restful, and allows free play of the cognitive imaginative elements which the practitioner is socialized into.

Thus, the ravenous taste ingrained in naming also stimulates passionate synesthetic imagination. Practitioners say that “names contain līlas”—they are gateways to remembering Radha-Krishna’s erotic activities in Vrindavan, which then shine in the “heart-mirror.” Casey (1992, 273–81) similarly argues that the resonance of repeated names is apposite for passionate rememberings (see also Csordas 1994, 142).

Chandrika, then one of the most famous woman kirtan singers in Bengal, and a close friend, explained—and even I recognized when practicing music—“Early in the morning we repeat only the first note of the musical scale [she sang the low tone with a grave tonality]. My singing-guru explained that the first tone contains the vibration of all others. So, when repeating it, we can hear the rest in the mind-ear. Haven’t you seen how a good background clarifies the whole painting? Similarly, with continuous chanting, līlas manifest clearly.” Then she held her jap-mala in the middle of her chest and said, “Our hearts are the unstruck sound, gupta-Vrindavan. During the chanting-round of the necklace, I think I am crossing the Yamuna, and when I return to the big central bead and strike with the sound of Radha-Krishna’s names, I return to Vrindavan. Līlas then shine in my manas.”

What devotees mean when they say that “names contain līlas,” therefore, is that continuous repetition engenders acute concentration, and through sustained chanting, one can imagine deities’ activities in the mind-heart then experienced as Vrindavan. Philosophically, they explain this by saying that since the names are the same as the deities, when practitioners utter the names, they also passionately experience the yearning to witness the deities’ līlas.

Besides solitary chanting, collective musical occasions also aid in imagining līlas. The best instance of “aural imagination” (Hedley 2008, 41) is embodied in Navadvip’s Samajhari temple. For more than a century, resident babajis have been singing kirtans describing Radha-Krishna’s erotic activities through eight daily periods, in the mood of deities’ manjaris, serving them during their intimate moments. At present kirtans are sung a minimum of four times daily, describing the corresponding līlas then ongoing in celestial Vrindavan. Babajis copy the songs into their notebooks and do not publish or show them to outsiders, since they contain details of deities’ activities realized by poet-practitioners during their personal spiritual imaginations. When devotee-singers sit and sing together on the temple grounds facing the
altar-deities, the temple priest offers *aratis* to the idols. Their collective aim is to witness the deities’ Vrindavan *lilas* in imagination, aided by the songs’ detailed lyrics. With lowered eyes and a coy smile, the head priest added, “I also chant during *arati*, since chanting manifests *lilas*.”

The songs sung during late-night and early-morning sessions are the most passionate and graphically describe the deities’ encounters before and after they retire in Vrindavan’s forest bowers. Lay people are usually not present during these hours. The songs, written in archaic Bengali, describe for instance how Radha’s handmaidens dress her to attract Krishna, how they sneak out from their homes and cross the beautiful nocturnal forests, how they decorate the bower in which the deity-consort will meet, how the deity-couple finally meet, and what they then say to each other. Then, leaving the deities alone for their erotic night, the curtains facing the idols are dropped, and the temple closes. Samajbari *babajis* have a distinctive, almost intoxicated style of singing. The four or five musician-devotees, led by a main singer, sing while looking at the idols, engaged in the lyrics to the extent that they share their emotional realizations with fellow singer-*manjaris* by smiling at each other when singing lyrics expressing Radha’s handmaidens teasing her, for instance. Some have mild convulsions when singing about such intimate acts as Radha’s sitting on Krishna’s lap. The main singer’s voice breaks from emotion at times, and they indicate their own body parts when describing the deities’.

*Nam-kirtan* as experiencing Vrindavan

While Samajbari’s *kirtans* are primarily shared among *babajis*, more common among Vaishnavas is *nam-kirtan*: public, participatory occasions of loud musical chanting. Sometimes *nam-kirtan* is more performative, and trained singers chant before the audience, which participates through attentive, embodied listening.

Devotees argue that singing the deities’ names converts the auditory space into celestial Vrindavan. The deity-consort, they argue, delight in erotic pleasures at the site of musical utterance, pleasures which they too can experience. Thus, a Vaishnava proverb says, “In naming itself eros will be found.” Hein (1982, 121) says similarly, about Radha-worshipping communities, that a “bond of erotic imagination” develops in devotional congregations.

This association between music and eros, I argue, is engendered by the auditory experience itself. Also, the rounded acoustic experience in
this case emanates from and returns to the choral collective, giving them the sense of being emplaced together in the sacred place.

Before kirtan begins, the singing site is set up. A stage may be prepared, but more often the audience sits on the same level as the performers, around them or facing them. Deities’ idols or pictures are present at the site, flowers are decorated, incense is lit. Lights are dimmed or turned off to intensify the mellow devotional mood. Cool, soothing sandalwood paste, considered Krishna’s favorite, is put on devotees’ foreheads (symbolizing their participation in the place-to-be Vrindavan), conch-shells are sounded, and naming begins on different melodies: “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare . . .”

The aromatic atmosphere creates synesthetic associations draped in resounding echoes of nam-kirtan. The khol and kartal are instrumental accompaniments. The auditory space resonates synchronously with the heartbeat. Tactile sensibilities are equally operative as people hover, singing together (Kakar 1985, 444). The smearing of boundaries of the voice and skin of oneself from others, felt through the body-ear, creates an indomitable ego-effaced community spirit, where every embodied listener “carries an anticipation of others’ bodies” (Downey 2002, 503). Thus, I often found myself swaying or clapping at a frequency similar to others.

The circular seating arrangement is considered to be the spherical stage for Krishna’s appearance before his lover-singers. The circular seating and the ceaseless name-repetitions have a correspondence. The logic of nam-kirtan is that “in identifying the sung name of the god with divinity itself, kirtan singers, in the same moment, create that which they propitiate” (Slawek 1988, 90).

Nam-kirtan’s spirit lies in its entrancing iterative fervor. While repetition presents an addictive propensity, it also creates a restless anticipation in the listener. Constraint and freedom together create tensions in the tuned body. While tedious routine generates an inescapable sense of habitual pleasure, the certitudes of security, one also feels the urge to break through it, and trample off-beat. Metaphorically, this tension is heard, mismatched and tussling, between the somber, hollow sounds of the khol and the cacophonous, impatient sounds of the kartal. This is also the sense of sexual impatience that the perpetual call between Radha and Krishna, as Vaishnavas assert, embodies in their continuous naming.

This acoustic anxiety manifests in the music’s tempo constantly increasing. Continuously escalating rhythm is an immediate correlate of
the erotic act. *Nam-kirtan* rhythm automatically involves a sense of passage, sensory arousal, and pleasurable climax.\(^7\) This is when devotees with raised hands ululate together, roll on the ground, cry, and shout Radha-Krishna’s names, and the main singer sings the line: “Where there is kirtan, there is Vrindavan.” In other words, sonic arousal and its climax become synonymous with emplacement in the transcendental place.

So, while some have argued that music *replaces* sexual arousal, calling it “misattribution of effervescence” (Marshall 2002, 366), or that *bhakti*’s eros finds indirect expression in music and dance, I argue that distinctions between music and sexuality are misplaced. Musical structures *generate* sexual auras. “Music does not make one think of tension—it is tension itself,” says Pike (1970, 243). Participants swaying their bodies to *kirtan* melodies, quivering to sonic vibrations, and the entranced dances of some devotees, are only ripples of the disquiet spread over listeners’ entire epidermal surfaces. Their collective rigorous clapping throughout the *kirtan* session articulates a euphoric climactic anticipation.

Just like erotic pleasure, musical satisfaction never lies in the climax’s quick resolution, however. The end is incessantly postponed through continuously rising rhythms. I call this a process of devotional *longing*, or intentionally making the singing process long, so that the sonic pleasures may be experienced more and more. Repetition and anticipation inhabit the musical body where postponement itself becomes the telos. The end is simultaneously also craved for, since without it no musical experience is possible. On completing a rhythmic cycle, however, another *nam-kirtan* round begins, and this process goes on for a long time.

It is common to see devotees cry profusely during musical sessions or their exhausting, cathartic ends. These climactic tears approximate Wolfson’s analysis of tears in Jewish mysticism. He says that “weeping of the eye symbolically displaces the seminal discharge of the phallus” (2004, 281). As part of *kirtan*’s collective ecstasy devotees may also experience other involuntary external states, known in the Vaishnava discourse as *asta sattvika bhavas.*\(^8\) These are “stupor, perspiration, horripilation, breaking of the voice, trembling, change of colour, tears, loss of consciousness” (Klostermaier 1974, 104). The associations of music and sexuality led Panksepp (1995, 203, cited in Becker 2004, 63) to call the chills felt during musical gatherings “skin orgasms.” I have myself experienced goose bumps during rhythmic climaxes, when singers, in
their high-pitched voices, passionately sing deities’ names finally. I also found myself unwilling to talk too much immediately after attending nam-kirtan sessions.

Stewart (2010, 91) makes a discursive point in asserting that the bodily practices and responses of kirtan are “entextualised” and thereby authorized within Indian aesthetic theories. However, Becker (2004, 10, 52–56) argues that rasaesthetic manifestations of “deep listening” are both spontaneous and culturally learned. I similarly argue that sensory excesses are also felt naturally due to the music’s affective effects. Thus, there is an established discourse about kinds of acoustic sensations. However, since the discourse is prevalent, the sensations also become culturally established and part of a celebrated sacred ideal.

Famous Vaishnavas are remembered by their affective responses to kirtan. A resident of Navadvip’s Nitaibari Temple is said to have shouted and entered trance every time he heard Radha’s name. Others fainted in emotional crescendo while dancing with raised hands. Some people become immobile for some time after the music is over. Participants often run to touch the feet of the devotee who experiences trance-states, as respect for these sensory gifts from Vrindavan.

**LILA-KIRTAN AS EXPERIENCING VRINDAVAN**

Equally popular as nam-kirtan is lila-kirtan, the rich performative tradition of describing Radha-Krishna’s and Chaitanya’s lilas to devotee audiences through songs performed by trained musicians in three-hour sessions.

*Lila-kirtan* consists of a series of poems (*padas*) of the highest literary standards, with sophisticated tunes often set to Indian *ragas*, composed by Vaishnava devotee-poets over three or four centuries, and imparted through generations of trained singers. The poems describe the deities’ activities through the day, or Radha’s/Krishna’s/Chaitanya’s love-moods. A day in celestial Vrindavan is divided into eight periods when Radha-Krishna meet for secret trysts (Delmonico 1995, 263–67). Very often twenty-four-hour *lila-kirtans* are organized in which eight musician-groups describe deities’ different activities throughout the day. *Lila-kirtans* also describe special romantic occasions in celestial Vrindavan such as Ras or Holi. The songs contain intricate details of how the deities look, how they are dressed by handmaidens for the particular occasion, how they feel when separated from each other, how their handmaidens arrange for their trysts, what they say to each other
when they meet, how they make love, and so on. Thus, devotees argue that the elaborate performance and embodied listening of lila-kirtan, like nam-kirtan, manifests celestial Vrindavan in the sonorous site. Preceding every narrative account of Vrindavan lilas, songs describing Chaitanya’s corresponding emotions in Navadvip are sung, since the saint is imagined to have embodied every element of the deity-consort’s passions.

Unlike my spontaneous participations in nam-kirtan, which I could analyze through attentiveness to my own and audiences’ reactions to music, understanding lila-kirtan required more specialist knowledge and intensive conversations with musicians. It was through attending numerous lila-kirtan sessions plus discussions with musicians that I developed insights into lila-kirtan music and its erotic power. I had very good relations with two lila-kirtan singers especially. Chandrika, a government-paid radio singer over 50, was the most dedicated and knowledgeable singer I knew. As a young girl she had been very poor, but had a keen interest in learning lila-kirtan. She stayed and studied with her kirtan-guru for 22 years in Navadvip, and served in his house, since she could not pay him anything monetarily. She also remained unmarried, since she did not want anything to distract her from her sadhana (musical/spiritual discipline). At the time of my fieldwork, she had been performing for over 35 years. She had a highly trained and husky voice due to intensive practice. She was a very popular singer throughout Bengal and had opened a kirtan learning center in Navadvip, where she was teaching sixty young boys and girls. Madhusudan was younger, 30–35, and formally educated, with a bachelor’s degree in the humanities. My musician friends in Navadvip recommended that I meet Madhusudan, who lived in another town. He was then the most popular and highly paid singer in Bengal. He was a friendly person, and in addition to singing songs, explaining their meanings and philosophical import, and elucidating difficult kirtan rhythms, as Chandrika did, he also took me along on his various musical tours. He also asked his wife’s kirtan-guru to teach me the basics of lila-kirtan and record some of the oldest and finest kirtans for me.

Kirtan performances include vivid explanations of the philosophically difficult verses for popular understanding (Christof 2001, 65, 72). Thus, singers also learn Vaishnava philosophy and effective oratory from their kirtan-gurus. There is a debate about whether singers need to be Vaishnava practitioners themselves, and most agree that they should. The poems were mostly composed by devotee-poets in the mood of
the deities’ *manjaris* and as reflections of their spiritual realizations in imagination of Radha-Krishna’s passionate *lilas*. Thus, the songs, characteristic of medieval North Indian *bhakti* poetry, are written in the first person, ending with the poet’s spiritual signature (*bhanita*) in their feminine moods as witnesses of divine *lilas*. Chandrika confessed that unless she knew how a *manjari* feels, she could never render the songs with apt expressions or communicate with listeners’ emotions.

Hayes (1995, 335) argues that the use of spiritual signatures rather than personal names at the end of songs is an expression of ego-effacement, of disclaiming personal authority as poets in favor of conveying only the song’s spiritual mood. Chatterji (2009, 64), borrowing Goodwin’s idea of a “spectacle poem,” adds that the poet’s role as a “witness rather than an author” gives the art form a “collective signature.” This enables singers and listeners to appreciate the songs in similar moods as witnesses of divine erotics.

Experienced singers also compose independent poetic interjections as couplets (*akhbars*) explaining their own spiritual realizations of the original text (Wulff 2009). Along with poems, *akhbars* are also imparted through guru-lineages.

In a *lila-kirtan* gathering the main singer stands in the middle, surrounded in a semicircular fashion by his musician accompanists. A supporting singer, two drummers, and cymbal-players are essential. To make the music contemporary, these days, synthesizers, harmoniums, and flutes are also used. All the musicians wear the Vaishnava adornments: *tilaks* and basil-seed necklaces. The main singer plays a pivotal role as his sonic-devotional mood percolates to the other musicians and to the listeners. During a *kirtan* class, Chandrika told her students, “As you learn singing, also learn *bhava*-expressions. You must not sing with ego. The moment one sings as Radha-Krishna’s servant, her vocal renditions will naturally communicate with devotees’ heart-ears; every time she cries, all listeners will also sob aloud.”

The singer’s empathic communication with listeners was especially evident during a three-hour *lila-kirtan*, about Krishna deceiving Radha and spending the night with another lover, performed by Madhusudan in a *babajis’* ashram in Calcutta during one of his musical tours. Typical of *kirtan* singers, he was singing in a very high register. High pitches automatically ensure a sense of urgency and attentive listening. Also, when sad *lilas* of separation between deities are sung, the tunes are melancholic, and rhythms, long-drawn. High-pitched tunes also naturally sound more feminine and almost like insistent weeping. The lyrics
described what Radha told her handmaiden-friends about her waiting alone in Vrindavan bowers, her sense of being betrayed and dejected; how the handmaids felt Radha’s pain, and eventually fetched Krishna. Inherently musical and cultural elements, that is, the tunes, rhythm, and beautiful lyrics, together create the appropriate devotional aesthetic. The *babajis* listened with rapt attention, gazing at Madhusudan, and reacted appropriately as he sang. They nodded their heads, jerked their hands in disapproval, as if arguing with Krishna on Radha’s behalf, cried on each other’s shoulders, smiled at each other in feminine ways when the deities met, and eventually stood up and jumped with raised hands when Radha united with her lover. Both the experienced musicians and the listeners, in their sonic imaginations, witness the deities’ *lilas* in their spiritual moods as devotee-*manjaris*, during *lila-kirtan*.

*Kirtan*-singers are deft managers of musical and affective excesses. The singer stops after singing a few lines and explains their meanings to the listeners. This is also intended, Madhusudan explained, to disallow listeners from getting emotionally too carried away in the tuned passions, since occasionally performances need to be paused when devotees lose consciousness or go into intense fits.

I have also seen Madhusudan crying copiously, for instance while describing Krishna’s leaving Vrindavan or Chaitanya’s leaving Nadia, while simultaneously indicating to the drummer with his hands the rhythm he wants next. Thus, kinesthetic and sensory habits during *lila-kirtan* are both naturally musical and “scripted” (Corrigan 2004, 16) and fall between what Bruckner (2001, 320), in the context of canonical text-performances, calls “spontaneous” and “controlled possession.” My analysis therefore differs slightly from Marglin’s (1990, 212) theorization of “spectator-devotees’” experience of “erotic emotions” while watching the ritual dance form in the Jagannatha temple, which she conceptualizes as “radically culturally constituted.”

The body’s reactions to rhythm during *lila-kirtan*, for instance, are both immediate and learned, affective and cultural. The drums play along with the music and their echoes pulsate in the collective ears and heart. Unlike *nam-kirtan*, where the rhythm is marked by gradual acceleration, in *lila-kirtan* the rhythm is characterized by an enjoyable unpredictability. However, experienced listeners can usually anticipate the rhythm changes. After repeated listening, even I could sometimes tell when the rhythm would change. When the rhythm is slow, a natural sense of sleepiness descends on the audience, which is conducive to relaxed imagination to witness Vrindavan *lilas* being described. Stewart
(2005, 263) also demonstrates relations between Bengal-Vaishnava listening practices in general and visualization of Vrindavan lilas. The phenomenology of repetition is such that listening to lilas time and again helps devotees identify with those narratives, till lilas eventually “possess” them, he says (see also Lutgendorf 1991, 244). Palmer and Jankowiak (1996, 240) similarly argue that performance contexts often facilitate experiences of collective imagination. However, when the rhythm changes, the singer indicates with hand-movements, and the audience ululates. This generally corresponds to descriptions of Radha-Krishna’s happy unions; and the musical groove automatically makes one want to dance. This rhythmic diversity helps sustain audience attention, avoids monotony, allows a range of emotions among listeners, and makes the entire listening experience spiritually consuming.

Mostly, the rhythm follows the singer’s tunes; sometimes the singer repeats a line continuously, allowing the rhythm to lead in the meantime. Repeating the same lines evokes the lulling sense of contemplation and facilitates thinking about the deities’ erotic pleasures described in those lines, while the heart-mind beats with the galloping rhythm. “So the musicality is not only an aesthetic gloss over the discursive content but rather a necessary condition for . . . ethical action” (Hirschkind 2006, 12).

Chandrika explained that the sonic site as Vrindavan has affective power over both singers and listeners. She said, “Through the songs’
descriptions, the entire place becomes Vrindavan, and it feels like moving about in the beautiful place with other devotees, and relishing sights of the deities’ *lilas.*” Throughout the performance singers indicate with their hands and on their bodies every element being described, as if it is present right there. For instance, if they sing about Vrindavan’s fragrant flowers, they either make feminine gestures with their hands in the shape of flowers, or point toward some imaginary tree where they have blossomed. Also, they wear anklets and sound them when describing Radha or her handmaidens. Their facial expressions and hand-movements are also soft and feminine then. I also saw Madhusudan open his flower-necklace, bring it close to his lips and stretch it, when describing Krishna’s flute. Thus, music and its embodied cultural expressions together help the devotee gathering experience the acoustic site as Vrindavan.

Toward the climax, after explicit lyrics about Radha-Krishna’s union are sung in the devotee-poet’s mood as witness of divine erotics, and the rhythm finally ascends, then as in *nam-kirtan,* the singer shouts into the microphone, saying, “Where there is *kirtan,* there is Vrindavan,” “With pleasure, look at this honeyed-Vrindavan,” and so on. The devotees’ ecstatic collective sobbing or shouting then contribute to *kirtan* acoustics, and as among the Kaluli where “becoming a bird” becomes the metaphor for sound and weeping (Feld 1982, 17), in *lila-kirtan* it is “becoming a woman,” or Krishna’s lover. The highest rhythm played at this point is called *murchona* or “fainting,” referring also to the final affective state that passionate listeners may ideally embody. Devotees ululate together at this point, and that sound, coupled with the restless cymbal jingles, gave me goose bumps repeatedly.

The three-hour *kirtan* performances tread different temporalities. The singer elaborates on some Radha-Krishna *lila,* its correlate in Chaitanya’s life, and its metaphoric relationship to devotees’ lives. For instance, early-morning *kirtans* may be sung to wake Chaitanya in Navadvip, then Radha-Krishna in Vrindavan, and devotees’ hearts to spiritual arousal. Real musical time, devotees imagine, is congruent with cosmic time. Madhusudan explained, “Even if I sing a monsoon-*lila* in peak summer, the sonic atmosphere will give devotees the sense of a wet Vrindavan. All time condenses where Vrindavan *lilas* are sung. . . . *Lila* time is present time.” This sense of presentness generates a real impact upon listeners, which they identify with the manifestation of celestial Vrindavan.

With the end of an intense *lila-kirtan* session, devotees rush aggressively to touch the singer’s feet. Through a successful performance a
singer comes to mean much more than a mere performer—she is the fullest embodiment of aspired devotional moods. Thus, unlike Chatterji’s (1995, 437) description of a Bengali folk-dance form where lilas are imitations of the deities’ activities, in lila-kirtan the music is considered to directly manifest the deities’ passions, transforming the sonic site to Vrindavan. Mason (2009, 2–19) summarizes Vrindavan’s theatrical performances similarly and argues that they blur the boundary between mimesis and ontology such that theatre is religion. Since there is a reciprocal relation between geography and performance, both theatre and religion can manifest the sacred place, he argues.

EMBODIED INSTRUMENTS AND AUDIBLE BODIES

The chief instruments used during kirtan, the khol and kartal, are sacred objects themselves. In some Bengal-Vaishnava temples, the khol is worshipped on the altar with the deities, and before every kirtan performance the drummer offers mantras to the khol. Following a complex phenomenology of listening practices, musicians and instrumentalists state that by itself, careful audition of the materiality of khol-kartal sounds can manifest Vrindavan lilas. Stoller (1989, 108), a pioneer in the anthropology of senses, pointed out decades ago that the sounds of musical instruments had not been put under descriptive scrutiny, and the situation is not much better now. However, I analyze devotee-musicians’ claims that the instrument sounds themselves become Vrindavan’s sonic secrets, and manifest Radha-Krishna’s intense eroticism. I document body-theological practices of integrating iterative chanting into the breathing interior of the musician’s corporeal space, such that the inner sensate body then echoes with khol-kartal sounds, or Vrindavan’s aural aesthetics.

Here I summarize views expressed by a few practicing musicians, especially Navadvip’s khol players. Of them, my relationship with Govinda, one of the most renowned drummers in Bengal, proved to be most productive in honing my own listening acumen and musical imagination. Although he lived in Navadvip, I first met him in another town during a lila-kirtan program where he played the khol most beautifully and was much appreciated by the audience. Unlike other aspects of my research, the complex theology of instrument sounds is not widely known, and Govinda took pride in his extremely nuanced and rare domain of experience and knowledge. Sonic understanding of the khol, he emphasized, came down to him as oral lore through generations
of trained instrumentalists. Govinda’s father was the most respected *khol* player of the earlier generation, and many of Govinda’s sensibilities were influenced by him. Govinda also accompanied important singers and held discussions with other instrumentalists of Navadvip and Vrindavan who he said had ratified his musical-spiritual understandings. Govinda was close to 60 during my fieldwork, and I had by far one of my most intimate friendships in the field with him. Our musical wavelengths matched very well, and apart from discussing the deep philosophies of *khol-kartal* sounds, Govinda occasionally also taught me some basics of *khol*-playing and helped me maintain a notebook about the significance of its multiple nuanced tunings.

Govinda exemplified the ideal combination of spiritual and musical discipline. He had been practicing the *khol* since he was a child. Also, since the age of 23 he had spent a great portion of his life in Vrindavan as a Vaishnava practitioner in the mood of a handmaiden-friend of the deity-couple. He used to have long hair and wear anklets then. It was while in Vrindavan that he explored the experiential connections between Vaishnava spiritual practices and the metaphysics of instrument sounds—between corporeal and musical acoustics.

I observed how *khols* are made in Navadvip’s and Mayapur’s instrument shops. *Khols* are crafted out of mud since its sound, musicians and *khol*-makers agree, is very sweet. The constituent element has an impact on sound’s materiality (Hurcombe 2007, 536). The Sanskrit name for the *khol* is *mrdangam*, “body of mud.” *Khols* all over Bengal are known as Nadia *khol*, since Nadia’s soil is preferred in making them. *Khols* are asymmetrical, conical, barrel-like drums, 23–24 inches in length and 42–45 inches in diameter. Once the body is made, it is covered with cow skin (like other membranophones) considered sacred by Hindus, and thirty-two strings are pulled between top to bottom. The tension of these strings tunes the instrument. Finally, a small air hole is punched in one of the edges, as sounds are produced by air-passage in the inner hollow.

During *kirtan* performances the *khol* hangs from the drummer’s neck with a strong cord, so that he may play it either sitting next to the singer or standing—to allow the audience to see him and the instrument clearly when he plays difficult rhythms, or when the rhythms are faster and he wishes to move about or even jump to the ecstatic rhythms he plays.

Navadvip is also famous for cymbal-makers. Large instrument shops all over Bengal outsource the work to Navadvip, and craftsmen make
them in their homes. Cymbals are of different sizes. The smallest pairs (mandiramanjari) make a “tung tung” sound; the middle ones (kartal) make a similar sound but with more resonance; and the big ones (jhompoc), weighing about a kilo together, make a loud “jh(n)a jh(n) a” sound. The shrill, sweet kartal sounds are due to constitutive properties of bell-metal. All cymbal varieties are generically referred to as kartal. Kartals are played in pairs and attached to the player’s hands with cloth strings.

Khol and kartal make the ideal combination as kirtan-accompaniments, since their tunings suit any scale of singing. Apart from their musical properties, devotees attribute this to their innate sacredness. Graves (2009b, 105) says that the khol has an “affecting presence” in the Vaishnava world and is treated more as an embodied person than as a thing. I also agree with Graves (2009a, 4) that the sonic ontology of Bengal-Vaishnavism is situated at the junction of religious discourse and affective efficacy of instrument sounds. Panopoulos (2003, 640) says similarly that both bell-sounds and the meanings they acquire in a Greek island village make them significant “aural cultural artefacts.” Thus, I concur with Ingold (2000, 1, cited in Chua and Salmond 2012, 106) that agentive primacies of human intention and artefacts are not discernible when cultural realities are studied in their entangled entirety.

Related to the idea of the sacrality of instrumental sounds is the parallel discourse about essential sounds of the spiritually perfected body. Govinda asserted that the khol is the perfect embodied correlate of the human body and that the ultimate spiritual purpose of advanced practitioner-musicians is to be able to hear the instrument sounds arising from one’s own corporeal interiors, even when the physical instrument stops playing. Khol-kartal sounds which echo Vrindavan lilas then manifest in the body-Vrindavan, according to him.

Once, during a discussion with my singer friend Chandrika about khol-kartal sounds, she insisted that rather than only ask about them I should try to understand through my own concentrated listening. She then asked what I feel exactly when I listen attentively to the instruments. I said, “I cannot concentrate on them for too long, since the repetitive khol-sounds bang intensely in the middle of my chest and navel, and the kartal’s shrill sounds have a deafening impact.” Happy with my attentive answer, she smiled and explained, “Precisely. The middle of the navel, the chest, and so on, correspond to the chakras, whose intrinsic, hidden sounds are then in tune with the khol-sounds outside.” And the kartal’s deafening sounds are the sounds of Radha’s
anklets. If you keep chanting well, your breath-chant will sound the body-\textit{khol} one day.” I could not understand exactly what she meant till later when Govinda told me about Vaishnava musicians’ beliefs.

When Radha and Krishna decided to be reborn in Chaitanya’s body, their indispensable belongings, Krishna’s flute and Radha’s anklets, wanted to come along. Since the flute and anklets sound together during Radha-Krishna’s love-encounters, they wished that the flute and anklets incarnate as drums and cymbals for \textit{kirtan}-music. Passion, in other words, was incarnate as music. Graves (2009b, 104) identifies this instrument incarnation as an “identity transposition.”

During a conversation with a musician-couple in Navadvip, the man, who is a \textit{khol} player, said, “When Krishna’s lovers run to meet him, they giggle, and their anklets dance in pleasure. Those are the tinkling sounds \textit{kartals} make. No wonder \textit{kartals} are also known as \textit{manjaris}. So when I hear the \textit{kartal} my \textit{manjari}-self rushes to see Radha-Krishna. Also, you will see that \textit{kartals} play in the same rhythm in which \textit{kirtan}-participants clap—as if Radharani’s ornaments are clapping in rhythm in the devotee’s heart-temple.”

In general, sounds and erotic sensibilities are acutely embroiled in Vaishnavas’ life-world. This is most evident in the hundreds of poems dedicated to Krishna’s flute. The search for Krishna and Vrindavan is often articulated as a search for the sound of flute or anklet. The flute is often a metaphor for erotic irresistibility, its seductive sound claimed to be a direct, penetrative eros entering the body through the ears’ interstices (see also Hayes 1995, 348). The poetics of the flute is described in some Vaishnava poems with the idea that as Krishna exhales his moist breath through the different holes there are different tunes, which, carrying his lip-nectar, fill the air of Vrindavan, attracting his various lovers.

The passionate flute-sounds are conceptualized as being in tune with the breathing body. I befriended a Muslim villager, 92, who lived in a village adjacent to Mayapur and was locally renowned as very knowledgeable about Vaishnava and Sufi aesthetics. He once said, “One of Krishna’s flutes [\textit{banshi}] has nine openings, and so does our body. If through spiritual practice we pull up breath-air and shut these nine doors, we trap breath-sound inside. . . . Krishna brought the flute with him; then as Chaitanya, he brought chanting. The two are the same. After sustained practice of chanting, it becomes indistinguishable from breathing. Thus breath is chant is flute-sound, and then the body-flute plays.”

Others say that one of Krishna’s flutes (\textit{murali}) has five holes, with which he attracts the five senses. Madhusudan, in explaining a song during one of
his *lila-kirtan* performances, said, “I will play as he wants to play me. He chooses to touch any pore in me, and my body sings along.”

The flute and the *khol* are both hollow, such that air can pass without hindrance. That is the sounding principle in both cases. Practitioner-musicians imagine this as emblematic of the feminine heart’s subservience to the lover, Krishna, without any obstruction or ego. The energy-centers in the hollow inside of the body-*khol* or body-flute can then echo Vrindavan’s passions. Irigaray (2002, 84–100, cited in Kearns 2005, 110) similarly argues that yogic practices sensitive to breathing apprehend subterranean, feminine, subservient, and erotic aspects of the self. Similar to the flute-phenomenology, she suggests therefore that we are breathed as much as we breathe (113).

Which sounds will be heard in the practitioner’s body is deeply in tune with how the *khol* and *kartal* sound in general. The timbre of instruments, as Balkwill and Thompson (1999, 50) remind us, determines the emotional moods accompanying them.

The repetitive rhythmic tones during a *kirtan* performance create an ecstatic atmosphere. Practitioners who prefer sonic meditation may choose to gradually stop listening to the *kirtan’s* lyrics and concentrate fully on the instrumental sounds. When the rhythm reaches its climax, the musical-orgasmic pleasure bursts both in collective shouts and in the individual listener’s inner body-space.

During one of Govinda’s *lila-kirtan* tours, in a Vaishnava devotee’s house in a Bengali town, the musicians rested before their scheduled performance. Govinda and one of his students (who had been learning the *khol* for more than fifteen years) brought their *khols*, and I brought my notebook, and we had the most enlightening discussion for four hours at a stretch. After Govinda showed me some basics of *khol*-playing, his student struck different portions of his *khol*, and both of them together explained:

The right-hand part of the *khol* has a treble, sharp sound [*tang tang*], almost as sweet as the flute. Its echo resonates for a long time after it is struck. There are large, round bangles around the *khol’s* edges, like Radha’s orna-
ments. When we strike the *khol*, the bangle also sounds [*chn chn*]. The *kar-
tal*, also like Radha’s different ornaments, echoes for almost thirty seconds after it is struck. As the sharp rebounds resonate, our mind-hearts travel on the echo-trail left by the instrument-sounds, to Vrindavan, and we can hear/see Radharani dancing, her ornaments sounding in rhythm with Krishna’s flute. The left side has a deep, hollow, bass sound. As its repeated *dhak dbak* or *gurgurgur* strikes, the heartbeat also pounds, as if in the excitement of seeing Radha-Krishna together.
Rodaway similarly says that auditory experiences are synchronous with the body’s biorhythms (1994, 91).

The *khol* rhythms taught by gurus are called *bols*. Govinda explained how different *bols*, as devotional embodiments, say different things to the deities. For instance, the *khol* might say, “I will only speak of Krishna,” “O hear how the flute plays,” or “Hail Radhe, Hail Krishna.” Advanced practitioners, he explained, are able to embody these words of subservience when they concentrate on the rhythms. Similarly, in Sinhalese Buddhist rituals drum-beats sound like spoken sentences (Becker 2004, 32). Jankowsky (2006, 389) also demonstrates that among sub-Saharan the Gumbri drum communicates with listeners like a speaking voice. Similarities can be observed in sonic conceptualizations across cultures, I argue, because music, albeit cultural, has sonic elements with affective generalities.

In similitude with *khol* rhythms, *kartals* play, and people clap. *Kartal* literally means “keeping rhythm with the hands,” which also refers to keeping count on the fingers while chanting. Just as there are 32 strings which tune the *khol*-sounds, the two *kartals* are divided into 32 portions, each of which has a tone aligned with the *khol*’s sounds. Govinda said, “Why do you think there are 32 possible sounds in *khol-kartal*? Because there are 32 syllables in the Hare Krishna chant. Keep chanting, and *khol-kartal* sounds will come from inside.”

My conversations with Govinda, our listening to *khol* together, his continuous reflection on sound, and our introspective ruminations convinced me that the Vaishnava sound-world is as much about internal as about external sounds. For a sustained period I was unable to concentrate on any other work. I was continuously counting chant on my fingers. I listened to *khol* records even before going to bed, and at times I felt that I could hear *khol* or anklet sounds just before going to or after waking from sleep. I discussed this with Govinda, who said it was typical for anyone who paid sincere attention to “sacred sounds.”

In a particular yogic posture called *bhamar asana* (honey-bee posture), one is supposed to pull in one’s breath and shut the eyes, ears, mouth and nose and create the repeated reverberation of the sound “mmm” inside. Beyond a point, the timbre echoes right in the chest cavity (see also Fillippi and Dahnhardt 2001, 355). I especially enjoyed practicing this *asana* while in college. In the Vaishnava discourse, pulling in the breath signifies shutting the body’s doors so that sonic-affective upsurge is introjected rather than let out (McDaniel 1995, 50–51).
Govinda drew the connection and said, “In our sonic philosophy, the sound ‘mmm’ apprehends the sense of dreamless sleep. When the honey-bee hums, it is the same nagging sound. Krishna, as honey-bee, comes to savor the interior space of the body-lotus, of a Vaishnava who has curbed her ego and let herself be submerged in divine sounds. This is possible through constant chanting in the *manas*. Krishna then breathes into the body and it sounds the *khol* in her body-Vrindavan. She hears the buzzing bee [gunngunngunngum] in the middle of the chest.” The metaphor of the bee is commonplace among Vaishnavas. Vrindavan’s maidens are repeatedly compared to flowers and buds, whose hearts, when steeped in honey/love, are cherished by Krishna, the black bee.

The sensory vibration of the bee-buzz has a monotonous insistence. It also has a calm, from within which shines forth the sense of clear perception, a mirror-like reflective quality. This grain-like clarified sensation is similar to the vibrating resonances of string instruments. Indeed, in *nada-yoga* (sonic meditation) traditions, “the word nada signifies the reverberating tone of vocal sound, especially the buzzing nasal sound with which the word AUM fades away” (Beck 1993, 82).

The body’s nasal “mmm” sound is replicated in a number of *khol* bols (*jhna, jhni, najhi, nako, jhini* etc.). These are also like heavy anklet-sounds. Musicians often complain of getting “lazy hands” after playing the *khol* for a long time. The sensation of the lazy hand, once again, has a sensory similitude with the nagging, grainy feeling of the “mmm,” and has a nasal name itself—*jh(n)i jh(n)i*. Similarly, cricket sounds are also called *jh(n)i jh(n)i* in Bengali. Govinda said that his guru asked his students not to stop playing the *khol* despite the tired, lazy sensation in the hands, since the exhaustion is a yogic blessing.

Nasal sounds are also said to echo in the body when a practitioner, with a straight spine, pulls up the breath via the central yogic nerve known as *shushumna*. When pulling up the breath the energy-centers are also pulled up. From the anus to the chest is, in the sonic-yogic imagination, the journey from silence to sounds. When the sounds finally travel from the middle of the eyebrows to the head, Vrindavan is said to manifest with its passion-acoustics in the “touch-hearing geography” (Rodaway 1994, 100).

Innate properties of sounds being linked to deeply felt cultural values is a widespread phenomenon. The Songhay, for instance, imagine high-pitched violin sounds as wailing cries, and the drum’s “clacks” in association with them as making ancestor-spirits present in the site

However, while I have been describing imaginings of the *khol*-in-the-body, the *khol* is also imagined to be the exact corporeal counterpart of the practitioner’s body. The interior space of the *khol*, in other words, is compared to the inner body-space. Thus, there is also a body-in-the-*khol*. Both are veiled-Vrindavans, waiting to be manifest to those with sensitive hearing. Govinda explained: “Like the *khol*, we have a small opening for breath in the nose; and just as our navel maintains bodily balance, the *khol’s* middle-portion is essential for sonic balance.’

The small black patch on the *khol’s* right side, musicians say, is Krishna’s embodiment, and the white patch on its left side, Radha’s. As the two are struck together, when Radha and Krishna are in erotic vibration, sounds overflow in the instrument’s affective body-space. A *khol* player living in Navadvip, who was around 86 years of age during my fieldwork and who had played the *khol* for 62 years, read a couplet to me from his notebook. It said, “A little air stays inside the *khol*. It breathes/chants Radha-Krishna all the time.” He explained, “Friction makes sound, and friction gives pleasure. As the *khol’s* edges shiver in sound, the couple vibrates in love.” Similarly, in the yogic discourse, the body, from the navel down, is the embodiment of feminine vitality, and upwards, of masculine energy. When breath connects the two, it sounds the desired love (Beck 1993, 101).

In the “intuitive imagery” of the “inner senses” (Csordas 1994, 89), the body’s energy-centers are imagined as lotuses. Each of these, Govinda explained, has its own distinctive sounds, and is assigned alphabetic characters with phonetic resemblance to those sounds. Which letters reside in which energy-center is a practitioner’s secret. However, when the practitioner-musician pulls up the breath and as the breath traverses the different *chakras*, the petals of the lotuses are supposed to blossom, and the sounds within reverberate. The *khol* is similarly imagined as divided into corresponding *chakras*, some below the middle portion (the navel) and some above. The same alphabet combinations can be played on the *khol* as *bols*. When a sensitive listener hears the repetitive *khol* rhythms, he is able to hear the same sounds within the body, rising ecstatically from the appropriate *chakras*. When the *khol* player, with intensely shut eyes, plays the instrument hung from his shoulders and leans his ears toward it, then the entire kinesthetics of striking the *khol* and shaking the body proves
that his *khol*-in-the-body and *khol*-on-the-body are entirely in sync. Sometimes the body sounds/hears the flute, sometimes anklets, ornaments, bees, drums, thunder, and so on. There are many more sounds, which no practitioner was willing to disclose.

Beck (1993, 91–97) similarly speaks about yogic traditions of subtle “mystical auditions” and an “esoteric physiology of sound,” through which the practitioner rises to higher levels of sonic perception. He says that what a musician plays externally and what he hears internally, that is, the link between instrumental sounds and sonic meditation, has not been studied (110). I hope to have partially filled in an ethnographic lacuna in this respect.

Govinda, indicating both the instrument- *khol* and body- *khol*, summarized, “Now I do no other *puja*. I only worship my *khol*, for it contains the essence of Vrindavan *lilas*. I drown myself in sounds, and the rest simply follows.”

Helmreich’s (2007) notion of “transductive ethnography” has been useful for me in thinking about the phenomenology of instrument sounds, sensitizing my ethnographic ear to the tactile in the sonic, to the bodily interior as a reverberator of sound, and rethinking the boundaries between external and internal soundscapes. In this case, however, the intimate “immersion” has been in the deep oceanic recesses of the body’s interior.

**Conclusion**

Devotees venerate every site of sacred-sonic utterance as *gupta* (veiled) Vrindavan, which manifests the transcendental place to them through cultures of attentive, embodied listening. While senses of sacred sound, music, and rhythm are discursively cultivated and conceptualized through Vaishnava discourses, they also intensely impact the body’s affective, visceral orientations. I have also argued that acoustic experiences and senses of place may be cultivated at the level of the musician’s inner sensate body. Thus, senses of sacred sound and place may be experienced as both external and internal to the devotee’s spiritually cultivated body and self.
This book has primarily tried to demonstrate that senses of (sacred) space and place may not be restricted to external physical geographies but also intensely experienced in internal states of the body, mind, and senses. Extending Edward Casey’s theorizations of being-in-place or body-in-place, I have shown how different groups of Bengal-Vaishnavas also experience their body-as-place, mind-as-place, and/or internal auditory sensibilities as apprehending senses of place. While both the anthropology of place and the anthropology of emotions, affect, and senses have been skeptical of theorizing interiorized experiences since they associate dimensions of interiority with disembodied ideas of consciousness and the mind, and therefore with paradigms of an autonomous, conscious, bounded subject, I have shown through different chapters how senses of place, in every instance, including when they are experienced in internal sites of the body or mind, are thoroughly embodied. I have also argued that the varied senses of place are both cultivated through discursive practices and affectively experienced at extra-subjective, ineffable, and visceral levels of breath, absorption, imagination, and sonic sensations. These affective experiences are often pre-conscious or supra-conscious and therefore overwhelm notions of a conscious subject. Also, senses of place, by being both external and internal to individuals, render the body’s and mind’s boundaries porous, that is, able to open toward senses of place both inward and outward, thus once again evading ideas of a bounded subject. My book therefore
brings together and seeks to contribute to the anthropology of place and anthropology of emotions/affect by foregrounding the importance of conceptualizing both embodied relations with physical geographies and interiorized experiences of place, since internal place-experiences may be not solely the prerogatives of a thinking mind but equally of embodied and affective sensations and sensibilities.

In concluding the book I now want to raise a different kind of question, the answer to which is deeply imbricated within my theorizations of place and emotions, although extending them further. Given the immense diversity of the devotional traditions and practices of the Bengal-Vaishnava groups I studied, a question I found myself asking during and after fieldwork was: What conditions of experience account for or constitute the simultaneous importance, popularity, and continuity of all these different Vaishnavisms? This question is a most general one, and all anthropologists of religion surely ask themselves versions of the same question, put most generally as: What fosters the persistence of religious traditions? This question obviously has different answers in different contexts, and I will think about this issue from the perspective of analyses I have already proposed in the book. Simply put, common to all Bengal-Vaishnava groups is a proliferative impulse which is embodied in and strengthened by their different philosophies and practices of place-experience and affective community formations. In other words, Bengal-Vaishnava practices render efficacious certain characteristics of place-experience and community ethics which are ideal for the proliferation of Vaishnava religion. Interiorized states of experiencing place and community support this proliferative tendency. Interiorized experiences, I argue therefore, are not only about solitary states, as commonly imagined, but are social practices indispensable for the continuity of Bengal-Vaishnavism. Although different Vaishnava gurus appeal to different kinds of devotees, and despite the stark differences in their religious practices, in concluding, I am more interested in their similarity: their capacity to disseminate themselves.

I have argued in the book that all Bengal-Vaishnavas have three parallel senses of place: the sacred physical landscape of Navadvip-Mayapur in which they reside, and which supports a thriving pilgrimage industry; their imagining of celestial Vrindavan as the desired after-life destination; and the varied religious practices which help them locate their senses of space in affective capacities of their imagination, body, sonic sensibilities, or physical sites where they render devotional services. A major implication that follows from this is that senses of place are
essentially creative: they may be fixed in external geography but also capable of mobility. Thus, a *goswami*’s or *babaji*’s sense of Vrindavan travels with him in his imagination; a *sahajiya*’s sense of place travels with her in her body; an ISKCON devotee experiences the pleasures of serving Vrindavan wherever she renders her devotional service; and all Bengal-Vaishnavas experience Vrindavan’s spiritual/sonic bliss in the sites of their musical performances.

Therefore, while Casey (1993, 306) invokes the concept of “de-liter-alization” to argue that one may journey while fixed in a single place, I am also arguing that one may carry the same place with oneself while journeying. Places acquire their capacity of mobility especially when interiorized in the devotee’s mind or body, that is, when the devotee experiences the mind-as-place, body-as-place, and so on. This dimension of mobility in senses of place is in turn particularly suitable for the spread of religion, through mobility’s intrinsic feature of geographical expansion. Inherent in Bengal-Vaishnava senses of place, therefore, are their multiplicities, that is, their potential to reproduce themselves infinitely. Thus, any Vaishnava guru, whether a *goswami*, *babaji*, *sahajiya*, or ISKCON devotee, can offer his potential disciples and teach the existing ones techniques through which they can experience the sacred place wherever and whenever they wish. Irrespective of whether a devotee is in Navadvip, Vrindavan, Chennai, or Boston, therefore, he is guaranteed the most sensuous experience of Radha-Krishna’s divine abode, and his own spiritual self emplaced there. This convenience of the mobile place-experience and its expansive spirit, I argue, ensure continued membership in the religion, or the experiential basis for every devotee to belong to an age-long devotional tradition, and the religion’s geographical spread, since people potentially from all over the world are able to embody its central principle of emplacing and experiencing oneself in the deities’ abode.

In conceptualizing the interiorized dimensions of place-experience I have been influenced by Gaston Bachelard (1994) in two related ways. The first, about which I have written in the introduction, follows from Bachelard’s argument that one can apprehend senses of place in spaces interior to oneself, especially in one’s imagination. The second is his related idea of a layered geography: a closed sense of place opening up from within itself to a larger sense of space/place. He suggests that the more one drowns in the deep intimate spaces of one’s interiorized self, the greater is one’s ability to apprehend “the large that extends beyond all limits” (ix, 205). He identifies in these “personal cosmoses”
(viii) the dialectic of the intimate and immense, within and without (xxxviii). The immensity of space, in other words, manifests itself as “inner immensity” (185) in the individual’s “inner space” (205). Also, as Bachelard says, “Associated with the immensity within us are aspects of the sacred and depth” (186). I find Bachelard’s theory of “intimate immensity” particularly useful in analyzing Vaishnavas’ conceptualizations and experiences of interiorized place—but with a difference.

For Bachelard, all place-experiences remain confined to the interior spaces of the solitary subject. I argue, however, that Bengal-Vaishnavas’ place-experiences, even when interiorized in the devotee’s mind or body, engender the capacity for sociality, without which community formation would not be possible. This capacity for sociality, in turn, is made possible by being oriented toward two kinds of others: the deities in the celestial place, and other devotees of the community. In both cases of being oriented toward the other, the notion of the bounded, self-contained, sovereign subject is destabilized. Thus, interiorized experiences, rather than remaining only the abstract mental processes of an autonomous subject, as the anthropology of place and affect have criticized, in this case also become the basis of embodied, affective, and intersubjective relations with others. Similarly, Csordas (1994, 158; 2004) summarizes the basic kernel of religion, the characteristic feature which ensures its persistence, as the “preobjective sense of alterity,” the sense of otherness which is the ground both for the self’s “indeterminacy and for the possibility of an intersubjective relationship” (157). Robbins (2006, 287), similarly, in suggesting what anthropology can gain from theology, identifies theology’s main functions as evoking a proper idea of otherness and writing in a “community building idiom.”

All Bengal-Vaishnavas, through their different religious practices, aim to cultivate intensely emotional relationships with, get glimpses of, hear, or serve, that is, sensually emplace themselves in, Radha-Krishna’s celestial abode, Vrindavan. From within their most “intimate” visceral domains, therefore, they claim to understand and experience the cosmic “immensity,” the divine place of sensuous bliss. Thus, Bengal-Vaishnavism offers the unique devotional possibility of devotees’ carrying the sense of their after-life destination with them. In their varied senses of place devotees are thereby always already oriented toward others: toward Radha-Krishna and an-other place, different from the one they are in, yet one they learn to understand, experience, and emplace themselves in through their present lives’ practices of imagination, devotional service, sexual heightening, and/or musical ecstasies.
In popular understandings of Hinduism, it is monistic yogis who best characterize interiorized experiences in meditation. Through meditation they aim to realize the supreme almighty in themselves, and all the rest of the world as an illusion (*maya*). But Bengal-Vaishnavas are dualists and realists. They emphasize the difference of deities from themselves, and the reality of both the celestial place in which deities reside, and the immediacy of their pleasurable present-life experiences. Thus, even through interiorized spiritual experiences in their bodies and minds, they claim to apprehend an-other place, outside themselves. That is what gives them the sense of soteriological certitude, of knowing their death and their after-life, and not fearing but loving it.

However, of greater anthropological interest are the myriad social, intersubjective relationships among members of the community engendered through Vaishnavas’ varied spatial practices. Like mobile place-experiences, the possibilities of different kinds of collective participation and empathic senses of community they generate, I argue, underwrite the proliferative impulse of Bengal-Vaishnavism. Also, every Vaishnava group, in its own distinctive way, offers devotees the most embodied ways of realizing their spiritual selves in relation to the deities and other devotees. Both the dimensions of pleasurable devotion and conditions of collective embodiment have tremendous popular appeal and lead to devotees’ sustained involvement in the Bengal-Vaishnava traditions. Indeed, the strong emotional and affective religiosities of *bhakti* traditions in general are prime reasons for their high status among the majority of Hindu devotees. I have also shown through the different chapters that all Vaishnavas emphasize the importance of cultivating ego-effaced subservience toward the Vrindavan deities, and subservience as a general virtue also ensures commitment to the continuing fabric of religion.

The interfaces of place-experience and community building as factors contributing to the perpetuation of Bengal-Vaishnava religious traditions are effectuated in highly complex ways. Among the many ways of constructing and experiencing place discussed in the various chapters, it is relatively easier to understand how pilgrimage practices, ISKCON’s devotionalism, and musical traditions facilitate community sentiments. Pilgrimage in the Navadvip-Mayapur region is a collective act, not simply because pilgrim-devotees come in groups but also because their pilgrimage experiences and also resident practitioners’ ways of emotionally relating to the sacred landscape are structured according to contested routes which reflect the collective sentiments and mutual conflicts of individual Vaishnava groups. I argued in chapter 2
Final

that Nadia’s consecrated landscape embodies the differentiated community identities of all the religious practitioners who claim it. Nadia’s physical landscape is therefore a congealed embodiment of collective sentiments.

The essence of *kirtan* also lies in its collective appeal, in the communal occasions of musical chanting and narrative music remembering the deities’ love-acts in Vrindavan. Collective musical occasions are generally effective in creating intersubjective, participatory communion (Burrows 1980, 242–43; Edelman 2009, 44). Such “acoustemologies” (Feld 1996, 91) give a sense of deindividuation, and affective and corporeal oneness with others (Cohen 1995, 444). Thus, *kirtan* is popularly known as *sankirtan*: collective singing. Its massive popularity throughout Bengal is precisely due to the inevitable collective ecstasy it spreads among devotee-singers and listeners. I showed in chapter 6 that during these performances devotee-listeners have similar bodily reactions to the collective music and rhythms, which they identify as intensely sensuous experiences of the divine place. McDaniel (1995, 42) says similarly about Bengali devotional traditions that religious ecstasies sensitize waves of intense emotions (*bhavatāranga*) across crowds. Thus, Vaishnava musical traditions also facilitate senses of empathic, participatory communion and affective connectivity among sensitive listeners.

ISKCON devotees similarly define themselves as *goshthanandi*: those who derive pleasure/happiness from serving in and toward the community. I showed in chapter 5 that ISKCON devotees promulgate a Vaishnava ethic based on collective devotional service (*seva*) toward Mayapur and its people. Thus, it has been successful in employing members of the global society in the common spiritual purpose of serving the temple and its adjoining areas in Mayapur. Indeed, ISKCON devotees venerate every physical site where they render collective services as Vrindavan. Thus, ISKCON’s philosophy also productively engages ideas of place-experience and community ethics.

It is relatively more difficult to understand how the solitary interiorized practices of *goswamis*’ and *babajis’* imagination, or *sahajiyas*’ sexual rituals, engender notions of the community. I argue, however, that not only do both householders and renouncers live in community structures to carry out their religious practices, but more importantly, that the practices themselves facilitate community formation. In other words, I argue that Bengal-Vaishnavas exemplify unique religious states wherein interiorized experiences of the mind and body are oriented toward others in the community, and therefore are essential for
fostering senses of collectivity. So, while Cook (2010b) argues that Thai Buddhist meditative practice, rather than being an asocial activity, generates interiorized realizations of religion which translate into different kinds of social action and community relationships, Bengal-Vaishnava practices of interiority not only translate into social relationships in the external world but have ways of relating to others that are contained within the religious experiences themselves.

Imagination would ordinarily be understood as the epitome of a solitary, abstract, mental act. But in case of goswamis and babajis, it is a thoroughly social activity. This is significantly but not only because the techniques and content of imagination are learned, and its effects understood, through rigorous training received from gurus. The community of practice, including the guru and his other disciples, is itself also internalized in the practitioner’s imagination. Thus, every practitioner follows a script of imagination which defines his role in relation to others in his guru-lineage. As I showed in chapter 3, every member of the guru-lineage has a place in his imagination such that, when his mind-as-place is manifest as Vrindavan, then the practitioner, in his imagination, along with all others, assists the guru in serving Radha-Krishna. Thus, the practitioner is bound in reciprocal relations with his guru and others in the community. This reciprocity is necessary for the continued importance of the script, imagination, service to Vrindavan, and therefore Vaishnavism. In being necessarily oriented toward others in their imagination, goswamis’ and babajis’ sense of place intensifies their community spirit. Their spiritual selves and therefore their religion will not be sustained unless they are in a relation of chained subservience to others holding crucial positions in their imagination. My analysis concurs with that of Mittermaier (2011, 3–5), who argues that dreams/imagination, insofar as they relate to the other/divine, are not self-consumed subjective spaces but interrelational ones capable of constructing senses of community.

Sahajiyas’ interiorized senses of the body-as-place are also oriented toward others and establish community sentiments. Sahajiyas’ cosmology, which highlights the importance of breathing routines, ingestion rituals, and sexual pleasure, relates to the body’s interior affective capacities. Sahajiyas conceptualize each of these experiential conditions as embodying dialectics of the self and world, inside and outside. Breathing for instance is the most immediate visceral experience which connects the individual to the space outside, the self to the universe. Similarly, I showed in chapter 4 that sahajiyas interpret their ingestion of excreta as
internalizing the sense of every human being’s essential corporeal same-
ess. In other words, they say that since excreta constitute every person’s
elemental constitution, ingesting excreta is the most immediate way of
internalizing the other within the self. Sahajiyas also exchange body
fluids among themselves in an intersubjective sphere. I have discussed
various occasions of such exchange: partners exchanging their urine,
the man consuming the woman’s menstrual blood and sexual fluid, and
the woman consuming his semen. Similarly, the female adept performs
ritual sex with the guru in the presence of her partner, and both the
male and female practitioners then taste the guru’s semen or its mixture
with the woman’s sexual fluid. Similar exchanges follow when partners
have ritual sex. Some sahajiyas also mentioned a secret communal ritual
known as chakra-seva, where a man and woman are dressed and wor-
shipped as Krishna and Radha, respectively, and hinted thereafter at
communal ingestion practices. In some cases, when the sahaja woman
reaches menopause, she and her partner borrow menstrual blood for
ingestion from younger sahajiya women in their community.

On all these diverse occasions, exchanging body fluids becomes
the most immediate way of establishing affective connectivity, or
what Gregory (2011) calls “skinship,” with others in the community.
Sahajiyas’ basic understanding is that since the elemental constitution
of all beings is the same, the experience of Vrindavan’s pleasures in the
body is essentially shared and collective. In a similar analysis, Irigaray
(1992, 59, cited in Casey 1998, 325) theorizes the woman’s body-
as-place, which in its capacity to take in or internalize another is always
open toward the other. As in goswamis’ and babajis’ practices, there-
fore, it is sahajiyas’ practices pertaining to the affective interiors of the
body which propel communitarian ethics.

Bengal-Vaishnavas’ philosophies and practices of place-experience
and community formation have a similarity: they are characterized by
infinite reproducibility. Vaishnavas embody a mobile sense of place, that
is, the potential to apprehend and experience themselves as emplaced in
Vrindavan, whenever and wherever they wish. I therefore concur with
Stewart (2010, 273–316, 2011), who demonstrates through a historical
analysis of Bengal-Vaishnava theology that Bengal-Vaishnavism has a
“self-replicating” mechanism such that it reproduces and perpetuates
notions of the cosmic place and community through continuously flex-
ible and expanding structures.

Similarly, the basic tenet of Bengal-Vaishnava philosophy is that all
human beings, in essence, are Radha-Krishna’s servants. This serves as
the most significant rationale for all Vaishnavas’ preaching exercises. For instance, ISKCON preaches “Krishna Consciousness” on a large international scale, and all ISKCON devotees say that their main aim is to make everyone realize their eternal relationship of servitude to Krishna.

Similarly, goswamis and babajis cultivate their imagination according to a pre-given script which is marked by intrinsic creativity and proliferation. Thus, every devotee is assigned by his guru a particular position in a pictorial chart representing Vrindavan. This picture/Vrindavan is imagined as a lotus flower, and all devotees are placed in its sub-petals. However, this chart is imagined as always incomplete, with the potential to incorporate more people in its sub-petals, since all human beings are imagined to have a location in it, that is, in relation to Radha-Krishna, who occupy the central petal. This implies that there is potentially no limit to how many people can be initiated into goswamis’ and babajis’ kind of Vaishnavism. Thus, their practices of imagination have an essentially expansive spirit. Also, every devotee’s position in the pictorial chart is permanent—that is, every devotee of the particular guru-lineage retains his importance in the script, unaffected by his physical death. Each member of the community continues to hold permanent relevance in the spiritual imaginations of other community practitioners, since they are all linked in relations of prescribed, chained subservience to the guru-lineage. There is therefore a long-standing intersubjective relationship of a very different kind among goswamis and babajis.

Sahajiyas similarly conceptualize their ingestion and sexual practices as understanding the corporeal sameness of all beings. Theirs is a notion of a transcendental community, where practitioners relate to each other and can potentially relate to as many others as possible, through universal, visceral dimensions of physical bodies: breath, body fluids, and sexual relationships. Thus, sahajiya religiosity has the capacity to connect with the largest possible numbers on the basis of the most elemental experiences. However, while I agree with Hirschkind (2006) that religious traditions perpetuate themselves through devotees’ cultivation of bodily, visceral substrates, I have shown throughout the book that Bengal-Vaishnava experiences are both cultivated and affectively sensed.

I began this conclusion with a most general question: What conditions of experience enable the persistence of the very diverse Bengal-Vaishnava traditions? I have tried to suggest two answers emanating from my ethnography. Although these answers may sound too general,
my observations pertain only to the continuity of Bengal-Vaishnavism, a religion with utmost popular appeal across a wide geographical region. I have tried to understand the central logics of Bengal-Vaishnava discursive practices, and imagine what far-reaching consequences they may have in contributing to the religion’s longevity.

I argue that the main factor contributing to the religion’s continuity and massive appeal, now even internationally through ISKCON, is its expansive spirit. I have identified two factors facilitating this proliferative tendency: the symbolic itinerancy in senses of place, that is, practitioners’ capacity to embody mobile place-experiences, which lead to the religion’s geographical spread; and a zeal toward community formation, which leads to the religion’s popular appeal.

Finally, I have discussed that the anthropology of place and affect have largely been critical of studying interiorized experiences of place, arguing that notions of interiority are predisposed toward Cartesian dualism, especially with respect to the mind and consciousness, and are therefore both disembodied and self-contained or subjectivist. While I have demonstrated throughout the book that interiorized experiences of place may equally be most embodied and affective, I have argued in concluding the book that all Bengal-Vaishnavas, including those whose practices pertain to the mind’s or body’s interior, also embody and highlight notions of sociality or communitarian empathy. In fact, I have argued that their intersubjective community sentiments and affective sympathies derive force from their practices of interiority. Thus, the mind’s or body’s inside opens itself to the outside, the self to the community, and senses of place apprehend the sense of cosmic space: celestial Vrindavan.