Building hype: the musicking body in university bhangra

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BUILDING HYPE:
THE MUSICKING BODY IN UNIVERSITY BHANGRA

by

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ABSTRACT
This thesis explores questions of identity and the body in performance in collegiate competitive bhangra, a South Asian diasporic popular dance form, through the analytical frameworks of hype and the musicking body. I explore the relatively recent shift of bhangra from a club scene to a college-level, competitive context in order to understand the ways in which this contemporary bhangra still offers participants a meaningful expression of South Asian identity, when the context in which the music is produced and consumed seems to have changed dramatically from the original context in which the genre emerged as a popular cultural form in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. I analyze the way in which hype, an intangible element of contemporary bhangra that is essential for successful performance, is built up and maintained through the embodied practices of the co-producers of bhangra.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“The faster you go, the hotter it looks,” Maya said, watching the team from the front of their makeshift practice area, urging them to perform with more intensity. A team member responded sarcastically, “Okay Maya, a’ight.” It was late on the night before the competition, and they were squeezing in some practice time before they would go and get some sleep. At the tech rehearsal the next morning, the captains both brought up the subject of this intensity again. Maya told the team about how she collapsed after the performance at a previous competition, implicitly offering herself as a model for what it means to perform bhangra to its fullest extent: to perform with such intensity that you are on the verge of collapsing. Gurteg (“G”), the other captain, reaffirmed this message by assuring them that someone would carry them off of the stage if they collapsed.

And G was right. I watched their competition performance from the wings of the stage, and as soon as the lights dimmed, I saw him running off the stage with Maya in his arms, breathing heavily. Backstage, her teammates offered her water and fanned her, and she recovered after a few minutes.

As an outsider trying to understand bhangra, this scene troubled me. Anyone who sees a performance of bhangra will no doubt be impressed by the physical requirements of the dance: a dancer is always in motion, bouncing at every beat, moving quickly from

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1 “A’ight” is slang for “all right.”
2 For a list of transcription conventions, see Appendix.
position to position. But Maya is a formally trained dancer and is in great shape—to bring her to this point, she must be pushing herself really hard. *Why?*

I returned to a word that kept coming up in my interviews prior to the competition: *hype*. Various members of the team had used the word “hype” as a positive, intangible element of bhangra performance, a sort of collective energy that was highly valued and desired. I had a vague understanding of the term in the context of the interviews, informed by my own experiences as a performer and audience member. But it was not until this competition that I realized the significance of hype for these performers, and that there is a threshold: a point where the exertion needed to create this hype can even push performers past a threshold, to the point of pain.

This research explores questions of identity and the body in performance in collegiate competitive bhangra, a South Asian diasporic popular dance form, through the analytical frameworks of hype and the musicking body. At the onset of this research project, my goal was to explore the relatively recent shift of bhangra from a club scene to a college-level, competitive context. I aimed to understand the ways in which this contemporary bhangra still offered participants a meaningful expression of South Asian identity, when the context in which the music is produced and consumed seems to have changed dramatically from the original context in which the genre emerged as a popular cultural form in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. This question is not necessarily less significant now, but, as researchers, we are often confronted with ideas and questions that eclipse our preconceived notions of what will be important. In my case, it was the visceral panic and concern for an interlocutor and friend, who had the dramatic collapse
in the anecdote above, that drove me to address issues beyond the expression of an ethnic identity. In this thesis, based on ethnographic research with a bhangra team over the course of the 2013-2014 academic year, I will seek to understand the aforementioned “hype”—how is it built up and maintained, and why? In what ways does hype engage the body, and how does this promote a particular way of being in the world, musically and socially?

My purpose is not to ascribe a singular, overarching answer to these questions as they pertain to the performance of bhangra and performers’ expression of identity. Instead, I recognize the team I have worked with as a complex community of individuals who have different beliefs, values, and relationships. Bhangra, as a common activity, provides dancers with a particular set of semiotic, kinetic, and affective resources that they can draw on to incorporate bhangra, in different ways, into their individual and collective social worlds. In the following chapters, I will explore individuals’ access to and use of these resources to establish an identity through which the performance of bhangra becomes meaningful, and examine those meanings through a close look at the key word “hype.”

I will begin this opening chapter with a brief introduction to the tradition of bhangra as it has moved among the South Asian diaspora, followed by a background of the team that I conducted my research alongside. Next, I will outline the framework I will be establishing to answer the above research questions, which will provide the reader with a context for the analysis contained within this thesis. Finally, I will describe my research methodology and its implications for this research.
A brief background of bhangra

“Bhangra,” as we know it in its contemporary context, is a South Asian diasporic dance form rooted in a folk dance form originating in the Punjab region of Northern India. Performances were acoustic, centered around the beat created by the dhol, a double-headed drum, Punjabi immigrants brought the genre to the U.K. in the 1950s and 1960s, where performances were common at social functions such as weddings and religious celebrations. In the late 1970s, bhangra groups began altering their performances through the use of sampling, drum machines, and synthesizers. Groups began incorporating other genres into the form of bhangra, such as reggae, hip-hop, and techno, the popular genres of other diasporic groups in the U.K.. These changes made bhangra immensely popular for British-born South Asians, not just those who identified as Punjabi. According to sociologist Sunaina Maira, this hybrid genre offered an Asian identity as a “possible racial location,” albeit one that is closely tied with the racial category “Black,” part of a political and symbolic unity between Afro-Caribbean and Asian peoples in the particular context of the racial politics in the U.K. at this time (Maira 2002: 76, Sharma 1996: 39). Cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes that this unity was not without its costs: the label “Black” had the effect of erasing the specific experiences of Asian people:

The question of Black, in Britain…has its silences. It had a certain way of silencing the very specific experiences of Asian people. Because though Asian people could identify, politically, in the struggle against racism, when they came to using their own culture as the resources of resistance, when they wanted to write out of their own experience and reflect on their
position, when they wanted to create, they naturally created within the histories of the languages, the cultural tradition, the positions of people who came from a variety of different historical backgrounds. (1991: 56)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, bhangra was spreading across the major urban centers of the South Asian diaspora, such as Toronto, Vancouver, and New York. Competitive collegiate bhangra, which is the main focus of my research, developed mainly in the United States and Canada, where such an affiliation with “Black” or “blackness” did not exist for the South Asian/American community. Despite referring to the South Asian diaspora as one unit, it must be made clear that these experiences are located within completely different historical, political, and economic contexts (Gopinath, 1995: 307, Maira 2002: 77).

Research on bhangra in these diasporic communities in the late 1990s characterized the social context of bhangra as predominantly a club party scene, where an audience of primarily ethnically South Asian men and women, college-aged and young professionals, came together to perform and dance bhangra. Maira suggests that this “party” or “remix culture” (referring to the practice of remixing various styles of music to incorporate them into bhangra) is one created by and for South Asian youth, or “desis” (Maira 2002: 29). In these communities, bhangra took on different sonic and visual aesthetics rooted in the tastes and trends of those locales, such as New York and Chicago.

While these elements of performance vary, such as dress and the addition of particular genres, “bhangra” still identifies a genre of music and dance with some common

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3 “Desi” is a term to denote those native to South Asia, but the younger generations have taken to using the term to denote anyone of South Asian heritage. In my field research, “desi” was rarely used, and I was told that it is almost never used in the bhangra scene.
characteristics, including a rootedness in dhol rhythmic patterns, the addition of other popular genres, and aspects of South Asian material culture. It must be understood as both situated within a particular local context but also across these contexts, as a transnational form (Gopinath 1995: 307).

Within the past ten or fifteen years, a new context for bhangra has begun to emerge: college campuses in the United States. Though the demographic is somewhat similar to the “party scene,” it is easy to see that this is a very different expression of the form. Campus bhangra teams set “folk” choreographic repertoire, drawn from the Punjabi dance form, to a mix created by remixing (referred to only as “mixing”) Punjabi bhangra music, Hindi film music, American hip hop, and other dance music genres. Teams largely structure their performance for South Asian dance competitions, sometimes solely for bhangra, where dance teams are judged against one another based on predetermined criteria.

Bhangra Teams’ Forum (bhangrateamsforum.com), an internet forum for these teams to communicate, such as to share mixes, have discussions related to specific teams or competitions, etc., lists approximately 160 competitive bhangra teams (though some may be inactive), almost all of which are from the United States and Canada.4 There are a few major competitions for Bhangra each year, primarily during the school year, due to the prevalence of academic teams (though there are also a fair number of “independent” teams, not affiliated with universities). While many competitions are hosted by university teams, there are some high-profile, professionally-produced competitions with major

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4 Though the list is not exhaustive, it provides the most complete list of competitive teams that I have found. It is regularly used by some members of BU Bhangra.
sponsors, such as the Elite 8 Bhangra Invitational and Bhangra Blowout. The competitions within North America are for North American teams: the judging is set up for the style of performance that has been cultivated there.

My research subject, Boston University Bhangra ("BU Bhangra"), is a co-ed collegiate dance group founded at Boston University in 1999. At the time of this research, the team consisted of 15 auditioned members (although an additional member was later brought in for one performance). 12 of the members dance in competitive performance, with the other 3 serving as "alternates," who dance at rehearsals and learn the same routine. They hold auditions at the beginning of the academic year, through which the current student executive board ("e-board") decides on the new members to be admitted to the team. All current team members identify as second or third generation South Asians, and few claim Punjabi descent. It is important to note here that membership is not limited to those who identify as South Asian, though with the exception of myself, there were no non-South Asian students among the forty some who auditioned for membership this year.

Analytical Framework

The musicking body

The tensions embedded in “hype,” as discussed in the episode presented at the beginning of this chapter, are tensions that ultimately only become clear when expressed through the body. The body becomes the medium for the performance and reception of bhangra. The body becomes an active site for the negotiation of the ideas surrounding the
performance of bhangra. The discourse around exertion, leading up to Maya’s actual collapse during the performance, are evidence of this process in action. Though my initial framework privileged “social” concerns over kinesthetic movement in order to embed bhangra within social experience, it soon became obvious that the two were not separable. It therefore becomes necessary to create a framework for understanding this the ways in which ideas and the body are brought together to create meaningful social experience—and in some idealized moments, to create hype. In order to bring together these ethnographically grounded insights, I will draw upon the analytical lens of the “musicking body.”

In his book *Musicking Bodies: Gesture and Voice in Hindustani Music*, ethnomusicologist Matthew Rahaim articulates what he calls the *musicking body*, expressed simply as “a trained body in action, engaged mindfully in singing and/or playing an instrument” (2012: 2). This body is apparent when, for instance, a singer begins to sing. She adopts a particular posture and moves her body—her tongue, the muscles in her throat, her arms—in particular ways. This body is taught, trained, and practiced.

Rahaim takes the view that gesture and voice in Hindustani vocal practice cannot be considered separate from one another. He notes that though it is tempting to consider sound (and in particular, the voice) as something transcendent, it cannot be considered separate from the body: the production of sound requires motion and engagement. The perception of this sound/body divide has been furthered by developments such as scientific acoustics and the prevalence of sound recordings (2012: 88).
His conception of the musicking body relies on ethnomusicologist Christopher Small’s reworking of the verb “to musick,” which shifts the focus away from “music” as a reified sonic entity towards “musicking” as a meaningful, social process (1998: 9). Should “music” be considered simply the sonic product of performance, it implicitly marks the sound and performance as analytically separable. Small takes the view that all practices involved in the production of sound is inexorably linked to sound—that one cannot be considered without the other. Rahaim’s focus on the body in motion, engaged in performance, requires an understanding of music as first and foremost a dynamic and socially embodied process.

I find Rahaim’s musicking body to be an extremely useful perspective, especially so in the case of bhangra, a dance genre. Of course, his use was limited to the body in vocal performance—my own employment of the term will require an expansion of his ideas. Why use the “musicking body” at all, and not something like the “dancing body” to discuss bhangra? As I hope to illustrate throughout the course of this thesis, the performance of dance requires an embodiment of the music. The dancers memorize the music, internalize the beat, and move their bodies in particular ways to mediate successful performance. To what extent are these activities different from a “vocalist” or “instrumentalist”? A focus on the practices of the musicking body encompasses these categorizations which are arbitrarily based on preconceived notions of performance genres. Though dancers are not producing “music” in a traditional sense, I take

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5 Rahaim is careful to point out that while Small’s definition necessarily includes audience in musicking, he separates what David Cavicchi (2011) considers “audiencing,” engaging in the consumption of music, for the purposes of his book. I will do the same here.
“musicking” broadly, and consider dance as an equally significant performance practice and expressive culture involving sound and body.

In this thesis, I will analyze the practices of the musicking body through three, interrelated domains: the sonic, the material, and the social. These domains consist of the practices of the individual body interacting with the world around it, as well as the ideas, meanings, and values that relate to those interactions.

The sonic domain

This domain consists of the ways in which the body is positioned within the world sonically. Consider Small’s definition of musicking: this domain does not consist simply of musical sound, but the process of creating contextually-meaningful “musical experience” and therefore involves more than the general understanding of “music” as production.6 Embedded in this domain are the ways in which the body relates to sound, as well as understanding of the ways in which other bodies relate to sound. What sounds are meaningful, and does that meaning shape the body in particular ways? If so, how? How to producers express an understanding of sound?

In competitive bhangra, dancers move their bodies in time with the beats of the mix in order to create engage the audience in particular ways. In collaboration with a DJ, teams create “sets,” the particular choreography as set to a mix. The DJ, then, creates his or her mix with the body of the performer in mind. While perhaps not explicitly imagining choreography to fit with song choices and particular beats, he or she still

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6 “Meaningful” refers to musical experience that provides an affective fulfillment for the participants.
considers that bodies will be moving to the mix in particular ways. I will explore this sound-body relationship with particular attention to the DJ’s creative role in the production of bhangra in chapter 2.

The material domain

The material domain includes those ways in which elements of material culture are paired with the body to create significant musical experiences. This domain highlights the ways in which objects, such as props and costumes, are brought into performance for specific purposes. Such decisions can even have the effect of limiting movement, enhancing aesthetic effects, and providing social significance to the body. Though these objects are non-human, they are brought to life when they are united with bodies in performance. Ethnomusicologist Eliot Bates, argues for an approach that seriously considers the roles that objects, specifically musical instruments, factor into musical experience:

…I argue for taking objects…seriously—but not simply as things that humans use or make or exchange, or as passive artifacts from which sound emanates. Much of the power, mystique, and allure of musical instruments, I argue, is inextricable from the myriad situations where instruments are entangled in webs of complex relationships…I thus am arguing for the study of the social life of musical instruments. (2012: 364)

Bates cautions that this is not meant to fetishize objects, but rather to continue the ways in which humans relate to them: the ways in which they fit into the social structures of musical performance (2012: 388).

In bhangra performances with full costume, drawn from the folk practice of Punjab, dancers spend hours preparing their costumes in specific ways which can
symbolically indicate to the audience (and judges) that elements of the “traditional” dance are meaningful to these contemporary performers. How does the material culture of bhangra, such as costuming and props, come to have significance in musical performance? Does this culture merely bear the markers of “tradition,” or can it come to act as an agent in shaping performance? How do these materials relate with the other, immaterial aspects of bhangra?

The social domain

The social domain of the musicking body explores the way in which bodies interact with one another in musical experience. This domain is an obvious departure from Rahaim’s use of the term, which centers the approach on the individual’s body.\(^7\) I suspect that this focus on the individual is a result of his choice of study, Hindustani vocalists. I will pay particular attention to two parameters in analyzing the social domain, kinesthetic and discursive.

In the case of bhangra, a coordinated group dance, a study of a single body in isolation would be all-but impossible. To have a successful performance, bhangra performers must be aware of one another’s bodies. A dancer’s movements are meant to appear virtually identical to others for most of the set. For instance, one jump should be just as high as another’s, even if that is not the dancer’s maximum height. This perception is one that is trained and practiced. What are the practices of the musicking body that

\(^7\) Rahaim does not completely view the body in isolation, however: he also explores the *paramparic body*, the body as it is learned, passed down from teacher to student, though this concept is unrelated to my point here (2012: 107).
orient it to other bodies? How are those bodies put in relation to one another by these practices?

But this domain is not limited to kinesthetic sense. Within bhangra rehearsals, dancers are constantly talking with one another. Some of this usage is pragmatic, as we might expect. Language is necessary to communicate technical details of moves, fix mistakes, and discuss performance logistics. Of course, talk is certainly not limited to these concerns. When the music stops, the laughter starts. While several of the team members have formed close friendships with one another, at each break in rehearsal, almost all members engage in what I call chat in small groups of three to four members. This chat is informal and unstructured, full of interruptions and joking. Topics range, but are typically centered on narratives of daily life.

To what extent can chat be located within musicking? Further, how can this be considered an activity of the engaged musicking body? At a bhangra rehearsal, it is possible to observe the body becoming “engaged” as the dancers begin to warm up and stretch. Following Rahaim’s conception, the body is fully engaged when rehearsing with music. But what happens when the dancers stop to take a break? They immediate begin talking. Instead of saying that the body is disengaged during these types of interaction, I argue the opposite: that socializing is an activity of the musicking body, just as is dancing, and that this social life is a meaningful part of musical experience.

Though separated in this thesis for the purpose of analysis, I will strive to make it clear throughout that these domains are not treated as separable by performers. As will be
clear even from this brief introduction, there are many ways in which these domains overlap one another, and I suggest that these points of overlap are useful sites for investigating some of the underlying social and aesthetic logic of performance. Successful, affective performance of bhangra requires performers to engage the musicking body through actions across these three domains.

One potential outcome of successful performance is this elusive “hype,” a palpable energy that is to be created and maintained by performers and audience cuts across these domains to acquire both tangible effects and significance. Hype is built and enhanced by many factors, including the volume of the mix and the intensity of the steps, the aesthetic of performance such as costumes and lighting, and the connection among the team. With a focus on hype as a goal of performance, I will therefore be able to better understand the underlying logic that informs the team’s decision-making processes as it pertains to the musicking body.

**Styling identities**

With an understanding of social practices as bodily practices, a more comprehensive framework is necessary to understand a key question: how does competitive bhangra remain a useful expression of South Asian identity today, when the stakes have changed so dramatically from its original context in the U.K., wherein bhangra was a part of the performance of an identity that subverted mainstream whiteness? It is necessary at this point to be clear about what I mean when I use the term “identity,” as the word has a multitude of definitions that we slide through in daily usage.
Identity, as I will use it, is not a singular or static property of a person, but is situationally constructed. Following sociocultural linguist Mary Bucholtz’ assertion that identities are contextual and relational, individuals are actively engaged in “doing” identities rather than “being” exclusive members of specific groups (2011: 7). How is this done?

Practice theory holds the view that the social world can be understood most clearly as a set of practices, social acts. For sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the dispositions that influence ways of understanding and living in the world created through practice are known as “habitus.” Habitus informs, and is in turn informed by, practice (1977: 17). Drawing on this theory, Bucholtz articulates the “community of practice” framework, which seeks to understand how culturally-shared resources, including language, are used by social actors to perform particular identities. This model recognizes language use as one of many social practices (1999: 208). These social practices offer actors semiotic resources, indexically tied to relevant social markers, that can be combined to display a particular kind of identity. Bucholtz considers these to be “stylistic identities,” though her use of “styles” in a Californian high school can sometimes be as essentializing as the static identities she seeks to replace (2011: 11). Instead, I will use “styling” to emphasize the often creative work that goes into this identity work in the collegiate bhangra scene.

The community of practice model recognizes a multitude of social actions that offer semiotic resources, not simply linguistic ones. I will argue that bhangra can be seen likewise as offering performers a set of resources which can be then styles into unique identities. With this perspective, it is obvious that identity work also crosses the various domains of the musicking body outlined above.
Though I will be drawing significantly from the approaches of the scholars listed above, this study will be unique in bringing together analytical approaches from both ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology. I’ve established these frameworks in an attempt to outline a new way for understanding contemporary bhangra, embedded within the everyday lives of the performers—not simply as a space to be South Asian. It is my hope that this research will also lead to new perspectives on examining musical experience, wherein scholars include considerations of the body and language.

Methodology

I was introduced to BU Bhangra when one of their captains was a guest speaker in a course for which I was a teaching assistant. Though bhangra is outside of the scope of my intended region of research as an ethnomusicologist, a study of the genre has afforded me the opportunity to examine sociality as it shapes and is shaped by musical performance, which has remained a scholarly interest of mine. Additionally, the team’s position at Boston University gave me the unique opportunity to conduct extensive research as a master’s student with a limited budget and heavy course load.

In order to gain access to study the team, I had to explain my project in full detail to the executive board. Beginning with their auditions, I attended the majority of their rehearsals in the Fall 2013 semester as they prepared for their competition in November in Buffalo, where I accompanied the team throughout the weekend.

My approach to understanding the problems outlined above is based on the methodology of ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and linguistic anthropology.
The core of this research is participant-observation fieldwork, in line with the methods of the disciplines listed above. While it is possible to merely observe the physicality of kinesthetic movement, collecting ethnographic data through conversations and more formal interviews has allowed me to contextualize the ways in which the team engaged their bodies, a necessary compliment to observation. Though my interaction with team members was limited to questions at first, as time went on, we spoke more freely and developed friendships with several of them, which helped me to gain a further appreciation of some of the social dynamics of the team.

As this project was rooted in an understanding of the body in motion, I learned the basic steps of bhangra through the audition process. This both allowed me to experience what it is like to engage the body in such a way, but also to gain an appreciation for the immense athleticism involved in dancing bhangra.

At rehearsals, I often made audio and video recordings using recording equipment (when appropriate) to allow for in-depth analysis of both dance technique and the way rehearsals are structured. Using methodologies from ethnomusicological accounts of dance and some gesture studies scholarship, I have used these recordings to further understand the ways in which movement can shape musical experience (Hahn 2007, Rahaim 2012).

Audio and video recordings also allow for transcription of music, dance, or talk when necessary. Close analysis of conversations, as outlined by linguistic anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (2001) and Bucholtz (2011), have helped to understand the styling of identity in the context of language use. Moments of broken narrative, where
other speakers interrupt primary tellers in instances of repair and problematization, offer
the opportunity to see team members’ expressions of value. This analysis also has
allowed me to show trends in the discourse, such as which individuals have the power to
dominate conversations.

In research, we are confronted with the problem of our authority to make
observations and draw conclusions—*why am I the one who is writing about this, when
the team obviously knows much more about bhangra?* In an attempt to bring the voices of
the performers into this work, I have used dialogic editing, as outlined by Feld (1987),
wherein I discussed observations and showed recorded video to team members and asked
for their opinions. Though I must assume some level of authority as the author of this
thesis, it must be made clear that so many of my insights were only possible through
extremely productive conversations with members of the team. The expressed genuine
interest in helping me to understand what bhangra was “really about.”

**Outline of thesis**

The first chapter, “Crafting the mix,” will explore the interaction between the DJ
and the choreographers and dancers through the lens of the mix created for their set. In
this chapter, I will describe the DJ’s process of creating the mix, including the ways in
which the musicking body is engaged in its creation, spread across the sonic and social
domains. In crafting this mix, the DJ must negotiate ideas of “folk” and “modern,” each
embedded with histories and ideas. In the past thirty years, bhangra has appropriated
multiple genres and forms of music, but these genres are not necessarily all used equally,
and the DJ’s use of them is an act of creating a particular kind of bhangra. Through unpacking these terms, I will attempt to articulate a more nuanced understanding of the tensions between confliction histories embedded in bhangra.

In the second chapter, “Learning the steps, building the hype,” I will examine the relationship between the captains and the team in rehearsal, and the relationship between the team and the audience in performance. Through a focus on the musicking body, I will examine the production and maintenance of hype, and what that means for performance. By following BU Bhangra from auditions to competition, I will show the ways in which rehearsals are designed to shape a particular kind of musicking body to create successful performances.

The third chapter, “The Social Life of the Musicking Body,” will focus on the relations among peers, on and off the team. Within this chapter, I will show the ways in which desire for successful performance necessitates a particular kind of social practice that in turn affects the definition of a “successful performance.” Through an examining of the ways in which the ideas of style shape identity, I will be able to analyze the way in which the musicking body has relevance for the social lives of the participants.

Finally, the concluding chapter will point to the many connections that this can have with future research across disciplines to fill out our understanding of not only contemporary bhangra, but other musical experiences as well.
Chapter 2: Crafting the Mix

The lights faded to black, and the familiar Punjabi instrumental came over the speakers of the university auditorium. Layered over top, a sampled voice of Lauryn Hill of the 90s hip-hop group Fugees repeats: “Ready or not, here I come, you can’t hide...” The lights flashed, revealing silhouettes of the team in their opening formation, posed across the stage with their arms lifted above their heads—three dancers were standing on the shoulders of others. Additional voices are layered in, and the mix builds in intensity. The team dismounts and spreads across the stage, picking up sapps. As a rapid percussion beat enters, the mix builds to a small climax—“Here I come, here I come...” The team begins to dance in formation, clapping their sapps and spinning across the stage, their feet constantly bouncing in time with the beat.

Though I had seen their set before, and even though this was only a “tech” rehearsal, this was the first time I saw them on stage. With the coordinated lights and the booming sound, this was no everyday rehearsal in a gym. The energy was palpable—each new segment of the routine gave me chills.

I see G run off the side of the formation and yell at the stage crew—he gestures to his ear and points upwards, trying to get them to pump up the volume. Though it was pretty loud to my ears already, the team needed it to be much louder.

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8 The saap is a wooden instrument held in both hands, with a series of rivets that makes a percussive “clacking” sound when opened and then brought together.
For BU Bhangra, choreography isn’t simply created to a preexisting tack; producing a particular “mix” is an equally important creative dance practice as dance itself. The “mix” is the piece of music crafted by a DJ that serves as the music to accompany the choreography. When these two components are staged, they are taken together as the “set.” In our consideration of the mix, it is essential that we do not conceive of it merely as anything: not merely background music, not merely a bunch of elements pasted together in computer software. When I saw G, one of the captains, leave his position to get the volume up, to a point where I could feel it shaking my body, it became clear that the mix—and therefore, the DJ—is critically important for creating a felt aesthetic space for both the audience and the dancers. The DJ, then, is not merely a producer of a musical accompaniment, but a co-producer in the process of developing successful performances of bhangra: meaningful to the audience, and meaningful to the team. To create an effective mix, the DJ must spend hours editing sonic material in computer programs, bringing together his or her own experience with bhangra with the needs and desires of the dancers. Critically, he or she must have an understanding of how the body is supposed to move in bhangra. I will argue that the DJ engages the musicking body in the production of the mix—that is, just as we might imagine that a dancer must embody the mix, the bodies of the dancers are also inscribed into the mix. While these two components of the bhangra set are different processes, they are conceptually linked in an ongoing feedback loop necessary to produce successful performance.

In this chapter, I will focus on the process of crafting the mix by through an exploration of Deep’s process as the DJ for BU Bhangra. I will first focus more directly
on Deep’s process, including the choices that he and the team makes to dictate the mix. Next, I will break down two concepts that govern stylistic choices in bhangra, including the mix: “folk” and “modern.” Through a discussion of these terms, I will show how multiple histories have been embedded in the aesthetics of bhangra, and the influences these histories have on performances of contemporary bhangra.

The Process

Dan: So, when people are making mixes, are they aware of how much...other stuff you can put in and have it still be considered “bhangra”? 

Deep: See, that’s a good question. You’ve pointed out a big problem or debate in bhangra between folk and modern. It’s something you always have to be aware of.9

As Deep (and others) have told me, co-producers of contemporary bhangra must constantly negotiate those terms, “folk” and “modern,” throughout the development of sets. Sonic elements that point to a “modern” performance can be, in effect, tempered by the “folk” elements of choreography that accompany them. Building a set is a complex balancing act, and requires vast amounts of experience and awareness on the parts of the DJ and choreographers. Deep said that for BU Bhangra, they strive to “reach a happy

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9 Deep, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2013.
medium” by “keeping traditional steps but adding a modern twist.”10 The process by which the mix is made for BU Bhangra illustrates some of that complicated work.

The starting point of a set is the “big picture,” the overall goal of the set: What competition are we targeting this set for? What do we (as a team) want to focus on? From there, the student executive board (“e-board”) will develop a list of songs that they want in the set, and give that to Deep. Deep must then weave these songs together. Using music production software, he is able to adjust elements like tempo and pitch to make songs flow evenly between one another. The most aurally-present aspect of the mix is the beat, which must be salient to allow for dancing: in bhangra, there are very few, if any, pauses in a set, and therefore the beat must always be audible.

The predominant songs and beats are enhanced by the inclusion of samples. These samples serve several functions: transitional material, which is a short, often repetitive element that bridges two longer songs that make up longer segments; referential embellishments, sounds that the audience will recognize, such as Jay-Z’s “Turn My Music High”; and those that set the stage for “gimmicks,” elements of a set that are typically considered outside of the purview of “bhangra” but are typically made to conform to bhangra sonically and aesthetically, such as using a love song from a well-known Bollywood film to accompany partner choreography where the male presented the female with a paper flower. Through the addition of samples, mixes become highly complex, with constantly overlapping layers. Even with the tracks separated visually in the computer software, it is difficult to try to pull apart each of these layers as you listen.

10 Ibid.
Putting the mix together takes a lot of thought and effort. As Deep ties the team’s songs together, he brings in samples that he think would enhance the overall effect. Sometimes ideas for particular samples just strike him when he’s listening to other music. Just as he composes in layers, it became obvious to me that he is also able to listen in layers. He recounted listening to a Jay-Z track when he realized that the instrumental would work well in the mix.

In listening to their mix from the previous year, I recognized that some of the tracks were used again in this year’s mix. Deep said that he sometimes uses some elements, such as songs or beats that worked very well from previous mixes, but uses them in different contexts to change the effect. While repeating particular parts of sets that work well is successful for some time, the set would not excite the audience if it were used repeatedly.

Though the mix is treated as a unit, it is actually a combination of many smaller “segments.” As he creates the music for a few segments (which amounts sometimes to only 32 beats of music, often about 20 seconds), he passes it to the e-board for them to choreograph it while he continues making more of the mix. The e-board discusses the mix and will send feedback for any changes so that the music will best fit the choreography. In this way, a feedback loop is established: the mix informs the choreography, and the choreography in turn can be used to justify changes in the mix. To some extent, this is only possible because of Deep’s close relationship to the team, as a previous dancer and captain. Some other teams, without this relationship, will
commission a fixed mix with a particular song choice, thereby making it much more
difficult to do small adjustments to the mix.

Though this feedback loop seems to show that the choreographers have much of
the authority, in BU Bhangra, Deep still retains agency in shaping the mix. At one
rehearsal, relatively early in the season, that Deep attended, G asked him to incorporate a
particular song, which Deep had included in the past segment only as a joke—apparently,
he really wasn’t fond of that song. Deep replied that he really wasn’t sure, but he’d think
about it. Though I cannot be sure the extent to which this happens for other bhangra
teams, it is clear at least for BU Bhangra that the DJ’s experience in creating a good set is
highly valued.

The process of crafting the mix relies heavily on conceptions of what a bhangra
set should sound like, bringing back to the fore the tension between “folk” and “modern.”
What ideas are embedded in these terms, and how does the DJ come to negotiate them?

Sampling histories: “folk” and “modern”

In all aspects of bhangra, from mix to choreography to dress, performance
requires all those involved to negotiate two seemingly opposing forces: “folk”
(sometimes “traditional”) and “modern.” Through my conversations with Deep, it
became clear to me that not only the dancers, but also the informed co-producers of
performance are also tuned in to the tension between these forces. My investigation of the
mix will begin with a breakdown of these terms.
Understanding “folk”

The concepts of “folk” and “traditional” will be familiar to many readers, even outside the context of bhangra; they act as signs that index the past, and sometimes a more specific historical moment. Within competitive bhangra, a performance that is “folk” is not defined by any particular set of elements but by an assemblage of many aesthetic decisions, including song choice, the presence of live instrumentation, and the choreography. As Deep and others have voiced to me, a performance must have a certain—though unspecified—amount of “folk” elements to be considered “real bhangra.” Sets must sometimes be catered specifically to competitions or even individual judges who want a more “traditional” performance. Through repeated use, “traditional” and “folk” have been collapsed in conversations regarding bhangra, taking on particular histories and a sense of objective truth.

The notion of “tradition” has long been problematized for its implication of a past that is unproblematically ahistorical: static and free of influence from external forces. Historian Eric Hobsbawm considers these ahistorical traditions to be inventions:

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (1992:1)

These “invented traditions” gain power to maintain dominant ideas and behaviors from this idealized continuity and sense of authenticity. The extent to which traditions are linked to actual past practices is not necessarily important to those who employ them, because through repetition, notions of tradition have the ability to inscribe the present with ideals and values.
With this in mind, how do we read this valuable “folk” in bhangra? Is this tradition an invented one? A quick survey of the introductions of the contemporary literature on bhangra is telling. In a section of his article entitled “The origins and development of bhangra,” cultural sociologist Andrew Bennett states:

Bhangra originates from the Punjab provinces of India and Pakistan where it continues to retain its traditional significance as a form of folk music performed during the festival to mark the completion of the sugar cane harvest. Bhangra is also used to celebrate the arrival of the new year in Punjab. (Bennett 1997:108).

In an oft-cited article discussing the development of contemporary bhangra in the 1980s and ‘90s, Gopinath offers only the following on the origins of bhangra:

Bhangra, originally a male form of rural folk music and dance from the Punjab (where it is still performed), was brought to Britain by Punjabi immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s. (Gopinath 1995:307)

In the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music entry on Punjab, music historian Joyce Middlebrook writes of bhangra:

In the villages and cities of Punjab and in the South Asian communities worldwide, Punjabi men perform bhangra, a lively, joyful dance. Five to eleven men, either in a circle or in one or more straight lines, execute vigorous movements. Usually an audience watches, and sometimes people in the audience also dance. (Middlebrook 1999:650)

These independent definitions of the origins of bhangra make it clear the way that bhangra as a genre is projected backwards to some fuzzy, unspecific past. A reading of any of these could give the reader as sense that bhangra in Punjab is and always was, especially in contrast to the specific dates presented of the contemporary “revival” of bhangra.
I am critical of these definitions not to delegitimize bhangra as a part of Punjabi culture, but to recognize the space for imagination and intervention within contemporary models of the authentic “folk.” Cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai observes that “…one of central ironies of global cultural flows, especially in the arena of entertainment and leisure,” is that “…we have nostalgia without memory” (1996:30). Sociologist Sunaina Maira responds to this, noting that the collective memory of a diasporic population is a recreated popular memory based on the myth of purity that is at the same time “historical, cultural, and personal” (2002:113). Those with power in the case of contemporary diasporic bhangra—perhaps judges and competition organizers—reproduce and reinforce this particular narrative through imagined notions of a traditional past.

The extent to which “folk” is invented is significant to understanding the meaning of its associated concepts within contemporary bhangra, but cannot get bogged down in deconstruction. As musicologist Carl Dahlhaus reminds us, “ideas are historical facts too” (1989: 79). Co-producers of a successful performance of “real” bhangra must be fluent in this history, invented or not.

For the DJ, this means including in the mix sonic signifiers that point to the “folk” bhangra. In almost all cases, this means first and foremost the use of a “bhangra beat,” a pattern with a heavily swung beat. This beat has a root in dhol drumming patterns, one of the core instruments used for bhangra, and aligns closely with the steps of the dancers. “Folk” is also marked by the inclusion of contemporary songs of the “bhangra” genre, which include Punjabi vocals and dhol drumming patterns. These songs are often used for
the longest segments (sometimes tied together with transitions from external genres). The use of these songs within the mix is particularly interesting—many participants do not understand Punjabi.

Dan: So, do you know Punjabi?

Deep: [Laughs] No, my parents are from Calcutta, nowhere close to Punjab. I’ve picked up a few words here and there since I’ve done bhangra.\textsuperscript{11}

If a relatively small amount of the participants understand the lyrical content, what is the significance of the inclusions of Punjabi songs? I argue that the DJ’s use of these is a part of the process of molding a set into “real bhangra,” tied to the “authentic” bhangra of Punjab. From this viewpoint, the notion “folk” possesses not only a historical quality, but also a geospatial one. Exemplified here is Appadurai’s “nostalgia without memory”: contemporary bhangra can act as a vehicle for expressing a longing for a place that the performers—even those who identify as Punjabi [American]—have no memory of.

I do not wish to frame the inclusion of “folk” elements as merely a way to appeal to conservative competition judges. The performance of a particular kind of “folk” is viewed by non-Punjabi co-producers as a part of respecting bhangra as a part of Punjabi culture, as well as their Punjabi teammates. In an interview with Maya, who does not identify as ethnically Punjabi, told me that she is careful to only perform material that will be respectful to Punjabi culture—also tied to Sikh religion—and thereby respectful to those who practice it, such as G, her co-captain.

\textsuperscript{11} Deep, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2013.
Understanding “modern”

Were a Boston University student to see a BU Bhangra performance for the first time, they would quickly associate the sonic and visual aesthetic with India (and likely guess that it was Bollywood, a mostly unrelated form of dance). However, they might be surprised to hear something familiar to them remixed the layers of the bhangra tracks: the introduction to the hip-hop song “Thrift Shop” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, the instrumental backing to Will Smith’s theme song from the popular TV series “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air,” and a hook from hip-hop artist Jay-Z’s “Turn My Music High.” Contemporary bhangra owes much of its character to the various other genres incorporated by bhangra producers in the past forty years.

Just as it is necessary to confront the (a)historical implicated by “folk,” the “modern” cannot be viewed as only existing in the present, a different sort of ahistorical moment. While “folk” points to tradition and authenticity emanating from Punjab, “modern” is marked with the impacts of the relatively recent “new” South Asian diaspora. An analysis of the “modern” elements of bhangra confronts the histories of the struggle for belonging faced by South Asians as they emigrated from the subcontinent.

As bhangra flowed along the diaspora into a transnational form, its producers were interacting with members of many different diasporas—Afro-Caribbean, East Asian—and therefore many different genres of music. By the late 1980s, South Asians in

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12 Scholars often consider two separate South Asian diasporas, as they are disparate in geospatial location, time, and character. The “new diaspora” are those who emigrated mostly to the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada in the mid-20th century (Barn 2008). I will be use “diaspora” here to refer exclusively to the “new diaspora.”
the UK had begun to pull other elements into their performances of bhangra such as reggae, house, and American hip-hop. The South Asian diaspora cannot be thought of in isolation. Gopinath notes that:

> Reading bhangra as a diasporic text allows for a far more complicated understanding of diaspora, in that it demands a radical reworking of the hierarchical relation between diaspora and the nation. Bhangra...reveals the processes by which multiple diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continuously negotiating and challenging. (1995:304)

She is not only pointing out the interaction, but also asserting that this interaction allowed South Asians in the diaspora to creatively negotiate their own identity, in relation to but ultimately separate from a geospatial point of origin. Contemporary, remixed bhangra comes largely from producers in the UK in the last 1980s and early 1990s. For these producers, the practice of bhangra was at once both a celebration of an “Asianness,” a political and symbolic alignment with “Blackness,” and a rejection of mainstream “whiteness.” The dynamics of these categorizations in the UK are very different than in the United States and Canada (Sharma 1996: 38-40).

The South Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom, cannot be considered as merely an extension of India. Instead, as Gopinath argues, bhangra can be read “in part as a response to the pressure to perform a coherent, stable, and essential ethnic identity in the face of white racism...” (1995: 308). Despite emigrating from South Asia at similar times, immigrants’ experiences were made vastly different by the disparate historical, political, and economic contexts (Maira 2002: 77). In response to this line of thinking, sociologist Rupa Huq argues that bhangra in the UK has often uncritically been considered by scholars as a rallying point for identity-claiming and part of the larger process of
establishing a pan-Asian identity. This, she notes, has the unfortunate effect of equating “Asians” or “Asianness” with a particular thing, thereby countering racializing acts that establish an essential “other” with something that ends up being very similar (2006: 69).

At the same time, this externally imposed, essential “Asianness” must be separated with one that is intentionally created in order to allow for collective political power and action. Kuljit Bhamra, one of the first producers of bhangra as a genre of fusion in the UK, states:

I think people maybe felt the need to identify themselves, and in order to do that a medium was needed, and that medium is bhangra. There is always this roots feeling, and people will always want to know where they come from: we are a different colour, we are from a different country originally, so where do we fit in? The Southall riots [of 1979 and 1981] made me aware of this as they did others…Prejudice exists within societies, within cultures, but the whole of Asian society is taking part in bhangra because there is always this need for a roots feeling…There is really a need to stay together and be amongst your own owing to racism, and bhangra music has provided [for] that need. (qtd. In Baumann 1990: 91).

It is obvious from Bhamra’s statement that “Asian,” as an identity, clearly also had value and utility to some in the UK in the face of racial subjugation throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Through its many unique expressions, bhangra was able to function both as a site of productive pan-Asian identity formation and as an individual site for contesting other-imposed, static identities by offering producers and consumers a location for a site of belonging.

I argue, with Huq, that we should not strive to fit the historical performance of bhangra into a culture/counter-culture binary that cannot capture the complexity of daily life. I see many parallels between this history and the act of sampling in hip-hop: the
process whereby sonic material is drawn into a new piece from outside sources, sometimes from different genres or non-musical sounds (such as spoken word from speeches). Sampling is not meant to be read as the producer’s tacit and uncritical acceptance of the sonic material. Instead, he or she is putting different sounds in dialogue with one another for any one of many possible reasons, such as to critique or to show tensions. In the same way, I see these South Asians producing bhangra in the UK as bringing multiple genres in dialogue with bhangra as part of their creative processes. Techno, reggae, and hip-hop were the genres that producers were surrounded by, and could use these forms to cement the resonance between “Asianness” and “Blackness.”

Techno, reggae, and hip-hop were particularly pervasive during the time of large-scale, often “underground” (to use Huq’s term) parties in the UK in the late 1980s and early 90s. Of those genres, however, only hip-hop has retained the same status in contemporary bhangra in the United States. Hip-hop beats and samples are a common element of many—in fact, probably most—contemporary sets. The history of “modern” is marked also with the history of hip-hop and U.S. black popular culture.

When discussing hip-hop in bhangra, it is important also to understand hip-hop is a key part of mainstream popular culture in the United States, something that producers were constantly exposed to. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes, “American mainstream popular culture has always involved certain traditions that could only be attributed to black cultural vernacular traditions” (1993: 105). He goes on to argue that within diasporic black popular culture, there are no “pure forms.” All forms are products of
connections across cultural lines, the bringing together of various traditions, and of

Hip-hop heavily relies on elements of black style, a term used by sociologist and
Africana Studies scholar Tricia Rose to refer to a “form of identity formation which plays
on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain”
(1994: 80). Resonating with Hall, Rose notes that “…black style though hip hop has
contributed to the continued blackening of mainstream popular culture” (1994: 82). Hip-
hop was never available only to black youth. Rose locates hip-hop culture as a means of
simultaneously “reflecting and contesting” the social roles available to urban youth at the
end of the twentieth century (1994: 72, emphasis original). Though she specifically
mentions black and Latino youth, Rose argues that hip-hop offers all urban youth
important resources to establish a particular way of being in a rapidly-changing world.
Through extensive research with “desi” hip-hop artists, African American and Asian
American studies scholar Nitasha Tamar Sharma asserts that South Asian hip-hop
contests a “hegemonic desiness” that restricts an “authentic” ethnicity to certain
behaviors and ideas. Through what Sharma calls “ethnic hip hop,” artists are able to
“operate as cultural brokers who translate between generations of American South Asians”
(2010: 11). Though these authors treat hip-hop in slightly different ways, it is clear that
hip-hop offered expressive resources to South Asian American producers, and was not
simply the appropriation of a “purely black” form. Whereas in the UK, South Asian

13 Sharma uses “desi” to refer to South Asian youth in America. “Hegemonic desiness” could therefore be
considered “hegemonic South Asianness” for my purposes, though this lacks some of the specificity of her
term in the context of her own research.
producers used sonic resources and stylistic elements to align themselves with “Asianness” and “Blackness,” the participation in hip-hop in the United States allowed producers to contest the social status of urban youth—aligning themselves based on class and location, not necessarily on racial identity.

With this in mind, I see these histories—of the South Asian diaspora, of hip-hop in America—as both embedded in and flowing through the “modern” character of bhangra. Despite hip-hop now being separate from the postindustrial context in which it first had meaning in the United States, the use of hip-hop by producers of contemporary bhangra in this collegiate scene shows both an alignment with mainstream popular culture and the continued relevance of hip-hop in building stylistic identities.

**The Mix, Hype, and the Musicking Body**

The musicking body in bhangra is reliant upon the mix: it is the beat that drives bhangra. When experiencing bhangra, it is the rhythm, typically from the *dhol* drum (either live, a track, or both), that is constantly heard and felt throughout. Regardless of what layers are used—the songs, samples, and instrumentals—the beat is ever-present. The pulse is the heartbeat of a performance. When the dancers are in sync, their legs match the beat, hitting the ground and rising together. Their arm movements are together, with movements that flow and shift with the mix. Each step enhances the beat, physically, visibly, and aurally.

Just as we might imagine that music is written onto the body when it is choreographed, I argue that the body is likewise written onto the music. The DJ, familiar
with bhangra in some way, whether participating in dance (in Deep’s case) or simply observing it, crafts his or her mix with the body in mind. They understand that choreography will be set to it, and individual bodies will move in sync to it. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, contrasting concepts of “flow” and “power” emphasized in choreography must be matched by the mix, or the effect is lessened, if not completely unsuccessful. Conceived in this way, the body affects the sound just as much as the reverse. In order to create a mix, then, the DJ must engage his or her musicking body. That is, even without physically dancing bhangra, the DJ is required to understand the ways in which a particular body (in bhangra) moves in relation to sound.

In addition to engaging his or her own musicking body, the DJ is also part of the process of engaging other bodies through the creation of hype. When G asked for the volume to be turned up even higher at their tech rehearsal, I was not sure exactly why it needed to be so high. Surely it was loud enough for the team to hear it—in fact, most of them could probably sing it alone, they had heard it so many times. But this was not simply about being able to hear the mix. Hearing the mix at the intended volume over those auditorium speakers, it became clearer: it had to be not only heard, but felt—embodied—by the team and by the audience.

Bhangra is one of the most intense, dynamic dances I’ve seen; and yet, as an observer you are separated from this intensity. In a full, staged performance, where the performers are costumed, the mix is broadcast loudly over the PA system, and the lights are programmed to synch up with the music, the effect is very different. It is in this mode
of feeling bhangra that the audience can experience hype, a collectively felt energy that is built and maintained by performers and audience members.

The mix plays a key role in this process. I suspect that most people have been at a concert with booming speakers, or been next to a car with the bass turned the whole way up. The sound physically moves your body, and you really have a sense of the physical properties of sound—unlike, for instance, experiencing elevator music. In bhangra performance, the driving beat and complex layers interwoven in the mix are experienced by the audience members in a very tangible way, physically engaging them in the performance. Engaging the audience, both physically and mentally, is an important goal of the team, and is reflected in some of their decision-making, such as in turning the volume very high and choosing to include aural “gimmicks” that will be recognizable to the audience, such as popular songs and film music. Such gimmicks, if successful, are met with very active audience participation, such as shouts and cheers. As Milan told me, an active and participatory audience that is hyped up not only pushes the performers to perform better and with more intensity, but also has a real impact on the team’s score in judged competition. It was reported, albeit with no real data, that the more hyped an audience is, the higher the team’s score will be.14

The histories and ideas of bhangra, as embedded in concepts of “folk” (also, “tradition”) and “modern” that are negotiated in the creation of the mix, are ultimately performed by the musicking body, wherein the body is written with the mix and the mix

14 Personal communication to the author, November 2013.
with the body. The next chapter will be focused on exploring the body in this relationship, including the ways in which the choreography is transferred from the teachers (captains) to the team.
Chapter 3: Learning the Steps, Building the Hype

I entered into a basement room of the Boston University student union. Though the room was clearly a multi-purpose room (I even remember getting my student ID photo taken here), the floor on half of the room was lowered, with wooden floorboards, in order to create a space usable for dance teams. Despite the accommodating floor, this room is clearly far from the dance studios I have seen. The room is long and rectangular—called the “Alley,” in fact—so the dance floor has limited depth. There are only a few mirrors on one short wall for dancers to see themselves while performing, a practice that is common during normal BU Bhangra rehearsals. The ceilings are low—even with the dance floor lowered a few inches, the dilapidated drop ceiling hangs just a few feet over our heads.

There was music playing when I came in, and three members of the team were adjusting the portable stereo they brought in, attempting to find an appropriate volume and dancing to the music. Auditionees began to come into the room, and they stopped at a table to register. Each received a paper with a large number to pin to the front of their shirts, so that the team could identify them. As they put their belongings against the wall and began to stretch, I chatted with them to learn a little more about those who came out for BU Bhangra.

The sheer numbers of those auditioning is quite impressive—approximately forty all together, more than I was expecting. One striking fact was that they were overwhelmingly female; only six males tried out. All auditionees were South Asian in appearance, though I do not know how many actually identify their ethnicity as South
Asian. Most were first-year students, who heard of BU Bhangra through student activity fairs or word of mouth, and were also auditioning for other dance groups as well. The auditionees socialized in small groups of three or four, and occasionally members of BU Bhangra (whom I could identify by their team shirts) would talk with them, though that seemed to be primarily with people that they already knew. Some members of the team went to the dance floor and ran through some of the set from the previous semester, seemingly remembering most of it.

When it came time to dance, the auditionees were spread out across the dance floor area. They would first learn the basic moves—body movements that consist primarily of leg and arm movements—for an hour, and then learn a routine that consisted of those moves in the next hour. Following that, auditionees would be put into small groups for a performance that would be recorded and later evaluated by the team. The two captains, Maya and G, introduced and demonstrated the moves, while other members of the team stood in front of the auditionees to also demonstrate the moves and be available to answer questions. The leg movements were taught first, followed by the arm movements. I frantically sketched the movements involved in each of the moves, alternating with video recording for later analysis.

In total, five moves were taught and combined for the final audition routine:

- **Touchdowns**: light step on the front of the alternating feet on each beat, paired with clapping the palms together in front of the chest
- **Fasla**: feet are lifted and pushed behind the body on each beat, paired with a four-beat arm pattern
Punjabs: similar leg movement to touchdowns, but with each foot tapping twice, paired with raising the arms along the vertical axis, with palms facing outwards

Tamals: knees are lifted on each beat, paired with folding the arms across the horizontal axis of the body

Squats: knees are bent and torso is lowered almost to the ground on each beat, paired with the arms being thrust forward in front of the body

Figure 3.1: The planes of the body

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It was clear that most of the auditionees had never danced bhangra before, though some of the women had previously danced classical Indian music. Maya (whom I later learned had this classical training as well) indicated that dancing bhangra is very different and asked them to relax more. The captains continually enforced that though this would be fast-paced, that they would be able to learn it with time, saying things like “You’ll get it. Don’t worry, you’ll get it!” and “It gets easier, we promise.”

Throughout, the captains—and occasionally members of the team or alumni who came to help—added comments to help people better understand the moves. “Flow” became a clearly desirable quality of the routine, during transitions from move to move and even within moves themselves. Fasla, in particular, was described as “flowy,” and that the “flow,” both in the legs and the arms, was very important to the success of the move. G made sure to inform them that the four-beat arm pattern was not just about hitting the marks, but moving a specific way in between those marks. Whereas fasla “is all about flow,” the squats “are all about power.” “Power” here seemed to relate to the energy put into the move: when the team modeled these moves, they bounced quickly off of their toes and thrust their arms forward very firmly. The move is actually so hard on the knees that G was actually unable to perform the move due to recent surgeries.

Orienting to bhangra

My involvement with BU Bhangra began with their fall semester audition process. At that point, I had just begun my research and knew relatively little about bhangra beyond articles and videos on the internet. It was here, at the very beginning of my
project, that I was confronted with the importance of understanding the body in bhangra. In retrospect, it was quite fortunate to begin my project at this point. The auditions served not only as a way to introduce myself to the team, but also to orient myself to bhangra in the same way as many of the auditionees. As I look back through my fieldnotes from this time, I can see the roots of what I later observed as a process of training and regulating the musicking body.

At these auditions, I observed people who were completely new to bhangra not only asked to move their bodies in new way, but also to think about their bodies in new ways (e.g., considering “flow” and “power”). When I took part in the auditions myself, learning those same steps, I felt this: a kind of discomfort and uneasiness about moving and conceiving my body in ways that I was unfamiliar with. While I do not assume that my feelings are the same as all of those auditioning, I was able to see and hear that their reactions were not too different from my own. For those new to bhangra, myself included, this audition process was the beginning of the development of the musicking body in bhangra.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I introduced the idea of an active musicking body in bhangra, a trained body that is engaged for performance. This body is built, trained, and maintained through regular practice, both through literal rehearsal as well as social acts, as in practice theory (Bourdieu 1977, 1991). The feeling of adapting a different body for performance may be familiar those readers who play music, act, or give public speeches—compared to everyday life, these performing bodies have often have different rules, such as how we use our voices when acting on stage or the way we shift our gaze
when giving a speech. The musicking body is a frame of analysis that focuses the attention on a person’s corporeal way of being when taking part in musical activity. It would be silly to expect that someone would inherently have a “public speaking body,” one familiar with the rules and performance practices of speaking to large audiences—and likewise, I do not believe that anyone is born with a “musicking body.” This leads to a critical question: how is this body built or developed?

In this chapter, I will focus on the musicking body of bhangra when engaged in dance. Through the audition process, auditionees are presented with model musicking bodies (the captains and current team) and begin the process of building their own. Auditionees are judged, and new members are chosen by the team based on their perceived ability to learn, not necessarily their perfection of the forms—demonstrating the value of musicking bodies that are seen as the most flexible and able to learn. After the new members have been selected, they join the team in regular rehearsals three times a week. Here, the captains and executive board (“e-board”) again teach by modeling, and the team learns through imitation. This process of transmission is not merely a one-sided reception of dance, however: a dancer crafts his or her own musicking body through their own efforts. By examining this process of transmission, my goal is to understand the underlying aesthetic logic in bhangra that leads performers to create successful musicking bodies.

**Transmission and the musicking body**
When transmission is seen as an active process in both directions, both from the teacher and from the student, the musicking body is therefore both social and individual at the same time. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of hexis, the imprint of a bodily habitus, provides a starting point for the examination of this seeming contradiction:

Body hexis . . . [is] a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values: . . . children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult — a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise) a certain subjective experience. (1977: 87).

Though this hexis has not taken on the form of a discourse, the acquisition of this bodily habitus is not merely a process of trial and error. Bourdieu argues instead that a learner is able to learn systematically because these values (or “rationales”) which serve to inform the hexis are saturated throughout the context: “. . . [the learner] has no difficulty in grasping the rationale of what are clearly series and in making it his own in the form of a principle generating conduct organized in accordance with the same rationale” (1977: 88).

In the case of the musicking body, performers cause the context to be saturated with meanings and values pertaining to the body through practice, the actions and discourses that build the world. A learner exists and contributes to this context, an active participant in these actions and discourses.

Ethnomusicologist Matthew Rahaim examines this topic by addressing what he calls the paramparic body, referring to the embodied musical dispositions that are passed down through lineages of teacher-student relationships (parampara refers to these chains
of transmission) (2012: 108). Within his research on Hindustani vocalists, the 
paramparic body is especially relevant given the significance of lineages among Hindustani vocal performance. Though those lineages are not significant in contemporary bhangra, Rahaim’s close analysis of the transmission process, using key works from gesture studies scholars, provides a nuanced understanding of the role of the musicking body that is useful in other performance traditions, and I would argue that it is also useful in the case of dance. As he states:

…Hindustani musicians are not alone in conceiving of melody as movement, or in moving as they sing. Nor is India the only place where ethical and bodily traditions are tightly intertwined. No body, after all, moves in a vacuum; no body learns to be itself by itself. Every body, whether speaking, singing, or silent, has a parampara. (2012: 134)

Citing gesture analyst David McNeill, Rahaim considers that the sharing of gestural understanding as a way of sharing the same cognitive state, but adds that sharing an understanding of movement relies not only on cognition but also on a kinesthetic sense, “like passing a soccer ball to a teammate who, after months of playing together, knows exactly where the ball will come” (2012: 116). I argue, then, that this “shared kinesthetic discipline” is a logical application of Bourdieu’s hexas: through practice within a particular context, individuals who share a kinesthetic understanding that allows for successful performance—a gesture that is understood by a pair of vocalists, a completed pass without looking, the understanding that a move must be “all about power.”

The question then becomes: how does one establish a shared kinesthetic discipline? Bourdieu’s theory outlines this process, that the hexas is shaped by being immersed in the rationales and ideas regarding the body within a particular system, but
does not necessarily ground this theory in practicality, and does not provide an answer to the above question.

Rahaim explores the analogy of “inheritance” in terms of the *paramparic body*, which is particularly prevalent in his research due to the aforementioned importance of lineage. Learning the ways to move the body with the music (or to allow the music to move the body), embracing the *parampara*, is made possible through “action understanding,” the empathetic perception of the purpose of another’s action. This understanding is cognitively different from merely learning through observation—the learner learns not necessarily from another, but *through* another (Thioux et al. 2008, Tomasello 1993).

It is perhaps easier to argue for a student’s “action understanding” in Rahaim’s work than in other cases. The intense guru-student relationship is significantly different than the teacher-student relationship in group dance situations, perhaps even more so with a peer-led group such as BU Bhangra. Nonetheless, I constantly think back to the ever-present use of the terms “flow” and “power” in the auditions: as we attempted to move our arms through the pattern for *fasla*, the captains and team consistently reminded us that we were to “flow” through the four-beat pattern, pairing this with models of the move. Though the neurological and psychological research that informed Rahaim’s work is outside the scope of this thesis, I suggest that in their descriptions of the move as paired

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16 Rahaim recognizes that “inheritance” has the unfortunate effect of implying a passive receipt of knowledge, when it is in fact quite the opposite: students do not go around absorbing every practice they see. “Inheritance” is only used here become of the prevalent analogy Rahaim was confronted with in his fieldwork (2012: 118).
with movements, the captains were asking us (as auditionees) to understand the movements through their engaged musicking bodies.

In what ways does transmission differ in the case of a teacher-student relationship that is not packed with the same associations as the guru-student relationship? In her ethnography on Japanese nihon buyo dance, ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn (2007) uses a close analysis of the transmission process of the dance in order to understand how we learn expressive embodiment. In this excerpt from her description of a student’s lesson, it is obvious that she identifies the musicking body (without using Rahaim’s terminology) in nihon buyo as well:

After reviewing the opening passage three times Iemoto continues dancing, introducing a new section of the dance. Michiyo immediately drops to the floor; she kneels, bows, and stands again, then promptly resumes following Iemoto’s movements…In this gesture, Michiyo’s quality of movement changed as she shifted out of a dance persona into a student’s role, returned fully composed, and continued her lesson with ease. (2007: 74) 

This “dance persona” is made through the engagement of the musicking body. The way the student, Michiyo, moved when coming out of that persona was different, and she had to become “composed” in order to inhabit this persona once again.

There are clear parallels between the Rahaim’s and Hahn’s work, though their difference in terminology leads to a slightly different perspective. Rahaim considers that musicians “engage” their musicking bodies through performance: “…the musicking body is alive, intelligent, and conscious. Its motion, its sounding, and its cognition are all brought together in a single intentional field of presence” (2012: 90). Hahn, instead, considers that dancers inhabit particular “personas” based on their settings and actions,
and that all of these personas are performances of sorts. Both descriptions provide useful insights into the body in performance, though I find the musicking body to have more space for difference. Hahn witnesses her teacher undergo complete transformation in the performance of the character: “It was as if Iemoto had vanished in that instant, leaving [the character] to take the stage” (2012: 149). This is clearly a product of subject matter: Hahn is dealing with a dramatic art form, and therefore embraces the use of metaphor, as do her interlocutors.\(^\text{17}\)

Hahn offers an extremely detailed account of transmission practices in \textit{nihon buyo} separated into sections based on three senses: the visual, the tactile, and the aural.\(^\text{18}\) Surely, these senses are not practically separable within the process of transmission, but, Hahn uses this explication to make the critical point that each one of these provides the learner with different information about the body, and therefore serves to orient the body in different ways—that is, the way information is transmitted from teacher to student has a real effect on the way the body is then positioned.

An analysis of BU Bhangra’s transmission practices will likewise yield information about how dancers are taught to embody the ideals of bhangra performance. What follows is a brief description of typical practices, with the understanding that many rehearsals run differently based on circumstances such as performance and academic schedules.

\(^{17}\) Hahn does note, however, that she had to “remind herself” that this character before her was, in fact, her teacher. Though she embraces this persona, as her teacher does, she grounds this in the understanding that it is a performance (2007: 149-150).
\(^{18}\) Hahn notes that while other senses (smell and taste) are certainly present within the dance, only sight, sound, and touch significantly impact the orientation of the body (2007: 78).
Rehearsing with BU Bhangra

In an average week, BU Bhangra rehearses Tuesday and Thursday nights from 9:00-11:00 p.m., and Sunday from 4:00-6:00 p.m. These rehearsals are held in a large gym in the Student Activities Center, divided by movable walls into four “Quads,” each often reserved by other dance teams or other student groups. Each Quad has little more than random assorted furniture and equipment left in the corners, but, importantly, has large mirrors on wheels, which dance teams can move around and use within the gym.

These regular rehearsals made up the bulk of my field research. Going to these rehearsals regularly allowed me to see the process of transmission over time, to see new members (“newbies”) familiarize themselves with bhangra and to see returning members (“oldies”) continue to hone their skills. It also gave me the opportunity to have conversations with the team members, often before rehearsal or during breaks. As an ethnographer, this time was critical for establishing relationships that were both informative and enjoyable.

Typically, members of the e-board show up early: before rehearsals, they work out some of the choreography and handle further issues. The team members trickle in slowly, often a few minutes after when rehearsal is to begin. Usually, they do not begin to get ready until one of the captains tells them to. The first ten minutes or so of rehearsals often consisted of team members getting in small groups to stretch, where they typically continued to chat (these language practices will be examined further in chapter 4). Often, this time would be used to handle important business for the team, such as logistics regarding upcoming performances. In these cases, the captains would instruct the team to
come together and continue stretching in the large circle in the center of the space while they spoke to the team.

The set is choreographed by the e-board at their weekly meetings, with occasional adjustments directly before rehearsal as indicated above. Disagreements about the choreography between the captains can get intense: on one occasion, several members of the e-board were attempting to adjust a sequence of moves, and though both raised their voices, it was in a light-hearted manner. (In interviews, both Maya and G have commented on the fact that though they have opposite dispositions, they compliment one another and feel that they have effectively led the team to this point.)

When it comes time for teaching new material for their sets, the captains stand in front of the team and introduce one move or a sequence of two by demonstrating its performance.¹⁹ These moves are typically four-beat patterns, sometimes repeated for a total of eight beats, which comes to approximately five to ten seconds of music (depending on the beats per minute, or “bpm,” of the mix). Moves are run through without music, only with verbal counts. Only after some level of mastery is achieved will the captains add music. Often, just as in the auditions, the movement of the lower body is introduced before the movement of the arms and upper body. Typically, as a move is first introduced, the captain will narrate what they are doing with their body in order to help the team understand the movements. When they run through it a second time, they will do so with counts (either from themselves or the other captain). As this introduction is

¹⁹ For the sake of clarity, I will refer to two or more moves strung together in succession as a “sequence,” and will attempt to specify, wherever possible, how many moves are in that sequence. (This term is not used by members of the team.)
happening, many dancers will attempt to trace the captain’s movements as he or she performs them. Next, the team will run through the moves with the captains. At this point, looking in the mirrors, the captains (mostly Maya) begin to give verbal commentary to the team, correcting errors such as incorrect posture or timing. Usually, one of the captains will step out to watch the dancers more closely and provide further critique. After the team performs a certain number of successful repetitions without music, the process will be repeated (albeit abbreviated) with the inclusion of the corresponding musical segment. This move or sequence will then be put into context of the rest of the segment, gradually building up to the complete set.

The team consists for fourteen members and four alternates, all of whom learn the same sets. Often, however, the team is divided into smaller groups in order for the e-board to teach most efficiently. In the beginning of this semester, the most common division was for the “newbies” to go to the side of the gym, where they would go through the new material (after it was taught to everyone) more slowly or gain familiarity with different techniques of bhangra, such as practicing with the saaps, a wooden instrument held in both hands, with a series of rivets that make a percussive “clacking” sound when opened (Fig. 3.1) and then brought together (Fig. 3.2).

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20 “Segments” are larger sequences of moves that are dictated by parts of the final mix given to the e-board by the DJ. Often, segments will be determined by particular songs—that is, a segment may be named by the corresponding song that is predominant in the mix at this time. Rehearsals are typically divided by these segments.

21 “Alternates” are new members who participate in rehearsals and learn the sets, but do not typically participate in competition performances unless taking the place of another member. This process is both to have alternates in the case of one member not being able to dance a competition, and to build up the experience of newer members of the team. Not all new members are made alternates: one new member was part of the regular competition team beginning with their first competition in the fall, and another played an instrument on stage during that competition.
While Maya or G would often take the newbies aside to teach them, this duty was occasionally given to the other two members of the e-board, Anita and Harjaap, second-year members at the time of my research. Maya explained that the new captains of the team typically have experience on the e-board, and allowing the new e-board members to have teaching experience better prepares them to potentially serve as captains in the future.

Very often, the team is separated into two groups by gender, “girls” or “ladies” (females) and “guys” or “boys” (males). In these situations, Maya will typically lead the
“girls,” while G leads the “guys.” These splits are sometimes due to the fact that some parts of the set are separated by gender: in partner work, the male and female parts each have their own choreography that are then linked together; and occasionally the genders separate in the set, as in one case where the choreography represented a battle scene. There have been several occasions where only the women were taken to rehearse, while the men were left to do as they pleased. The women were very often told to dance in a way that made their bodies seem “larger” and more “powerful” explicitly in order to match up with the men. Critically, though “power” was often contrasted with moves that were more “graceful” or “flowy,” I observed that those moves did not have the same gender associations—that is, while women were asked to move their bodies in ways that expressed “power” in order to align their bodies more closely with the men, men were never asked to align their bodies in a more feminine way.

For BU bhangra, the power/flow dichotomy was not precisely parallel with a male/female dichotomy. Instead, power and flow, both used as positive qualities of particular moves, tend to be associated with masculinity. I suggest that this is the product of a larger discourse within bhangra where the genre is seen as a predominantly male form. The highest-level competitive teams are all-male—in fact, several members of BU Bhangra, including G and Deep, are members of FAUJ (literally “Army”), an all-male, independent (meaning not affiliated with a school) bhangra group. I was told that FAUJ is composed of the “best dancers” in the Boston area, with no explicit mention of gender. According to G, the experience of participating in FAUJ is “different” than BU Bhangra,
in that the dancers were at a higher level of performance.\textsuperscript{22} I would argue that within contemporary competitive bhangra, the ideal musicking body is masculine. Though this ideal does not seem to lead participants to see females as inferior, I suggest that the above practices reinforce bodily gender disparities.

At the end of rehearsals, the team does at least one “run-through,” where all new material is put into the context of old material. These are often video recorded on someone’s phone, and are later uploaded to the team’s private YouTube channel. Members are expected to watch these run-throughs and critique their own performance. At one point in the year, the team was brought into a circle and asked to share three critiques of their performance with the rest of the team.

As should be clear from this description, dance in BU Bhangra is learned primarily through the act of following. Though there are steps and movements that recur in choreography, the team members are dependent upon the captains for learning new dance information. Following is not merely a mechanical act, but requires synthesizing visual and kinesthetic information to coordinate one’s body movements (Hahn 2007: 87, Bakan 1999: 285). Hahn argues, “The visceral nature of dance transmission gestures to embodiment as a vehicle for observing qualities of cultural values…I see that the enculturated body becomes a sight and a site of cultural training that is ritualized in the dance lesson” (2007: 98). What values are visible in this ritualized practice?

\textsuperscript{22} Gurteg, in discussion with the author, December 2013.
In bhangra, discussions of values so often point back towards the idealized “folk,” while still in dialogue with the concept of modernity, as discussed in chapter 2. In an interview, Maya made this clear:

MS: “That’s very much what the [competition] circuit is about. We’re bringing traditional bhangra into a modern circuit. It’s making it gimmicky or hype on stage. Bhangra is a very traditional dance style. You think of it as dancing in the village in India. You don’t think of it on stage with costumes and trying to add a hype gimmick or things like that….It’s very traditional in terms of the steps you should be doing, the kind of movement and form your body should have. None of that is compromised in making it modern.”

In this excerpt, some of the underlying logic that leads to particular aesthetic decisions becomes more visible. Maya’s background in classical, folk, and contemporary South Asian dance inform her approach to participating in and teaching bhangra. Here, it is clear how she negotiates “folk” and “modern” in her dance and dance instruction—simply put, there is not much to negotiate. The ideas may overlap, but are separate when it comes down to it: “None of [the traditional] is compromised in making it modern.”

As long as it remains out of the way of what is perceived as “tradition,” “modern” offers the space for dancers to innovate within existing forms. Modern, which Maya equates with “gimmicks” and “hype,” informs aesthetic decision-making. These decisions are necessarily embodied: “hype,” as it was described to me and I observed it, is only achievable through a knowledge of the entire context of a performance: the sights, the sounds, the audience, and the body.

Just as hype has a sound, as discussed in the previous chapter, it also has a look. Though it is variably used as a noun and an adjective, and despite the fact that it is never

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23 Maya, interview with author, October 22, 2013.
made explicit what exactly it is, it is clear that the visual component is a guiding force of that which is outside the domain of “folk.”

MS: “…[In bhangra,] everyone does the same movement. That was also something really foreign to me. Because [from my perspective,] for Bollywood, it makes so much sense how to do something different and stylized and, you know—but for bhangra, if everyone is doing the same steps, how do you look different? How do you look like a different team?”

Hype is born out of a style of movement which is unique and individual to a particular team of dancers.

In the auditions and in their rehearsals, I saw a meticulous approach to creating a synchronicity and uniformity across the team in order to achieve the desired visual look. Getting from point A to point B is not sufficient: the way in which a dancer moves through those points is equally important. This can be seen within gendered instruction, to some extent. When the women are told to make their movements “larger” and more “powerful” to match the men, this points to bringing the entire team towards a desirable aesthetic that is associated with a certain kind of masculinity.

This desired aesthetic is also visible in planning formations. On one occasion, when G disagreed with Maya’s suggested change to a particular formation, he said, “You’ll kill the flow,” worried about the way her changes would alter the way the set moves. This use of flow greatly resembles the ethnomusicological focus on “groove,” which Steven Feld refers to as:

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24 Ibid.
25 “Flow” here is similar to, but ultimately different from the “flowy” quality of movement within a particular move that is associated with grace and fluidity.
an intuitive sense of style as process, a perception of a cycle in motion, a form or organizing pattern being revealed, a recurrent clustering of elements through time. Such consistent, coherent formal features become one with their content, but, are uniquely recognizable by the way they shape content to articulate specifically in that form. (1988: 74).

The “flow” is a part of the set that is not explicit, but is explicitly sensed by knowledgeable producers. As with groove, flow organizes the senses for the performance of bhangra, dictating a particular embodiment of sound, aesthetics, and kinesthetic senses. As Rahaim argues, the musicking body is alive, thinking, and conscious—the organization of flow engages the body, allowing individuals to embody the patterns of “flow.”

Ultimately, flow is a major marker of successful bhangra performance, marked by the presence of hype among the dancers and audience members. Hype, when conceived of as an end product of this flow, is a state of the completely engaged musicking body. This bears resemblance to yet another definition of “flow,” articulated by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino:

*Flow* refers to a state of heightened concentration, when one is so intent on the activity at hand that all other thoughts, concerns, and distractions disappear and the actor is fully in the present. The experience actually leads to a feeling of timelessness, of being out of normal time, and to feelings of transcending one’s normal self. (2008: 4)

Though the conditions for hype are not the same, it bears resemblance to Turino’s flow as a heightened state. Hype is an expression of the musicking body that relies heavily on the flow (as articulated by G), the successful organization of the senses by informed members versed in the performance of bhangra.
Through the process of transmission, learners are presented with the ways in which a musicking body should look, feel, and behave through modeling and discourse. With hype positioned as the ideal product of bhangra performance, those ideas which establish hype, such as flow and power, guide the aesthetic decisions that captains and team members make throughout the process of learning.
Chapter 4: The Social Life of the Musicking Body

After I took the team’s picture for them, I climbed into the U-haul, crouching over one of the dancer’s legs. When I embarked on this research project, I never saw myself here—one of sixteen people in the back of a cargo van at 11:00 at night in Buffalo. They started singing songs from their set, laughing and pulling out their smart phones to take videos. I was exhausted, and they were the ones who had just finished a rehearsal. In spite of all that, I was having a lot of fun. When we got to the Motel 6, we slowly backed out of the van, still laughing about how ridiculous this all was. “You’re going to have a lot to write about,” they joked with me. I laughed with them, knowing that they were right. Though I had only been with them for a day to this point, I had been learning not just a lot about university bhangra, but also about the team.

As we walked into the motel, one of the team members next to me said, “You have to party with us.” This had been an ongoing thread of conversation—bordering on a threat—since I told them that I was going to come to the Muqabla competition. As always, I expressed some hesitation. He added, “You’ll get to see what bhangra is really about.”

Of course, I knew this was a bit of an oversimplification. BU Bhangra was much more to these dancers than just partying, or they wouldn’t put so much effort into practicing and perfecting routines. Nonetheless, this was a very strong, clear statement, and it was important for me to understand this as part of the experience of university bhangra.
As discussed earlier in this thesis, bhangra has typically been associated with a South Asian “party scene,” especially in the United States (Maira 2002). Maira has shown that participating in this large South Asian musical experience enabled the bhangra fans and artists to express an identity as South Asians, or as of South Asian descent. However, I argue that contemporary university bhangra cannot be read in exactly the same way. The members of BU Bhangra are also students with intense majors and heavy course loads, who enjoy taking a trip with their friends and participating in competition. This is to say, the social dynamic of contemporary university bhangra should neither be read simply as an extension of the bhangra parties of the late 80’s and early 90’s, nor as the product of the activities of competitive college students where ethnicity plays no role. Instead, I suggest that the participation in bhangra offers a variety of semiotic resources which performers use to establish a particular identity (or identities) that a relevant in their social lives. This chapter will be focused on the ways in which bhangra is deeply integrated with the social lives of the performers, and how this integration comes to affect the musicking body in performance. Through an exploration of the social domain of the body, I will address the ways in which the musical is made social.

**The community of practice**

Practice theory, the view that the social world can be understood as a set of practices, offers a starting point for the investigation of the social domain of the body. For sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, habitus is what informs practice, and habitus shapes the
body via the bodily hexis. Critical for this thesis is the idea that language is one practice that is informed by habitus. It shapes and is shaped by the ideas of the body: “Language is a body technique, and specifically linguistic, especially phonetic, competence is a dimension of bodily hexis in which one’s whole relation to the social world, and one’s whole socially informed relation to the world, are expressed” (1991: 86). However, Bourdieu tends to see individual acts as reproductions of social structure, not agentful acts.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s theory of practice, created initially to address the practices of women but not explicitly related to language, is critical of earlier theory like Bourdieu’s which does not account for agency and complexity:

Studies of the ways in which some set of “texts” – media productions, literary creations, medical writings, religious discourses, and so on – “constructs” categories, identities, or subject positions, are incomplete and misleading unless they ask to what degree those texts successfully impose themselves on real people (and which people) in real time. Similarly, studies of the ways in which people resist, negotiate, or appropriate some feature of their world are also inadequate and misleading without careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their “agency”, and that limit the transformative potential of all such intentionalized activity. (1996: 2)

Sociocultural linguist Mary Bucholtz (1999) notes that the community of practice framework offers an analysis that deals with the weaknesses identified by Ortner. Within sociolinguistics, the community of practice model explicitly counteracts the weaknesses of the “speech community” model when dealing with identity. Instead of seeing a shared quality (in this case, language) as that which identifies community, the community of practice model “recogniz[es] practice – the social projects of participants – as the motivating context for linguistic interaction” (Bucholtz 1999: 208). By shifting the focus
to social activity this framework decentralizes “language,” marking it as one of many social practices. “By defining the community as a group of people oriented to the same practice, though not necessarily in the same way, the community of practice model treats difference and conflict, not uniformity and consensus, as the ordinary state of affairs” (Bucholtz 1999: 210).

Put simply, within this model, linguistic activity exists side by side with other social activities, with none necessarily being privileged over another. The community of practice quite easily can be viewed as organized around performance:

More importantly, however, the community of practice, unlike the speech community, may be constituted around any social or linguistic practice, no matter how marginal from the perspective of the traditional speech community. Likewise, by focusing on individuals as well as groups, the theory of the community of practice integrates structure with agency. And because identities are rooted in actions rather than categories, the community of practice model can capture the multiplicity of identities at work in specific speech situations more fully than is possible within the speech community framework. (Bucholz 1999: 210)

Communities are formed through the common practice of these social activities, though the ways in which they are performed can be (and is often) different. I suggest that through practice, this social activity, which forms these communities, a repertoire of signs and ideas are built up, establishing style.

Style and identity

This perspective draws on the framework of “style” from sociolinguistics, which Bucholtz articulates as “a bundle of semiotic resources indexically tied to a social type,
category, or persona” (2011: 11). Style, conceived in this way, is offered as a focused way of examining the question of social identity. Bucholtz points out that within early sociolinguistics research, identity is primarily used a static property, a set of definitive characteristics offered as an explanation for perceived linguistic differences. (2011: 10). Contemporary research in sociolinguistics has focused on the ways in which identity is relational, built through “outwardly directed social action” (Bucholtz 2011: 10). This is to say that identity is never an individual process, but one that is produced jointly and variably among different contexts.

In her ethnography of racial tensions in a United States high school, Bucholtz (2011) explores the salient styles within this context through her deep ethnographic engagement. She shows how language use affects and is in turn affected by the ideas related to these styles, stemming from other work related to language and identity in schools (Eckert 1989). Though she argues for the plasticity of style, she tends to portray highly static categories of style (e.g., “punk,” “normals”) that have discreet characteristics as defined by students of the school. In effect, “style” simply becomes reified, serving only as a way to articulate a slightly more nuanced conception of “identity.”

In her introduction, Bucholtz defines styles as “socially meaningful ways of doing things” (2011: 10). The actual use of the term within her book varies, caught in a conflict between style as a thing (that “bundle of semiotic resources”) and as “ways of doing things.” Within music scholarship, style is most often used to refer to the meaningful patterning of behavior or the materials of human behavior within a musical context.
(Meyer 1979: 3, Feld 1988: 74). I suggest that style does offer meaningful contributions to an understanding of identity practices. Both definitions used by Bucholtz have something of value, but it is necessary to differentiate them and refine their usage.

There is a “style” of bhangra (noun). Deep, BU Bhangra’s DJ, said, “you [general usage] can look at a performance and say ‘this is bhangra’ or ‘this isn’t bhangra’.” To return to a point I’ve made throughout this thesis, bhangra has a look, a sound, and a feeling, shaped by conceptions of the past and contemporary values. These qualities—or “semiotic resources”—carry meaning, and therefore “bhangra,” as a style, a bundle of these qualities, becomes meaningful to those aware who participate. When individuals apply understanding of this style to create meaning, they are “styling” something (verb). “Bhangra” can be performed: with an awareness of what is bhangra and what is not, producers can make aesthetic decisions that signal to others that “this is bhangra.”

**BU Bhangra as Community of Practice**

As I began my involvement with BU Bhangra, it was obvious that bhangra is a meaningful expression of belonging within South Asian diasporic culture. For those team members who actually identify as Punjabi, the participation in bhangra is part of practicing Punjabi culture in the United States. It became clear to me, however, that bhangra is significantly impacted by the contexts in which it is performed. This is to say that the performance bhangra in the United States and Canada is unique to the point

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26 Sociologist and Africana studies scholar Tricia Rose addresses style in hip-hop as a key part of the process of identity formations.

27 Deep, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2013.
where it cannot be considered merely a transplant from Punjab, or even the UK.

Nonetheless, bhangra, through sonic and aesthetic markers (Punjabi instrumental tracks, brightly colored costumes) is marked as something that is plainly “South Asian.” There exists a tension between the individual expression and a totalizing view of bhangra as a facet of South Asianness in North America. Sociologist Sunaina Maira analyzes this tension:

Elements of the music popular among Indian American youth are part of a larger discourse about culture and tradition in which Indian American participate and which reifies identity and culture in ways that feed back into the ‘remix’ scene. The ‘mixed’ nature of this music and the popular culture associated with it simultaneously undermines this essentialisation of identity in certain ways, but the degree to which it is politicised is contingent on the contexts in which it is embedded. (1998: 357)

In other words, Maira argues that even if bhangra is not simply accepted marker of “Indian” (or “South Asian”) identity, the participation in musical activity is part of an ongoing discussion that tends to make an “Indian” culture real and apparent to those participants. I argue that this is precisely the way Bucholtz uses “style” as a noun: as something made real through discourse and practice. Whether or not it is “real” in a practical sense is not important—these styles are something that those who participate in that culture must dialogue with.

BU Bhangra is made up completely of those that identify as ethnically “Indian” or “South Asian,” but there are bhangra teams at other universities with those that do not. In fact, at auditions, many team members and auditionees asked if I, as a white, non-South Asian, was auditioning. Certainly, I’m not describing a discourse of “colorblindness,”
where racial and ethnic differences are imagined not to exist. In a discussion with one of the alumni at auditions, the issue came up:

Dan:  Do non-Indians do bhangra at all?

Jay:  Yeah, of course. I remember seeing MIT Bhangra one time. Their captain was actually this white guy, and he was really, really good.28

At the Muqabla competition in Buffalo, I did see several members of different teams that did not identify as South Asian, though none of those dancers were on bhangra teams, only raas and fusion, the other two genres of dance featured in the competition. In a conversation with one such dancer, she was already versed in several dance traditions, and cited her extreme interest in the genre. My own non-South Asian identity was sometimes used as a joke among the team. One such instance was after some discussion of non-South Asians in bhangra:

Pratik: Yeah, all we need now [to round out our team] is a white guy

[Laughing]

Harjaap:  What about Dan? [Laughing]

Dan:  [Laughing] No, I think you guys will do just fine without me.29

28 Jay, personal communication with the author, September 2013.
29 Conversation with the author, November 15, 2013.
As Maira discussed, topics of ethnicity and identity certainly came through on occasion: individuals are constantly in dialogue with the reified “Indianness.” Many members of BU Bhangra are also friends with other members of other South Asian dance teams, or have participated in those teams themselves. Several of the men on the team are active members of Iota Nu Delta, a South Asian interest fraternity. As is clear from these examples of the discourse on ethnicity, though, this dialogue with ethnic identity is not the does not bind the team together.

I see BU Bhangra as a community of practice, as a group of individuals brought together by social action: the performance of bhangra. Conversations with members tended to affirm this belief:

Maya: “Well, actually, I’m a trained hip-hop and contemporary dancer—like a Bollywood dancer back home.

Dan: Really? Wow

Maya: So I’ve pretty much danced my whole life—and a classical Indian dancer but I’ve never done bhangra in my life.

Dan: And where’s home for you?

Maya: California—So I’ve never done bhangra in my life and um…I honestly couldn’t tell you why I joined the team. [Laughter]

Maya: I really think it was just luck, because at one of the freshmen orientation events [BU Bhangra was] for some reason the only flyer that I picked up for auditions. I have no idea why, I really—
it’s actually a running joke on the team why I’m on this team, because I’ve literally never done it in my life and I’ve done every other style so I should be on another team, I really should.

Maya: But…I took to it really well. I think it was the people that really drew me to it because they were all just really passionate about it and fun-loving, whereas some of the other teams had a little bit more college drama, and that wasn’t really appealing. So, I think the team dynamic—because I knew nothing about the specific culture at that point—the team dynamic pretty much drew me to the team.”

She places emphasis on the activity, specifically the way in which that activity is performed, as a defining factor of the team. The community, this team, is brought together by a certain way of doing bhangra. The practice of bhangra in this way in turn shapes team members’ ideas of bhangra in this context.

Through this process, over time, a style of bhangra emerges. That set of resources becomes available to dancers in order to style a way of being, to perform an identity. Outside of shaping competitive performance, these resources are also utilized in ways of talking about bhangra, ways of communicating in and around bhangra, and aesthetic decisions.

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30 Maya, interview with author, October 22, 2013.
To illustrate how social acts could function within an understanding of bhangra as a community of practice, I’ll use the instance of an aesthetic decision informed by style. At auditions, and at many rehearsals, I noticed that many members of BU Bhangra who wore team shirts from the previous year that read, “Chaal So Hard, Your Jodi Wanna Find Me.” *Chaal* refers to particular move in bhangra, and *jodi* is the term for a performer’s dance partner. The meaning here, however, is in a joke that requires a bit of inside knowledge. The phrase is a direct play on the lyrics of the hook of a hip-hop song by Kanye West and Jay-Z, “Ni**as in Paris”: “Ball so hard [expletive] want to fine me.” (I only learned the meaning “chaal” and “jodi” by asking—the “inside knowledge” required to notice the play on words is merely a familiarity with the song, but the play would nonetheless be completely lost on someone with no knowledge of the lyrics. “Chaal” and “jodi” do not fit the meaning of the original lyrics precisely.)

Within the community of practice framework, Bucholtz categorizes all practice as a “positive identity practice” or a “negative identity practice,” which indicates whether that practice is a deliberate act to align oneself from a particular identity or distance oneself from that identity, respectively (1999: 211). I found this plausible, if a little simplistic, in the context of her ethnography of a high school, where she positioned “cool” as a currency that all students had to negotiate in some way. However, for my own research, I don’t find this approach particularly applicable. In the case of the shirts that references Kanye West and Jay-Z, it could be read as aligning themselves with contemporary bhangra, or aligning themselves with hip-hop, or even aligning themselves generationally. It is difficult to locate what sort of “identity” this practice is a response to.
Instead, I suggest that it is a way of styling the body through an aesthetic decision informed by the ideas of these styles.

Wearing specific clothing (outside of performance costume) is a common way that team members style themselves as part of this community. Including the shirts discussed above, the contributes money to do orders of zip-up hooded sweatshirts and t-shirts that bear their names and the BU Bhangra logo, an anthropomorphized Boston terrier holding a dhol drum. These are often worn at events where the team will be going out together in public, such as at competitions, but are also generally worn as part of everyday dress, marking them as members of the team. At competitions, some of the men of the team wear brightly colored pajama pants, a less obvious example of styling through aesthetic decision-making, but one that is nonetheless used to take part in the specific style of bhangra at BU. It is a way of taking part in a practice that bears social significance.

**At ease with Bhangra**

Clothing may not seem like a serious matter, but within the community of practice framework, decisions informed by style are an important clue for understanding the actions that hold the team together as a community. This was clearly identified by Maya, above:
Maya: “I think it was the people that really drew me to it because they were all just really passionate about it and fun-loving…”

Her use of “fun” is not insignificant. “Fun” appeared as a recurring part of the discourse in and around bhangra. I spoke with Deep about some of the goals of bhangra. Of their public performances, he said, “We’re spreading culture here—We’re doing this [performing bhangra] to have fun. Spreading culture comes with that.” Here, he points out that spreading culture to unfamiliar audiences (such as in university culture shows) is a significant goal and result of bhangra, but that it is not the primary goal. Instead, there is a focus on enjoyable performance.

G, unlike Maya and Deep, identifies as Punjabi. He was steeped in Punjabi culture as he grew up. He began participating in bhangra when he was in high school, and knew that he wanted to continue performing bhangra in college. This does not come at the expense of enjoyable experience. Backstage at *Muqabla*, as the team was waiting to go on, G gave a speech to hype up the team:

\[
G: \quad \text{We have a dope set. If we execute, it's going to be [expletive] phenomenal. Just go out and have fun and kill it.}
\]

\[
\ldots
\]

\[
G: \quad \text{Go have fun.}\]

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31 Ibid.
32 Deep, in discussion with the author, October 20, 2013.
33 Author’s fieldnotes, November 16, 2013.
While it may seem odd to tell someone to have fun, this is part of an ongoing discourse regarding the experience of performing bhangra. The team is encouraged not only to have fun, but also to even shape their bodies in a way that communicates that experience to the audience: they are constantly told to smile through the entire performance, no matter how tired they are or how badly they hurt. Just before they went on stage at Muqabella, Maya told the team to “Eye [expletive] ‘em [the audience],” essentially meaning that they should make the audience feel like the team is engaging them with their eyes. Enjoying the experience, and communicating that enjoyment, enables the team to create the desired secondary effects of performance, e.g., spreading the culture, generating hype, winning competitions.

Enjoying the experience is certainly not limited to competition performance. Though Maya and G show irritation that the team spends so much time talking before and throughout rehearsal, both have told me that it is very important that rehearsals are relaxed. The idea here is that if the team is relaxed, they will perform their best.

This has resonance in the work of performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison, who discusses “being at ease” in a particular world. Applying the thinking of feminist philosopher Maria Lugones, Madison (2012) describes being at ease as being comfortable in the world: to be fluent in its language, to know the norms and vocabulary, to be normatively happy, to feel “humanly bonded,” and to have a shared history (121). To be at ease is to feel a sense of belonging in the world and have the freedom to safely take social risks:
To be playful in a world means that it is both safe and appropriate for one to take risks, to be foolish and uncertain; to be playful means that one is free to not worry about competence and to abandon competition and self-importance. It means that in this particular world one need not fear harm or arrogance for being playful...To be playful in a world, you must be at ease in that world. (2012: 122)

BU Bhangra rehearsals are intensive and exhausting, but are set up in such a way that members have the freedom to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. They have the freedom to correct one another: a common practice at rehearsal is to have half of the team dance the set, while the other half watches and prepares to give constructive criticisms. Though much of the feedback during the rehearsal comes from G or Maya, in these moments, members are taught that this is a safe space where everyone is trying to perform the best that they can.

Madison’s description of ease also borrows from performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood’s (1989) concept of play as the opportunity to stretch the limits of what is allowable:

[Play] is linked to improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning, and carnival. As soon as a world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions...Appreciation of play has helped ethnographers of performance understand the unmasking and masking tendencies that keep cultures open and in a continuous state of productive tension. (1989: 83)

Conceived in this way, play is a recurring element of BU Bhangra’s practice: moments where the regular order or structure is stretched. On one occasion, I came to rehearsal to find them attempting to coordinate the filming of a video. The women were cooperating
with the instructions (Maya was taking charge), but the men did not seem to be interested in the endeavor, and helped begrudgingly. Alia, one of the new members, told me that they were hosting a party with another of the South Asian dance teams, so they were filming a “shout out” to the other team to post onto their Facebook page. While Maya continually reminded them that this was going to be fast, and take only “two minutes,” the whole process took about forty-five minutes of the rehearsal time. Maya saw me writing, and told me, “This isn’t what it’s normally like.” The whole project became a bit of a joke: as the time went on, it was taking longer and longer to film individual scenes for the video.

G: *It’s 9:55, and we haven’t even learned one step.*

???: *That’s your fault!*

All: *[Laughter]*

The extent to which this moment was actually out of the ordinary is subject to question. From what I observed, while it was abnormal for a non-rehearsal moment to take such a long time, these social times were a common part of rehearsal for BU Bhangra. For me, it is in these moments, abnormal or not, that it is clear that being on BU Bhangra involves much more than the regular dancing of rehearsals. In the conception of musicking used in this thesis, discussed in chapter 1, these moments which seem apparently non-musical do,

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34 Author’s fieldnotes, October 17, 2013.
in fact, shape the musical experience of participating in bhangra—that is to say, these moments, silly as they may seem, are activities of the musicking body.

Language Use and the Musicking Body

To this point, though I have certainly stretched Rahaim’s conception of the musicking body, the place where I depart the most from him is on the social life of this body. He consistently describes the musicking body as the body while performing—when it is engaged to trace the melody of a raga, or to learn a particular passage. As discussed earlier (chapter 3), though Hahn does not use the same terminology, she too sees performers as inhabiting particular personas for the purposes of performance. Hahn describes a moment where the student she is observing falls out of her dance persona into a bow, a student’s persona (2007: 74). It is here that I disagree with the conception of the body engaged in dance.

Hahn’s focus on dance personas was productive for her study, and I do not mean to suggest that her analysis of the aforementioned event is invalid for the context. Instead, I argue that it could be useful to conceive of the student’s musicking body as one that stops dancing and bows to the teacher when they move on to another part of the dance. The body is always shaped by and is engaged in shaping rules and customs (bodily hexis), and even social acts, such as the use of language, are an expression of the body.

Rahaim’s conception of the body as involved in musicking relies on Christopher Small’s (1997) development of “musicking” to include all that is involved in musical experience, and many ethnomusicologists have seen the valuable information that can be
gained from this perspective. Musical experience, by Small’s conception, is not marked only by the presence of musical sound. Just as the community of practice framework was developed to de-essentialize language as social activity, I think it is a productive exercise to de-essentialize musical sound from musicking. I suggest that it is productive to see the musicking body also as social, wherein non-musical activities are also an essential part of defining particular musical experiences.

In BU Bhangra, language use is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to see the body in any other way. Even after the dancers stretch and warm-up, engaging their musicking bodies through actions across musical and aesthetic domains, talking is still ever-present. When the music stops, the laughter starts. Members recount stories of their days, talk about upcoming social events, and discuss work. Though the captains try to keep the talking under control, especially when it delays rehearsal, most of the time, the practice does not tend to get in the way of rehearsal.

Though it would be difficult to make the claim that language use within practice is rule-governed, there are certain recurring patterns. During times of conversation, typically at the beginning of practice and in times when the captains are working with a subset of the team (e.g., “newbies,” females, males), the team will almost always separate into groups of two to four people. Certain individuals are closer friends, and will talk more often, but many members of the team engage in conversation with one another. Typically four to five conversation groups form across the gym, with some individuals remaining alone to stretch or use their cell phones. The groups are typically separated by gender: women enter groups with women and men enter groups with men. The all-female
groups tend to be more animated, and their conversations often involve multiple tellers and interruptions. Conversations in all-male groups are often less dynamic, with only one teller at a time. When a group forms with men and women, which occurs very infrequently (perhaps one group among all in every three to four rehearsals) women tend to take significantly more conversational turns than the men.

These breaks for conversation occur all throughout rehearsal, and even sometimes during dance. In run-throughs that are not “all-out,” wherein the body is poised for staged performance, sometimes members will be engaging in conversation and joking about their performance. The dancers’ musicking bodies do not merely disengage while this is happening.

Within the framework established in this chapter, a style is formed and altered by practice, and in turn informs future practice. Language use, as an expression of the body, is necessarily in dialogue with the practices that exist side-by-side with it. An analysis of language use can inform an understanding of other social acts within the same context: in bhangra, an analysis of language use with regard to the body can yield interesting insights regarding the body in performance.

It is clear that the understanding of gender in bhangra is one such example. As discussed in chapter 3, females are asked to change their bodies in order to resemble male bodies: they are asked to move larger, to move more powerful. These bodily differences are not necessarily grounded in physicality: there are females on BU Bhangra that are larger, and in my opinion, move more powerfully than some of the males. Nonetheless, the perceived gender differences are made real through practices that interact and overlap.
Most clearly, the women and men are referred to as separate groups, “girls” and “guys,” and are kept in those groups during rehearsal. Formations are written around jodi pairs: one male and one female. In the co-ed groups that I have observed, males are never put together in jodi pairs. In BU Bhangra, their costumes are such that pairs wear the same color. Though partner work does not make up the entire set, often the colors will be kept symmetrical for aesthetic affect. Attitudes about gender in bhangra have been reported to vary: Deep told me that while co-ed teams have been growing, all-female teams have began to spring up, and some judges have felt that this cannot be bhangra: that bhangra is a male form. These perceived differences come to saturate the environment through practice, and therefore tend to inform all other aspects of performance.

The community of practice framework, paired with the conception of identity as based on an active process of styling, drawing on existing meaningful repertoires of semiotic resources, allow for an analysis of performance that comes closer to capturing some of the complexity that goes into play in my analysis of BU Bhangra. Some of the “play” that the team engages in offers a chance for members to stretch the structure of what defines concepts of performance and rehearsal, and is linked back into the production of hype. Especially for groups that are clearly associated with an ethnic identity, as with bhangra, a process of analysis that examines the ways in which various influences come to be felt by members tends to yield more relevant results that focus less on generalizations of essentialized experiences.
When seen in this way, the musicking body becomes a key site for negotiating social life and musical experience. Practices within bhangra engage the musicking body across the sonic and social domains, and this practice necessarily comes to inform both the social lives and performances of participants. The logic that teaches successful performance also teaches participants ways of being in their broader worlds.
Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks

Alan Merriams’s 1964 model for ethnomusicological research, in which musical sound, cognition, and behavior are all interrelated and are worthy of academic interest, has shaped the contemporary discipline of ethnomusicology. While scholars predating Merriam certainly explored these facets of musical experience, the institutional effort brought to this model by Merriam and his students has cemented these three pillars in academic approach to understanding music. Over the past fifty years, scholars have visited and revisited Merriam’s ideas, and ethnomusicologists are still attempting to find out where the dividing lines are between some of these ideas: where does “noise” become “sound” become “music”? To what extent is someone’s cognition about music similar to other kinds of cognition? As the world changes, so too does the presence of musical sound, and new questions become relevant and interesting for further research.

When I set out to do this project, I hoped to continue the work of bringing language use into the fold of ethnomusicological research. Through my undergraduate training in anthropology, I developed an interest in the insights to be gained from examining the way humans use language. I’ve found it surprising that the amount of talking in and around music is sometimes seen as tangential. In anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox’s 2004 ethnography of country musicians outside of Austin, Texas, his book underscores the idea that “social life” and “musical life” are impossible to separate from one another. By examining the linguistic practices of these musicians, he finds that the reason that the ideas of “real country” are part of an underlying social logic that informs “ordinary” ways of talking of talking and singing. Fox’s work is
performance-centered, but does not privilege musical sound, instead embedding it deeply within the Texas working-class sociality. I find this effort to be a profound step for the discipline of ethnomusicology: not one that weakens the disciplinary focus, but a step that situates our research in a way that easily demonstrates connections to other research.

I approached competitive bhangra with the idea that a focus on language use would provide a way to read the activity as embedded into the social lives of the dancers. This approach, however, had the effect of privileging language over musical sound and dance, a problem for an activity that is considered musical by all involved. My method became primary, and I lost focus of the questions that were important to me, and more importantly, the ideas that were important to the members of BU Bhangra. These moments can be educational. As I searched through my notes to try to better understand what I had to contribute, I stumbled upon “hype.”

Hype captures so much of what it means to do bhangra. Though perhaps difficult for individuals to articulate—sometimes a noun, sometimes an adjective, always vague—the members of BU Bhangra know what it means and what it feels like. Following the thread of hype throughout my fieldwork has allowed me to see the ways in which the idea serves as both a means and an end, and it deeply informs the way in which bhangra is practiced. Within hype is yet another feedback loop among ideas of flow and power, patterning ways of thinking about bhangra, informing ways of performing, and in turn further influencing the way bhangra is thought about—a loop that generates significance for participants.
This loop is not just theoretical, but is acted out by the body as engaged in musical experience: the musicking body. Ways of thinking about performance are transmitted by bodily practice, from captains to team members, and from team members to future team members. The musicking body is an active part of the learning process. Through practice, knowledge about dance seems to become part of a bodily repertoire, where it can be skillfully reproduced by experienced producers.

But the performer does not merely repeat steps mindlessly, carrying on unchanged tradition. Contemporary competitive bhangra is very different than the scene even twenty years ago, and teams are clearly different than one another, despite being limited to certain steps. That there are co-ed bhangra teams, let alone all-female bhangra teams, is a testament to the changing ideas surrounding bhangra. In order to account for this change, individual participants must be seen as agentful, having the ability to make conscious choices regarding performance that can affect the feedback loops that shape the understanding of “bhangra.”

These choices are necessarily ones that engage the musicking body across three domains: musical, the material, and the social. These domains necessarily overlap and influence one another, and performance decisions require an understanding of how the body is configured in each. In choreographing a segment, the captain must understand and embody the mix, predict how the audience will experience the choreography, make sure that the dancers will be coordinated on stage, etc. These considerations are not necessarily deliberate, but are embedded within a deep, experiential knowledge of the body, built up through social practice, rehearsal, and performance.
The production of hype requires this engaged body. A “hype set” is used to characterize a great set, with choreography and mix that will also make the audience hype in a competition: they will be cheering, yelling, and clapping, which also is likely to positively influence the judges. But a set is only made hype in performance by its execution, when the performers put in a great amount of effort and have fun. Having fun is a part of being on the team, enjoying the experience of traveling and practicing together. And dancers are reminded that they should be smiling at all times and showing that they are putting effort into their moves—these must be communicated to the audience. There is yet another tension here, between a sincere desire to have fun and at the same time, an obligation to exert oneself, potentially to the point of collapse.

Hype also walks a thin line between the concepts of tradition and modernity packed into the “folk” and “modern” aspects of bhangra. BU Bhangra spends a long time developing hype “gimmicks,” parts of a set not typically associated with bhangra but weaved in by producers that can set one team apart from another. These gimmicks are visible part of the producers’ creative balancing act. Inserting segments of contemporary hip-hop, or segments of Bollywood-style music and dance, are ways of negotiating the bounds of “folk” and “modern” to push the genre in a particular direction.

These tensions within hype are not simply “musical concerns,” but ones which have broader implications for everyday life. Bhangra comes to act as a style for these students, a repository of meanings that they can draw from to style their social selves. In shaping bhangra in particular ways, such as a historically-oriented or a contemporary
dance form, dancers are making different sets of semiotic resources available: that is, through practice, they are actively involved in the process of defining bhangra.

The emphasis on “fun” is not one to be taken lightly—as I spent time with BU Bhangra, from auditions up until their first competitive performance of the year in Buffalo, I came to see how the relationships formed and cemented through the participation in bhangra are an incredibly significant part of what they do. In this thesis, I’ve made efforts to problematize the extent to which contemporary bhangra is read as a product of the South Asian diaspora, because so much of this experience seems to me to be part of the college student experience—one that I was familiar with and could engage in with the team.

I would suggest that further research on contemporary bhangra from a variety of disciplines, such as ethnomusicology, dance studies, and anthropology, could explore in more detail the performance of ethnicity and identity, with potential comparisons to other forms of South Asian dance. Bhangra was often described to me as one of dances most rooted in tradition, and comparable work with more “modern” teams such as Bollywood or fusion might illustrate differences, allowing researchers to question to what extent the tensions in bhangra are unique.

Sometime during about the middle of my fieldwork, I had a brief conversation regarding my research project with Kenneth Elmore, the Dean of Students at Boston University, and his office oversees and advises student groups at the university. I asked what he thought about the groups on campus that seemed limited to particular ethnic identities, as with many of the South Asian dance groups. When I discussed some of my
experience with the team to that point, including being confused with an auditionee. He said, “That’s it. That question, ‘Are you auditioning?’ says a lot, doesn’t it?” And perhaps it does: for BU Bhangra, concerns of ethnicity are secondary to the enjoyment of bhangra—that I was included in so much of what they did was a testament to this fact. While bhangra’s style owes much to a history of creative producers and a variety of contexts, a single narrative cannot effectively explain the overlapping ideas and practices. As a community brought together by their participation in social activity, co-producers of bhangra—captains, DJs, dancers, and audiences—shape their ways of being in the world by engaging with the styles of contemporary bhangra by embodying flow, feeling hype, and most of all, having fun.

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35 Kenneth Elmore, in discussion with the author, November 2013.
APPENDIX

In transcribing written speech, I have used the following conventions:

- “xxx” Direct quote from recorded interview
- *Italics* Speech reconstructed from author’s fieldnotes
- **Bold** Emphasized speech
- — Interrupted speech
- [xxx] Non-linguistic description
BIBLIOGRAPHY


