why it was included with the first. Until I asked him about it, Mike was unaware that this video existed. When I told him, he pulled out his computer and immediately looked it up, and sounding agitated he remarked that he would ask them to remove it from YouTube. I know from conversations with Mike that the footage for this video was shot for a yoga retreat. It was to be a joint effort between both the Green Girls and Mike, but never came to fruition.

The relationship between the first and second half of the video is not apparent, but when analyzed further, several issues can be brought to light. First are the references in the first half to yoga and Hinduism, and how they are portrayed as health-beneficial. Second is how the footage of Mike continues this line of the promise of health and wellbeing through kirtan. In John L. and
Jean Comaroff’s, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, the authors discuss how identity is marketed and used to bolster the efficacy of commodities within the “ethnic industry,” but I choose to approach this issue slightly differently.\(^9^1\) Rather than marketing kirtan ethnically as “Indian,” a more apt description would be marketing kirtan based on the essence of ethnicity, drawing on American notions of Indian spiritual and religious sensibilities and regurgitating those concepts back to the consumer. In addition to the health and wellbeing angle, kirtan is marketed ethnically in order to fill the spiritual void in consumers’ lives. Kirtan chants are promoted as events to open the heart and create a connection with the Divine. Kirtan fits well into this marketplace because, for many, it fills roles that have traditionally been occupied by religious institutions. The same sense of community, personal fulfillment, and connection to a higher consciousness is offered to participants without the exclusivity of any particular religious denomination. Kirtan’s role as an ethno-commodity within advertisements, as defined in *Ethnicity, Inc.*, can highlight difference and otherness, thus exploiting notions of Indian spirituality and identity as a replacement for traditional religious institutions.\(^9^2\)

**ClearPoint Website**

The way in which kirtan is marketed and sold to consumers extends well beyond advertisements for kirtan itself. Kirtan’s close association with other commodities, as well as the way it is seamlessly integrated into the lives of participants, demonstrates the need to understand fully the various ways kirtan is marketed. Because of the ways in which the ClearPoint Center advocates, promotes, and hosts kirtan, and because of the importance places such as this have in providing kirtan to their local communities, it is vital to analyze the way ClearPoint is marketed on the Internet. Steve and Shannon, the owners and operators of ClearPoint, are in many ways equal mediators between kirtan participants and kirtan leaders. In the following section, I analyze various sections of the ClearPoint website and show them to be both reflective of the owners’ personal values, and how the same types of politics we saw in Chapter 3 manifest themselves within these advertisements.

The website for the ClearPoint Center is designed to be a home for all of Steve and Shannon’s business and personal ventures. A simple, clean, and easy to navigate homepage offers different tabs at the top, which link to five different sections: The Center, Advances, Learn

\(^9^1\) Comaroff.
\(^9^2\) Ibid.
& Heal, Store, and Contact. Each of these is represented by a different pastoral photograph, with the exception of a picture of Steve and Shannon representing “The Center.” The banner at the top of the page is a slideshow of vivacious photographs with the accompanying words of: “a way of being,” “self-discovery & healing,” “a community of like-minded people,” “revitalizing food,” and “intimate environment.” The website describes the center in a very calculated way, using many of the same themes and techniques observed in the Green Girls advertisement. They describe the location, illuminating the close relationship with nature:

**The Locale of New England’s Stafford Springs**

Stafford Springs was, in some ways, Connecticut’s first resort town. The Native Americans considered the land to be holy land. They settled nearby and came to the town’s center to bathe in the healing mineral springs. Today we enjoy bringing guests to Staffordville lake and nearby Bigelow Hollow.

Sometimes when people come to the center, we go on a trip to visit the Judd’s farm, where Jo and Kirby Judd make their own fresh maple syrup and grow organic crops of blueberries and peaches. Aside from the romanticism of something like that, it’s sustainable – it’s real.

Fresh blueberry picking at Judd’s farm.

Fall is a spectacular time to enjoy the beauty of the surrounding area.

From our mindset, we find a sincere charm in knowing all the owners of our favorite businesses, visiting our farmers and enjoying the local harvest. We remind our visitors of what its like to have an intimate connection with the land, nature and local food.

Similar themes and associations with food, nature and health are seen here, especially with the use of adjectives such as: “fresh,” “organic,” “sustainable,” “real,” and “local.”

When web navigators click on “The Center” they are taken to a page describing ClearPoint, again accompanied by colorful photos. The description is important, and is worth quoting at length:

ClearPoint is in the midst of nature, surrounded by tall pines and cloaked in grapevine. Take off your shoes. Feel at home. Discover cutting edge healing techniques. Commune and dine with like minded people. Learn from world class teachers. It’s a space where all things are possible.

The intention here is for your optimal growth and learning - with small groups coming together in an intimate environment. You’ll have a chance to get real face-to-face time with our teachers.

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94 Ibid.
The accommodations are comfortable, warm, and simple - uncluttered. Fresh linens and towels are provided for our overnight guests. The center offers a suite of wellness equipment including a chi machine, bio mat, zero gravity chair, inversion and massage tables and more. Our outdoor whirlpool offers a spectacular vista of the starry sky. If you head out our back door you'll find a winding and scenic nature trail amidst the pine forest.

Enjoy locally grown, healthy and home-cooked meals. Pure delicious water flows from our tap. The highest nutrition is a meal cooked with love. Our favorite times are when we prepare and enjoy a meal together.

Come to ClearPoint. Re-connect with old friends and create new lasting friendships. Attend to the requirements of the soul and consciously live in the ever-changing terrain of the infinite journey.

We look forward to sharing a part of our journey with you!

~ Steven & Shannon

The description of ClearPoint makes use of the same political forces that we saw shaping Mike’s kirtan sessions. In the first paragraph there are clear examples of these various politics identified in Chapter 3. “ClearPoint is in the midst of nature, surrounded by tall pines and cloaked in grapevine” highlights the close relationship with nature. “Take off your shoes. Feel at home” evokes a sense of community. “Discover cutting edge healing techniques” associates the center as health beneficial. “Commune and dine with like minded people” benefits from the politics of community. “Learn from world class teachers. It’s a space where all things are possible” is a clear evocation of the politics of knowledge, and assures potential consumers of the benefits and possibilities one can experience at the center.

While this sort of sentence-by-sentence analysis can be applied to the rest of the description, I feel it is more beneficial to discuss the ways in which this description serves as a complementary piece to various other components. The language used here serves to not only depict the activities of the center, but also shows the strong connection to nature Steve and Shannon are striving for. Most importantly, however, is how the description focuses on nutrition, food, and a healthy lifestyle. Given their trainings as holistic health counselors, and Steve’s current profession selling a cleanse and replenish system, it is easy to see how this description is both reflective of their personal beliefs and lifestyles, and also professionally and financially beneficial.

Similar sensibilities can be observed under the area of ClearPoint Values, they state:

96 ClearPoint Center, “The Center.”
97 Ibid.
On the Perfect Diet
There is no perfect diet! We practice being flexiterians and enjoy eating foods from many different dietary theories. Most importantly is to know the source. Is the food local, organic and lovingly prepared? Is the food raised with care? Do I appreciate the food on my plate and give gratitude to its source? Am I eating with good company? Am I chewing my food?

On Environment
The most important environment is our internal environment. The outer world will be a reflection of being at inner peace and harmony with ones self. “Our environment is more powerful than our willpower” If you surround yourself with positive people you will move to a new level in your life. If you eat healthy food and create an internal environment of health you will need less will power to avoid addictive food.

On Spiritual “Advancing”
The term ‘spiritual’ usually associated with some form of religion or religious practice, actually has a much broader meaning: “All activity which drives the human being forward towards some form of development- physical, emotional, institutional, social - if it is in advance of his present state, is essentially spiritual in nature.” (Alice A. Bailey) By this definition, every word, thought and action is potentially spiritual and capable of improving the human condition.

On Integration
“Integration” is a key word. Not just one dietary theory is perfect for every person – you need to take different bits from different philosophies and find out what works for you. If you break it down phonetically: “integration” can be seen as “into-Great-ness.” Integration is a personal path to greatness.

On Vitality
What we do here is we show people different ways to take care of their health – it’s not just health but it’s living a life of vitality and energy. We do nutrition cleansing – self healing modalities – building community – helping get you connected with like-minded people. 98

Every paragraph above has a reference to food, nutrition or diet, excepting the paragraph “On Spiritual ‘Advancing’” mid-text. In fact, the entire section builds to “On Vitality” in which there is a blatant reference to “nutritional cleansing,” the couple’s primary source of income. I should point out here that the product is never referred to by its name on this page, and it takes a bit of navigating through several pages to ever find explicit mention of Steve’s product. Buried on the site, in the area of “Steve’s blog,” it is discussed, but this page is not linked to from the homepage. Furthermore, neither the ClearPoint website, nor the Center are thinly veiled attempts at selling cleanse and replenish systems. I cannot stress this enough.

It is my belief that the paragraph “On Spiritual ‘Advancing’” acts as the glue in the middle of the other four. Spirituality, especially in the way in which it is described in this paragraph, is shown to be a natural occurrence in everyday life, much in the same way that Shannon described her own personal approach to spirituality, and the search for knowledge and truth.

This section, titled “Values” is, well, just that. Rather than a disingenuous attempt of some major “Food and Drug” industry giant to dupe consumers generally concerned about their health into purchasing their product by exploiting their customers’ concerns of remaining healthy, having a nutritious diet, and leading generally positive lifestyles, these values come from someone who lives the lifestyle. Steve not only sells a product that claims to be health beneficial, he is also a marquee example of the stereotypical consumer for such a product. Somehow, for me anyway, this type of marketing is more transparent, more believable.

What it Means to Go Green

The ClearPoint Center website and the Green Girls video are indicative of a very common and important theme that is present throughout the health and wellbeing marketplace. While suggestions of “going green,” “community building,” and “think globally, act locally,” conjure slightly different images for consumers, their message is essentially the same. Each term is both specific enough to mean something to those who hear it, and also ambiguous enough for it to be used in a variety of ways. It may be difficult to find a catchall term that accurately describes the aspirations of these buzz words, but I think it is beneficial and appropriate to say that each of these phrases, and others like it are promoting a universal oneness. Veit Erlmann argues that the world music industry, by its very nature, creates an environment that encourages sameness and fosters homogenization, while at the same time claiming to celebrate difference.99 Through an attempt to offer diversity by exposing consumers to musics from all over the world, outside of their typical choices for rock, pop, jazz etc., the world music industry emerged.100 In reality, however, the category of world music became the new home for any musics that did not fit into the traditional categories, ultimately resulting in a diverse array of music being simplistically and irreverently labeled “world music.” Or as Erlmann puts it:

100 Ibid. I should note here that Erlmann makes a point to “…dispute the notion that certain forms of world music are to be seen as an antidote to the venom of Western consumer culture and cultural imperialism…” Erlmann, 469.
In this stage, the forces and processes of cultural production are dispersed and cut loose from any particular time and place, even if local tradition and authenticity are what the products of the global entertainment industry are ostensibly about. World music, in this reading, appears to be the soundscape of a universe which, underneath all the rhetoric of roots has forgotten its own genesis.¹⁰¹

The Green Girls advertisement is guilty of the same myth of homogenization. While promoting health and wellness, and universal oneness themes, the advertisement also implies that the spiritual essence and ethnic otherness is what makes their product distinct, and thus a valued commodity. Specifically, there is one clip in the Green Girls video of a woman dancing. She is adorned with a bindi, wearing what appears to be an Arabic bedleh, while the words “sacred sensuality” appear across the screen. This image, especially when combined with the words, are exploiting Western understandings of Eastern practices; both the Hindu religion and what many observers from the West would identify as “belly dancing.” Admittedly, this is a generalization about the Western audience, but the perception of the bindi as “sacred” and the bedleh as “sensual” becomes even more probable with the addition of the text on the screen. The essence of Indian ethnicity is highlighted in this advertisement, and while the creators of the video may claim to be using this idea to promote a universal oneness through the experiences and diversity of others’ lives and traditions, they are in fact fetishizing the “otherness” aspect of Indian spirituality, highlighting it as foreign, and therefore beneficial. Rather than explaining how their product (whatever that may be) will be beneficial to their consumers, they are capitalizing on the politics of knowledge, foreignness, health and wellbeing, and perceived authenticity.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 475.
The Green Girls advertisement is the video equivalent of a record shopper purchasing an album simply because they found it in the “world music” section, and because they wanted something other than what they buy on a regular basis. The key difference, in this situation, is my definitional difference between homogenization and oneness. On the whole, catch phrases and slogans like “going green” and the others are used in ways to promote oneness are great ideas. In my opinion, they should be fostered and taken on with more initiative. The danger arises, however, when these ideas turn into proposals that are administered in such a broad swath that they ignore the unique challenges and situations of faced by local individuals. By promoting their two ideas of “sacred” and “sensuality” together, the Green Girls are fostering homogenization, as opposed to oneness, claiming to celebrate difference, but in reality ignoring it. The result is a meaningless fetishization of deep, personal experiences of spirituality repackaged and regurgitated as a health and spiritual panacea.

Figure 10. “KIRTAN with Mike Cohen” screenshot.
Summary

Kirtan’s life as a commodity may be seen in many different types of advertisements. In both print material as well as media on the Internet, kirtan is associated with commodities of the spiritual and health and wellbeing marketplaces. Kirtan is used to promote yoga retreats, nature tours, eco-tourism, art, dancing, health food stores, and various other festivals. Kirtan 2.0 is described by Mike and others as a way to extend the connections made through kirtan into other areas of participants’ lives. This type of kirtan marketing evokes the same politics identified in the previous chapter such as knowledge, authenticity, and the sense of community. Mike’s somatic healing workshops draw on similar political forces in order to promote them to potential consumers. These sessions allow Mike to connect to his most enthusiastic participants, and because he conducts sessions via the Internet it allows him to continue his touring schedule. Advertisements for these sessions employ language that is familiar to those interested in kirtan, thus making the sessions more desirable.

The kirtan experience is a powerful, transformational event for those who participate. Because this experience is so compelling for enthusiasts, advertisements capitalize on these feelings as well as kirtan’s association with spirituality, and health and wellbeing. In the Green Girls video, the text that scrolls across the screen is evidence of these associations. Themes of “abundance,” “authentic,” “community,” “local economy,” and “radical homesteading” portray feelings of personal fulfillment, a connection to a higher consciousness, and a sense of community. My analysis of this video has shown it to be insincere and somewhat devious.

The video exploits American perceptions of Indian and Middle Eastern spiritualities and practices, and it plays off of these perceptions in order to promote their own interests. Notions of the “sacred,” and “sensuality,” are used to manipulate viewers into associating the kirtan experience with The Green Girls. My interviews with Mike have revealed a disconnection between Mike and the creator of the video, and because he was unaware of its existence until I brought it to his attention, it is apparent that its use to market The Green Girls can only be described as slippery.

I have attempted to show a difference between the Internet marketing employed by the Green Girls and that used by the ClearPoint Center. Both have an interest in promoting kirtan and promoting Mike specifically. Both use language, images, concepts, and political forces that are deeply embedded within the kirtan community to promote their products. But each of these
entities is representative of a distinct class of Internet marketers: marketers that are exploitive of the kirtan experience, in the first instance, and marketers that are genuinely interested in sharing the kirtan experience, in the second. Although I have come to this conclusion through the insider knowledge, and have interviewed Mike, Steve, and Shannon about their respective advertisements, I think the distinction between these two classes of Internet marketers is visible on the surface, even to casual Internet surfers who have never met the people involved. I see this difference in marketing styles as analogous to the way other commodities, including music, are marketed as proclaiming to celebrate difference, but are in fact relying on the hope that their commodity will be viewed as something outside of “normal” and thus more desirable. Marketing kirtan under catchall terms such as “New Age” creates the same sort of homogenization as do labels like “world music,” devoid of individualism and drawing heavily on perceptions of otherness. I have argued that in order to properly appreciate the role of kirtan in participants’ lives, we need to understand it as an American phenomenon, with its own distinct set of values, consumers, and challenges.

One of the main reasons that kirtan is such a successful endeavor is because it adapts to each person in individualized ways. Because kirtan is so accommodating to various belief systems and appealing to customers in multiple marketplaces, there is nothing that needs exploited in advertisements. Mike would be the first to mention that participants gain from the kirtan experience what they offer during the chant. Kirtan is many things. Kirtan’s value as a commodity, and its perception among consumers as being health beneficial is portrayed in advertisements for products that also fall within the marketplace for health and wellbeing. When participants find meaningful experiences within kirtan, they become more apt to seek out other similarly beneficial products and services of both a health and spiritual nature. In this way, there is a symbiotic relationship between kirtan and other commodities within kirtan’s two marketplaces. In Noise: The Political Economy of Music, Jacques Attali analyzes culture through music, explaining that music is not only a reflection of culture, but that it is anticipatory of culture. In this way, kirtan not only fulfills the spiritual and health needs of its participants, but also shapes the future paths of its participants, allowing them to seek out similarly meaningful experiences. In many ways, kirtan is anticipatory of culture, in the way that Attali argues. More

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succinctly, kirtan can be viewed as a simulacrum for the entire spiritual, and health and wellbeing industries.
CONCLUSION

Through its origins as a traditional Indian yogic practice, designed to connect individuals to the divine through mantra repetition, to its popularity through ISKCON and its resurgence with the yoga boom of the 1990s, kirtan has always been focused on connections. One question that I asked the kirtan participants was if they could explain the role of kirtan within their overall lives. While the responses I received varied and the participants I interviewed all use kirtan in vastly different ways, they all spoke about connections. The nature of kirtan chant, and the distinct ways in which it is presented and offered to participants allows it to be equally applicable to every participant in the room, generally fulfilling some combination of spiritual and health beneficial needs.

Distinct from the Hare Krishna community, kirtan practiced in yoga studios is not reflective of a particular creed or dogma. This is one of the major reasons that it is so popular. The world of kirtan is very diverse. As Sara Eckel states in her 2009 *New York Times* article:

> It was a definite scene — a mix of a religious revival meeting, a Grateful Dead concert, and summer camp. And it could certainly challenge many comfort zones. But if you can adjust your comfort level to include white people in dreadlocks and saris, if you can roll with belting out several rounds of “Hare Krishna” and “Om Nama Shivaya,” then you might just enjoy yourself.\(^{103}\)

Although this description is tongue-in-cheek in nature and perhaps even a bit sarcastic, it does accurately describe the overall vastness in assortment of kirtan participants. Given this diversity, it is very plausible that the unifying feature, perhaps the only unifier, would be the power of the kirtan experience. Due to the power of chanting, the communal environment, and the distinct personal interpretations, kirtan becomes more than activity for many, it becomes a lifestyle.

The political forces that affect the kirtan experience draw on a number of different factors. I have demonstrated these politics to be a bridge between participants’ experiences and the advertisements that seek to promote such events. Ultimately these forces serve to answer the question of what makes a kirtan valuable, and what strategies are employed by both leaders and participants to ensure that they have the most fulfilling experience. Through the many viewpoints presented in Chapter 2, I propose there are a handful of political forces that have the greatest impact. Some of these politics were expressed to me during interviews, while I have discovered

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other, more implicit forces through observation. Participants need to feel engaged in a sense of community when they chant. They need to feel as if they are gaining some sort of knowledge by their presence in the kirtan session that they could not obtain on their own. Many participants are aware of a sense of authenticity by the way kirtan leaders present their chants, and through the manner in which they conduct themselves while leading the group. Kirtan has the perception as being health beneficial, which allows it to be marketed to a wider audience. All of these political forces help to adjust the value of kirtan and serve as a locus for negotiation between experience and advertisement of this experience.

The nature of the relationship between the kirtan leader and participants is filled with multiple forces, of both an explicit and implicit nature, that regulate the value of kirtan as a commodity. Perceptions of the way kirtan sessions should progress mix with the way the sessions actually occur. These conceptions are also reflected in the advertising, thus influencing perceptions again and working in a circular manner.

Such advertisements underscore these various political forces and the result is advertisements that serve to both draw new people to kirtan sessions, and act as tangible examples of intangible feelings, ideas, and emotions. There are many natural associations made between kirtan and similar commodities. These products are found within the same marketplaces and are marketed similarly. In the previous chapter, I outlined ways in which various print and Internet marketing strategies have used kirtan and similar commodities in their advertisements, and the various politics they draw on to do so. I have offered examples that use the power of the kirtan experience in both a positive and negative way, and have provided explanations as to why I characterize them as such. When done in a way that is true to one person’s, values or even one company’s values, these advertisements are able to capitalize on highly spiritual and powerful experiences in a responsible and meaningful way.

Kirtan has a distinct connection to the marketplaces of spirituality, and health and wellbeing, but the way in which kirtan is portrayed in advertising is sometimes disingenuous to the true goals and experiences of kirtan leaders and participants. It is difficult to show intention within advertising, let alone prove it. It can be difficult connect the meaningful experiences I have shown to be present among kirtan participants to the sometimes dubious ways that kirtan is portrayed in advertising. I hope to offer criticism focused on the perception of the advertisement,
rather than the intention in both the advertisements for kirtan and advertisements that use kirtan to sell another commodity.

Through an analysis of participants’ connections to kirtan, I have shown how these very meaningful and beneficial experiences are represented in and also exploited by advertisements. The question, then, becomes whether it is possible to promote kirtan and sell it within the marketplaces of spirituality and health and wellbeing without degrading and exploiting participants’ experiences.

I found one answer to this dilemma through my conversations with Shannon. She spoke about how one of her responsibilities at ClearPoint is to make sure that her guests feel welcome and at home. Hospitality and a sense of community are both important values for Shannon. The way Shannon speaks about ClearPoint and her role in its operation points to a broader idea of her values in life. Helping people obtain things that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to encounter is one of Shannon’s personal goals, and is also one of the values of the ClearPoint center. Furthermore, this is an objective of kirtan chanting, and one goal that Mike stresses in his sessions. All of these ideas work together in one cohesive thread, because they are all predicated on the same values. Therefore, advertisements from Mike, or ClearPoint, or any other person or institution that appears to be selling spirituality, deep personal connections, or anything else that could be misconstrued as exploitive, should be examined critically, and initially without judgment. The information I have collected here supports a claim that those who are behind such advertising share a deep belief in the effectiveness and power of their products. Their advertisements become a genuine expression of these beliefs and values. They become tangible forms of passion and convictions for commodities that foster and support their chosen lifestyle, which in turn continues to shape their values in a never-ending cyclical style. As I search for a way to encapsulate my argument, I keep returning to something that Shannon said to me, something that I could not have written better. “If you have the opportunity to provide something beautiful, why not?”

The potential pitfall in presenting a work such as this, where the ethnographic data that I have provided highlights highly personalized and spiritual experiences and is analyzed with a model that situates these experiences within the highly capitalized framework of commodification, is that this juxtaposition can leave a disjuncture between this analysis and the actual experiences of the people that I interviewed. I have made an attempt to address this
concern by making it clear that the ultimate goal is to somehow marry these two worlds: the experience with the commodification, which by its very nature seems to compete with everything the experience claims to represent.

I would suggest, by way of conclusion, that because kirtan is so inclusive, so uncontrolled by specific creed, dogma, and overarching authoritative body; because it is so personal and different for each person; and because the kirtan experience is so powerful, that even a terribly diminutive and exploitive advertisement would not detract from the kirtan experience. On the other side of this dichotomy, the reproduction and reappropriation of traditional customs and practices do not destroy their original culture, but instead affirm and reinforce that culture’s sense of tradition, values and even identity. In this way even the admittedly oppressive advertising draws in more consumers, thus reaffirming the meaningful experiences and cycling back to kirtan. Kirtan acts as a mirror for participants, and they achieve individual goals even within the communal setting.

Often, those that are the most seriously invested in the proliferation of kirtan are also those, like Mike and Shannon, that have the most to gain from kirtan’s success. Because of this, the advertisements that they create simultaneously express their own personal beliefs and values and serve as effective recruiting tools. The simile of kirtan as a mirror can be extended one step further. The deep, personal experiences allow people like Mike and Shannon to create meaningful advertisements, which allow more people to become involved in kirtan, receive the same experiences, and eventually (and hopefully) create equally meaningful advertisements. This cycle is likely to sustain kirtan as long as stewards like Mike and Shannon continue to maintain it.

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APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 5/4/2011

To: Matthew DelCiampo

Address: Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Buying Spirituality: Commodity and Meaning in American Kirtan Music

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and one member of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 5/2/2012 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is
FWA00000168/IRB number IRB00000446.

Cc: Frank Gunderson, Advisor
HSC No. 2011.6286
FSU Behavioral Consent Form

“Kirtan Music, Meaning, and Commodity.”

You are invited to be in a research study of kirtan music and your experiences of its affects. You were selected as a possible participant because of your enthusiasm and participation in kirtan. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Matthew DelCiampo, a graduate student under the advisement of Dr. Frank Gunderson at Florida State University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand the complex relationship between the deep personal connections that participants feel through kirtan and the marketplace in which these kirtan events take place.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: allow the researcher to video and audio record all of your musical/chanting interactions during the duration of your participation in these kirtan performances for the purposes of analysis and transcription. You will be observed during your participation in the kirtan event at South Boston Yoga, #36 Dorchester Avenue, Boston, MA 02127, on May 14, 2011, for the duration of four hours. Additionally, you will be interviewed up to five times by the researcher, at the duration of one hour each, via phone, at a mutually convenient time, in the following three month period.

Risks and benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risks, meaning the risks of harm anticipated in the study are not greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

The benefits to participation are a new insight into the feelings and experiences of kirtan participants.

Compensation:

You will not receive payment for your involvement in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject, unless you give consent to be identified by your first name only. Research records will be stored securely and password-protected and only the researcher will
have access to the records. These tapes will never be used for commercial purposes, and will only be seen by the researcher, unless you give consent to the researcher to use these tapes in academic, educational settings. The tapes will password-protected and saved for archival preservation.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Yoga Mandali and/or Clearpoint Center and/or South Boston Yoga. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Matthew DelCiampo. You may ask any question you have now. If you have a question later, you are encouraged to contact him or Frank Gunderson, (850) 644-6106, fgunderson@fsu.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the FSU IRB at 2010 Levy Street, Research Building B, Suite 276, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742, or 850-644-8633, or by email at humansubjects@magnet.fsu.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

________________  _________________  
Signature                                          Date

I freely and voluntarily and without element of force or coercion, consent to be identified, by first name only, in the research project entitled “Kirtan Music, Meaning and Commodity.”

________________  _________________  
Signature                                          Date
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matthew DelCiampo received his Bachelor of Music in Percussion Performance and Music Management from The Hartt School, University of Hartford, in 2010. While there, he studied percussion under the direction of Benjamin Toth, and additionally studied a wide variety of world percussion traditions. He is currently a graduate student in musicology at The Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida, and his current research interests include Indian music, music and technology, and American popular music.