IMAGINING SPACE, CREATING COMMUNITY:
EMERGING TABLA PRACTICE IN THE INDO-GUYANESE DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

Mike Levine: Imagining Space, Creating Community: Emerging Tabla Practice In The Indo-Guyanese Diaspora
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Hindustani ceremonial tabla drumming, a long-established genre with roots in northern India, remains a cherished and important component for the New York City-based Indo-Guyanese community’s religious services. Through religious Hindustani tabla instruction, repertoire, and performance, members of this immigrant group maintain and construct new cultural links that identify the particular circumstances of their diasporic setting in New York City. What are the socio-musical dynamics that condition those trajectories?

Through interviews with students and teachers of Hindustani classical music, this thesis highlights aspects of tabla performance and instruction practice particular to this diasporic community. I argue that through disparate cultural influences, the relationship between students and teachers informs ideas of Indian heritage while introducing foreign musical concepts that challenge established markers of Indo-Guyanese heritage. By closely examining this immigrant group’s emerging tabla practices, my project illuminates how New York’s Indo-Guyanese immigrant population actively debates the role of heritage within their community.
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INTRODUCTION

Although research on the Indian diaspora has increased over the past decade, most studies on Guyanese Indians locate the community’s story in Caribbean destinations. Helen Myers conducted insightful research on Hindustani traditions in Felicity, Trinidad (Myers 1998). Peter Manuel investigated the emergence of tān singing in Trinidad, Guyana, and Fiji (Manuel 2000). But today, more Guyanese live outside their home country than remain, and the strong net growth of this group in New York City over the past five decades remains to be studied in detail. During this time, the group has gained a cultural foothold in the crowded, cosmopolitan spaces of Queens and Brooklyn. Guyanese immigrants are New York’s fifth largest immigrant group according to American Community Survey census figures recorded in 2016 (American FactFinder 2016), but continue to endure a reputation of always having just arrived. Yuvraj Ramsaroop, a fourth-generation Indo-Guyanese descendent of indentured laborers and a US immigrant, related this common concern in his memoir Realizing the American Dream: “And all you see is my skin color? All you see is that I am probably an Indian? All you see is that I am an immigrant? How come you don’t see me as an American?” (Ramsaroop 2010: 23)

Lack of attention obscures an expressive culture marking public events over the course of the Hindu religious calendar, including the Holi/Pagwah Festival, Ramayan in the Park, and the Diwali Motorcade, as well as myriad East and West Indian musical events taking place throughout the year. The tabla performs a significant role in constructing the soundscapes located
at each of these cultural events. In less public settings, the instrument provides accompaniment to *bhajans* (a semi-classical song form devoted to a particular Hindu god) sung at weekly Mandir rituals and a leading role in virtuosic improvisations performed at student showcases sponsored by local schools like Matra and the East Indian Music Academy. My focus on this instrument therefore will shed light on how this immigrant group represents themselves in both public and private spaces. The tabla sounds a particular cultural formation during each of these events, providing a highly visible means to identify cultural negotiations performed between the group’s Guyanese, East Indian, West Indian, and US-based cultural relationships.

The tabla identifies this group’s journey to New York City more directly than perhaps any other instrument, as its introduction to the Indo-Guyanese community parallels the group’s immigration to the US and Canada. The tabla was all but absent from Guyana. Although it was first brought over by indentured servants traveling from India’s Bhojpuri northern region during the 1830s (Roopnarine 2006: 6–9), the instrument was not able to achieve cultural saturation as pervasively as other percussion instruments like the sarangi, dholak, or dhantal. Unlike the tabla, these three instruments have a long history in Guyana, maintaining distinct lines of development separate from their history in India. Peter Manuel notes in *East Indian Music in the West Indies*, for instance, that the dhantal is difficult to locate today in India, but enjoys a strong presence in Guyana’s Hindustani religious music (Manuel 2000: 232). Unlike the dhantal or other aforementioned instruments, however, the tabla is expensive to purchase and requires specifically skilled manufacturers unavailable to most Indo-Guyanese. These factors may have contributed to the instrument’s failure to take root in Guyana in a significant way.

Another obstacle to the spread of Indian tabla performance in Guyana was the fact that proficiency in the instrument traditionally required a student to maintain a lengthy relationship
with a guru associated with a particular musical style, or school, called a gharānā (lit., of the house). Proficiency requires the player become skilled in the practices of one of six recognized gharānās: Ajrana, Benares, Delhi, Farrukhabad, Lucknow, and Punjab. Each of these six schools emphasizes a particular playing style, reflecting a unique tradition passed down through a teaching lineage from one generation to the next.

Celebrated Indian-American tabla performer and instructor Pandit Samir Chatterjee is a leading player in the Farrukhabad gharānā. This gharānā’s playing style is characterized by extensive use of resonant strokes. Indian Pandit Ujjal Roy today leads the Lucknow gharānā. This school is known for their characteristic full usage of the palm in addition to the fingers and for the use of ring and little fingers on the Dayan. The stylistic features of these gharānās serve as important markers to delineate stylistic expectations for repertory and content for a given school. Although, as will become clear, players have increased access to alternate playing styles today than in previous generations, stylistic differences between gharānās are still widely understood and appreciated by adherents and audiences, serving as the basis for the aesthetic judgment of tabla players in the twenty-first century.

Separated by a geographical expanse of almost 15,000 kilometers, these schools did not share proximity with the Guyanese Indian population. After obtaining independence in 1962, Indo-Caribbean performers in neighboring Trinidad began to include tabla instruments within their religious ensembles and developed a specific relationship with the gharānīc tradition. But due to political instability, this adoption never took place in neighboring Guyana after its own independence from the British Empire in 1966. Indeed, acute racial divisions between African and Indian Guyanese marked the political climate of this nation during the transition from colony

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1 The Dayan is the smaller of the tabla’s twin drums. It is always located to the right and produces lighter and higher tones, as opposed to the Bayan, the larger and bassier of the pair located to the left of the player.
to independent nation. Ruptures largely persist to this day, creating a challenging social and economic environment for residents and providing impetus for migration out of the Caribbean region (Cambridge 2015; Gampat 2015).

Lack of access to instruments and teachers, and a challenging social environment prevented tabla playing from becoming established as a musical tradition in Guyana. To this day, although the instrument has of late become resurgent in some temples and is now taught by publicly funded organizations such as Georgetown’s Indian Cultural Center, the tabla is still largely missing from its traditional role in most Guyanese Hindustani music ensembles, or khirtans. This historic unavailability of tablas and tabla instruction changed following the large-scale immigration of Indo-Guyanese people to New York City.

After Britain enacted a law in 1962 to restrict unregulated immigration, and the United States conversely opened its doors in 1965 to a wider immigrant pool, Indo-Guyanese people began migrating en masse to New York City (India Abroad 2017). The 2000 US Census identified 24,662 people in the Richmond Hill, Queens area of New York City who were born in Guyana, and 7,384 who were born in Trinidad; in that neighborhood, overwhelming proportions of both groups are of Indian descent (Bernstein 2009). As of 2017, the number had more than quadrupled: more than 80,000 Guyanese, mostly Indo-Guyanese from the Berbice farming region, now live in the contiguous Queens neighborhoods of South Ozone Park, Richmond Hill, and Jamaica, according to New York City’s Department of Planning (Robbins 2017).

Like finely woven saris and potato pea samosas, the tabla is part of a larger project of cultural recovery for this growing community. India is one of New York City’s largest trading partners, and it is also home to the largest Indian population in the United States. Within the urban space, Indo-Guyanese immigrants locate Indian products that were largely unavailable in
Guyana. Likewise, community members maintain dozens of stores carrying and selling Indian instruments at prices affordable to working-class immigrants. Gharānic schools provide instruction by recognized tabla instructors in all five boroughs, from the Farrukhabad gharānic tradition taught at Samir Chatterjee’s Chhandayan Center for Indian Music in Manhattan to the Taalim School of Indian Music located in Brooklyn and Manhattan. This school teaches from the Delhi, Ajrada, and Punjab traditions.

In each of these destinations, the tabla signifies new cultural possibilities for Indo-Guyanese immigrants. Historian James Kippen writes, “the term [tabla] conjures up images that include players from highly respectable social backgrounds” (1991: 37). Divorced from their native India while living in Guyana, twice-migrated, largely working-class Indo-Guyanese migrants in New York City are now able to re-access Indian musical traditions along with their attendant associations of social ascendancy. The tabla also marks a relationship with the Afro-Guyanese community, forming a common cultural link in the sound of West Indian chutney and soca musics. Likewise, the instrument marks exoticism and fascination for US-based musicians. These alternate trajectories carve a wide set of cultural relationships.

While the instrument is praised by some players and audiences for its role in cultural preservation projects, its use by younger Indo-Guyanese immigrants also reflects new possibilities in playing style that depart from the instrument’s East Indian origins. Through various interviews conducted with musicians and community leaders living in New York City, I identify stylistic traits of emerging tabla practices. I argue that these stylistic choices express cultural values meaningful to the community and address the following questions. What does the tabla envoice for this group? What happens when an instrument is (re)introduced to a community
after a long geographical and temporal absence? What does it mean that this instrument has been (re)introduced to this community in a diasporic location far from either Guyana or India?

**Researching Indo-GuyaneseTabla Practice in New York City: Methods and Challenges**

To examine these questions, between June 2017 and March 2018 I conducted ethnographic research and both formal and informal interviews with several New York City-based performers to discuss their tabla practice. Unconventional places such as public parks, restaurants, and temple spaces were useful to record the information obtained. I held several formally recorded interviews, and otherwise relied on memory to record information. Increased familiarity between particular community members and myself gradually encouraged an open rapport. In their rhetorical relationships with other West Indian groups, non-Indian US residents, and East Indians, Indo-Guyanese musicians focused on themes of hybridity that highlight universally shared cultural characteristics, while their own group identity is reclaimed through music performance. Often, it is in the gap between rhetoric about the instrument and its performance during concert that interlocutors position a practice uniquely associated with New York City’s diasporic setting.

Diaspora refers to movement of people across national borders, both away and toward an imagined homeland. According to James Clifford, “diasporic cultural forms such as art, literature, and music are deployed in transnational networks and are increasingly defined and understood in contexts of displacement that exceed place-bound concepts of discrete cultures” (1994: 307). The economically tied, technologically driven and border complexities of transnational systems have received particular treatments from scholars in the social sciences and humanities. Paul Gilroy describes the Black Atlantic as a “webbed network” connecting the local
and the global in ways that challenge nationalist notions of ethnic absolutism (1993: 29). For Appadurai, diaspora falls under the rubric “ethnoscape.” Together with “financescape,” “technoscape,” “mediascape” and “ideoscape,” this rubric completes his influential vocabulary for globalization. The ethnoscape captures the flux of people moving through a deterritorialized world and suggests a broader concept than diaspora. Ethnoscape includes “ethnic groups, sectarian movements, and political formations [that] increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities” (Appadurai 1996: 49). Social change and cultural transformation, therefore, occurs within an interconnected space. But the Indo-Guyanese community also confronts structural barriers in New York City that challenge mobility and circulate their cultural products in specific directions.

Situated in the center of an interconnected space between the cultural poles of Guyana and India, I argue that New York City’s Indo-Guyanese emerging tabla practice provides a material construction of their particular diasporic patterns. Tabla practice is marked by both hybridity and competition indicative of transnationally situated cultural traditions. Here, I draw from history and sociology, extemporizing upon David Lowenthal’s consensual competition model of society, published in West Indian Societies (1972), which draws from research developed by Talcott Parsons (1940). In this model, consensus is achieved between cultural groups as a consequence of a mutual competition for space. In Myers’ authoritative Music of Hindu Trinidad, this model is elaborated upon to investigate how Hindus in Felicity, Trinidad countered Christian proselytization by mimicking their structures while retaining “uniqueness in belief and ritual” (Myers 39).

In this model “West Indian social groups often maintain separate institutions and exhibit behavior while they share underlying values” (Lowenthal 1972: 90). Neighboring communities
adopt practices from one another in order to maintain necessary relationships. Performance practice meanwhile, identifies the creative gestures that players employ to maintain idiomatic cultural features. Jamaicans migrating to the U.K. following World War II utilized similar strategies in their widespread use of reggae and dub sound systems. These systems allowed Jamaicans to maintain cultural connections with the Caribbean while encouraging a performance practice that welcomed such disparate groups as Jamaican artists and white British skinheads to share the dance floor. “To find whites listening to roots music was not in itself unusual. Since the 1950s there had always been some young white people living in the ghettos alongside the immigrants who were interested in West Indian music” (Hebdige 1987: 78).

The tabla provides a uniquely productive resource to investigate this model’s applicability for twice-migrated communities in New York City, as the instrument can be commonly located in widely diverging sets of musical practices, identifying intra-cultural and intercultural trajectories in each of these settings. While the community is certainly developing actively and experiencing near-constant change, a snapshot of today’s tabla practices is useful in interpreting the directions this community is taking in both preserving and constructing heritage. No interlocutor speaks for a community entirely, but the subjects and spaces examined in this paper identify issues of hybridity and competition common to twice-migrated diasporic communities. Like Kaley Mason’s profile of a Chicago-based tabla player using empathetic musicality to find success in music performance and instruction in several intersecting communities, and Anna Schultz’s investigation into airs sung in a Minneapolis-based, Indo-Guyanese mandir, this paper examines the tabla as an instrument “enlisted in performance to narrate class, inclusion and diasporic identity” (Mason 2018; Schultz 2014: 393). These authors recognize the potential of instruments to both maintain and expand cultural identity in new and
unexpected directions. This project extends their work to include discussion of how tabla practice is constructed by a particular diasporic community, and how a diasporic community uses the tabla to construct their own shifting identities.

The first two chapters locate the tabla in shared spaces where New York City’s Indo-Guyanese community comes together. In the first chapter, I document the educational space’s role in the formation of an Indo-Guyanese performance practice. While most tabla players generally take from gharānic teaching traditions, Indo-Guyanese players also bring playing styles associated with their own folk traditions to tabla playing. Significantly, this community transposes the loud and often rapid hand gestures associated with the dholak drum to their tabla practice in New York City. This importation pulls tabla practice away from its East Indian roots, identifying an area where Indo-Guyanese performance style is kept at a distance from its East Indian peers. How does the importation of Guyanese dholak styles change playing style? How does the intersection of West and East Indian influences uniquely mark Indo-Caribbean practice and identify shifting cultural values?

The second chapter considers the spaces of Hindustani classical repertoire and popular British Caribbean musical styles. While New York City’s Indo-Guyanese community performs bhajans, kirtans, and ghazals typically associated with Hindu temples (often originating from devotional Bakhti traditions), they also include bhajans taken from Bollywood films in religious services. These bhajans are culturally valued in their native Guyana and identify new source material from which to shape religious services and other performance settings. While filmi music is instantly recognizable to most members of this immigrant community, their addition to temple repertoire marks a trend that would be unrecognizable in East Indian religious settings. This chapter will address how the addition of filmi music affects performance practices and
perceptions of Indo-Guyanese-ness. It also examines the role of West Indian music and culture in Indo-Guyanese diasporic settings.

The third chapter asks how the spaces of education and repertoire explored in the first two chapters allow Indo-Guyanese tabla players to fashion creative subjectivities within New York City. There are a number of mostly younger New York City-based Indo-Guyanese performers that utilize the tabla to express issues of marginalization, such as femininity and labor. These expressions have little place for public demonstration in either traditional East Indian values or in their native Guyana. In New York City, tabla players fashion new subjectivities that make these values visible. Consideration of these voices will highlight areas where members of this community express their desire for changing social values through interventions in Hindustani musical practice.

Indo-Guyanese residents comprise a sizeable portion of New York City’s immigrant communities, but their visibility in academic literature remains remarkably poor. Although they arrived in the US over fifty years ago, little has been published that documents their cultural history since migration to North America. It is my hope that this study will increase the visibility of a community that is often either assumed to incorrectly practice Indian music, or to duplicate Guyanese music within a foreign setting. In tabla performance, an observable area can be studied where New York City’s Indo-Guyanese community constructs new traditions and modes of performance particular to this destination. Reflection on the role of the tabla in this group’s musical performance will make visible the musical migrations and artistic contributions of this dynamic and rapidly changing group.
CHAPTER 1: TEACHING THE TABLA — THE EDUCATIONAL SPACE

“How can we bridge the gap between our ancestral culture and American culture?” A parent of a student attending East Indian Music Academy in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York posed this question in a May 2014 article published in The Queens Chronicle (Lord 2014). The inquiry underscores parental anxieties regarding the immense distance in both space and time that must be traversed if traditional Indian values are to be instilled in the next generation of Indo-Guyanese children living in the US. In the article, a student answers by asking another question: “In Monday night class, we talk about this. Where else am I going to learn about it?”

This exchange frames the stakes surrounding the teaching of East Indian heritage within New York City’s cosmopolitan urban spaces. Growing up in the multicultural mix of New York City, first and second-generation Indo-Guyanese immigrants are exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences: Indian, Guyanese, Caribbean, and US spaces all share a part in shaping their community’s diasporic experience. But for many parents, it is most important that East Indian ancestral heritage is formally transmitted to their children. Schools, including the East Indian Music Academy, are viewed as a sanctuary where these values are preserved and maintained across generational boundaries.

 Transmitting values of heritage and authenticity through closer contact with Indian music, East Indian Music Academy is respected for its stewardship of Richmond Hill’s Indo-Caribbean children. Through Hindustani music education, founders Ravideen Ramsamooj and Bharati Ramsamooj prepare pupils to perform music at local Mandir temples, while providing
immersion in East Indian values. Classical Hindustani instruments such as the harmonium, sarangi and tabla are taught to ensure that students receive both an education in music and in the social values of their ancestral India. The school’s mission statement, printed on their website’s “About Us” page, encapsulates these goals: “Promoting East Indian Culture and Spiritual Awareness through Music, Language, and other Arts Forms are the primary goal. We are committed to help our students raise their level of ethical and Moral consciousness so that they are better prepared to meet the challenges of society in which they live” (EIMA 2014).

The design of the school’s rehearsal and performance rooms represent these commitments in physical space. East Indian Music Academy is decorated in a manner that evokes the religious setting of a Mandir temple. The high ceiling and recessed chandelier in the main room evokes the cavernous feel of a Mandir’s sanctuary. There, a large sitting area adjoins a stage adorned with a wide array of statues and paintings of Hindu gods. Students learn their instruments while sitting on blankets spread across this room’s floor, while the instructor occupies a position of prominence on the stage in front of the classroom. Each week, several young tabla players meet to recite bols and practice their rudiments together.

While the school’s mission purports to preserve an authentic Indian culture, student performance practices contradict these rhetorical goals. Choices made in students’ playing style, repertoire, and accompanying instruments betray a hybrid sound that is marked as much by students’ personal preferences and West Indian cultural backgrounds as it is by formal Indian teaching models. Far from mimicking traditional East Indian music, West and East Indian traditions are learned and performed together by students in a stylistic fluidity unique to their personal experiences.
Indo-Guyanese musicians have a hidden history of learning percussion music informally. Informal music instruction marks an important mode of transmission for this culture. According to Timothy Rice: “Informal music learning among children in the absence of formal instruction is probably the most common mode of music learning around the world” (Rice 2003: 74). These informal lessons have generated unique musical forms for various percussion instruments. The dholak, notably, has developed into a widely practiced and well-established percussion instrument. Most informants with whom I have spoken had never heard of an instance where the dholak had been taught in a formal educational setting. The instrument is usually learned instead through mimicry and improvisation, and this mode of transmission generates particular stylistic practices.

These practices are now influencing tabla practice in New York City. Many of the dholak’s forms have been transferred to tabla when learned informally in West Indian settings, while schools such as the East Indian Music Academy offers a formally conducted educational setting that seeks to remove this influence from tabla education. But the influence of this instrument and other West Indian traditions persist in the Indo-Guyanese community, creating new meanings as it disrupts traditional Hindustani educational processes. Music and musical transmission are both “reflector and generator of social and cultural meaning” (Kruger 2009:1). The tabla, perhaps more than any other instrument used in Hindustani music, identifies a liminal space between East Indian teaching traditions and Indo-Guyanese performance and teaching practices where social and cultural meaning is contested and constructed.

According to Gerry Farrell, “the language of the tabla is not culture-specific” (Farrell 1997: 18). Farrell’s claim speaks to the portability of tabla practice internationally. The non-specificity of the instrument’s vocabulary has allowed tabla practice to be ported successfully to
a number of countries. While a number of ethnomusicological studies have been conducted on tabla teaching practices conducted in India (Stewart, 1974; Shepherd, 1976; Gottlieb, 1977; Kippen, 1988), few studies have been conducted outside of this place. Countries in the Indian diaspora such as Fiji, Trinidad, and the US have each developed particular teaching practices that fuse together both East Indian and local traditions. These teaching practices illuminate particular social and cultural concerns central to these spaces.

For Indo-Guyanese performers, studying Hindustani music in formal East Indian school settings connects the group across an imagined distance in time and space to a recognized model of musical excellence. Over the last two hundred years, tabla players have steadily grown in social respectability. Respectability is of primary importance to tabla players and South Indian musicians more generally. Kaley Mason points out that “…to weave ordinary South Indian musicians into the fabric of world music history is to braid stories of pride in musical craftsmanship with tales of material needs and desire for occupational respect” (Mason 2013:442). Tabla players provide a salient case of this historical ascendancy through social class and caste. According to James Kippen, the tabla is today the most commonly played drum set in North Indian classical music and a universally recognized marker of Indian-ness (Kippen 1988: xi). Historically, tabla players created the soundtracks to dance halls and palaces with the lowered class reputations these areas conjure. But since the early twentieth century, have come to be regarded as upwardly mobile, ascendant and respectable” (Kippen 1991: 37). This quote outlines the ascent of the tabla player’s social status as the historical culmination of several centuries. Tabla style and social support developed through a lengthy series of experimentations, eventually emerging as a national symbol of India. This cultural value remained for indentured
servants making their way from India to Guyana, even while they had limited access to the instrument themselves.

Their use of informal teaching methods developed in Guyana, coupled with a lack of available materials, generating a distinctly West Indian musical school of Hindustani percussion practice. In New York, these East and West Indian teaching spaces combine to condition the unique trajectory of this group’s musical education. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Indo-Guyanese diasporic tabla practice in New York City is constructed through a combination of formal and informal teaching models, renewed access to Indian instruments, and personal choices demonstrated in students’ learning methods. Through interviews and ethnographic observations of students learning to play this instrument, I came to understand Indo-Guyanese diasporic tabla instruction as a cross-section of gharānic traditions associated with East Indian Hindustani music transmission, the dholak playing style associated with Guyanese playing traditions, and the constant negotiation that takes place between those cultural poles in New York City.

**The Indian Tabla**

Indo-Guyanese students in New York City enthusiastically approach tabla lessons. Schools like the East Indian Music Academy routinely fill available slots far ahead of their registration deadlines with children eager to learn the intricacies of a complicated and demanding instrument. Akash Doobay (co-owner of the Indian Cultural Center and a tabla player and instructor himself) is forced to turn away students when his ranks fill beyond his scheduling availability. But why go to all this trouble? Why is the tabla, an instrument with little history in Guyana, considered fundamental to the musical practice of Indo-Guyanese people in diaspora?
Along with the sitar, this instrument is one of the iconic instruments of the Indian sub-continent. For many older community members, the tabla offers a historical connection to India that few other instruments conjure in the diasporic imagination. History reveals the tabla as symbolic of many of the triumphs of Indian nationalism, coupled with notions of East Indian respectability. At the same time, its history places the instrument at the center of a complicated narrative of transnationalism and colonialism.

From the beginning of India’s independence, the tabla has been used extensively in India’s nation-building projects (Kippen 1988: xi). According to Kripalani Coonoor, when All India Radio began its programming following India’s independence in 1947, its frequent broadcast of tabla performances by well-known musicians (alongside other nationally recognized instruments including the sarod, santoor, shehnai, and flute) allowed the instrument to rise to national prominence (Coonoor 2017). The tabla also accompanies all ten of India’s nationally recognized dances and can be found in every region across the expansive sub-continent.

Its twin drums are usually assumed to be indispensable to appropriate performances of Indian music, and no other rhythmic instrument can be substituted for its role in providing percussive accompaniment. The views of Daniel Neuman are typical of the rhetoric surrounding the tightly coupled relationship between the tabla and popular definitions of Indian music. He writes that the “tabla is mandatory as the drum accompaniment for all Hindustani musical performances except dhrupad and shahnai performances” (Neuman 1980: 123). This view suggests not only that Indian music traditions require a tabla in order to be performed correctly, but also that Hindustani music performance cannot rightly be called Indian music without the inclusion of the tabla. Simply stated, the tabla indexes a relationship with India, both musically and culturally.
But there is historical justification for troubling this assumed relationship. The lengthy and disordered history of the tabla upsets the narrative that this instrument has always been automatically identified with Indian culture. Depending on one’s cultural preference, the instrument is either traced as a product of the invading Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century or indigenous to India from the first millennium CE. According to Gottlieb, it is likely that the tabla first developed from the *pakhawaj*, a closely related instrument of Arab origin (Gottlieb 1993: 1–3). The barrel-shaped drum contains similarly designed tuning pegs and a conical shape. One popular legend describes the tabla as having originated in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century in northern India after a musician cut a pakhawaj into two pieces (Neuman 1974).

Development of the tabla’s formal practices coincided with the spread of institutionalized education throughout colonial India during the nineteenth century. In his study, *The Cultural Structure and Social Organization of Musicians in India* Neuman writes, “Musicians give the impression that gharānās are very ancient, but in reality this concept must date from the end of the 19th century” (Neuman 1974: 182). The British colonizers made compulsory education a high priority; educational goals were reflected in the growth of institutionalized musical education, as well (Catriona 2009: 365). According to Neuman, the emergence of gharānās in North Indian art music only began to appear in the middle of the nineteenth century, around the same time as the construction of the first railway lines and the increasing urbanization of music specialists (Neuman 1980: 130). Neuman’s study reveals how urban patronage opened pathways of mobility for low status performers. Trains and cities were responsible for both the formation of the gharānā system, and the institutionalization of courtly entertainment as national music.
There are six formally recognized tabla gharānās in India. All six schools are approximately two hundred years old with the exception of the Delhi gharānā, which traces its history to the early eighteenth century. One of the more striking differences between gharānic and Western instructional models is the guru-shishya (Sanskrit for master-disciple) relationship. This model is both highly systematized, and idiomatically specific to the Indian tradition. The guru-shishya tradition is a culturally dependent mode of learning originating from the Indian Brahmanical tradition of religious study. It was not until very recently in fact, that this system of transmission began to include anyone from outside (including women) a strict hereditary line to participate as students (Bakhle 2005; Kippen 1998).

Given the tabla’s reputation as a ceremonial instrument with established and representative gharānās, one would be forgiven for having the impression that adherents universally recognize the instrument’s traditions. But this is far from the case. The tabla is coupled with a history of notable stylistic shifts happening within a relatively short period. Many of the instrument’s transformations are reflected in stylistic changes introduced in the gharānic teaching system. The Farrukhabad gharānā, one of the oldest gharānās, is presently in the thirty-third generation of an unbroken lineage, but its adherents exhibit a number of compositional choices outside of the school’s official teachings. The gharānā’s present day practices are often compared with older playing styles more commonly associated with the Delhi gharānā. Zakir Hussain is recognized as the present-day master of the Punjab gharānā. This gharānā enjoys a long history, but its stylistic development shifted after Pakistan became a politically independent country after 1947. Hussain’s playing and reputation has shifted Punjab gharānic practice into new trajectories. He is one of the better known musicians of Hindustani classical music today, made famous through highly publicized collaborations with artists such as John McLaughlin,
The basic theoretical building blocks from which composition and form are constructed however, have remained constant in tabla education. Primarily considered a rhythmic instrument, the tabla contains an intricate set of metrical patterns, or tala, that can be challenging to the beginner. Indeed, my own attempts at tabla playing have been embarrassing at best. The tabla can be especially difficult for students more accustomed to learning from written scores, as instruction is primarily conducted orally. Various attempts at notation have been made. Notably, Hindustani musicians Bhatkhande and Paluskar in the late nineteenth century created a method to standardize notation in an effort to encourage mass music education and demonstrate that Hindustani music was as complex and rational as Western models of music education. “Notation served to advance the goal, shared by Bhatkhande and Paluskar, of creating of a musically educated audience amongst the Indian middle class” (Bakhle 2005:68). But to this day there remains no universally recognized system of notation available for the tabla or most forms of Hindustani music.

Every piece of music composed for the tabla is constructed from bols. A bol is the smallest discrete unit found in Hindustani music. These are onomatopoeic single-syllabic vowel sequences (the word “bol” literally derives from the Hindi word for “to speak”). There are fifteen bols used in tabla practice. Each bol is played on a specific part of the drum, and requires a particular hand gestures in order to generate the desired sound. Phrases are constructed from these bols that together form taals. A taal is the repeating framework that denotes the shortest complete metrical sequence in tabla composition. Hundreds (if not thousands) of different taals
exist depending on which classification system is utilized. Inside the taal, vibhags serve as groups of metrical phrases. Vibhags are the bars of Hindustani music. These can split up the taal into various sizes, depending on the size of the vibhag.² Teental is a full rhythmic sequence of the taal, as opposed to a vibhag cycle, which delineates a single rhythmic group within the larger taal. Tabla players frequently referred to both vibhag and taal in our interviews, so delineating between these two expressions is important for understanding metrical conceptions. Teental is characterized metrically as a sixteen-beat repeated sequence. In Western music, this taal most closely resembles common time. Its associated vibhag is equal to $4 + 4 + 4 + 4$ (A. Doobay 2017; Kippen 1998).

From these taals, a complicated and expansive range of compositional forms is constructed, ranging from the peshkar, a form that celebrates virtuosic improvisation, to the ekhatthu, a form that challenges players to perform with only one hand. Certain forms are associated more or less commonly with various cultures. These differences are also important delineators of cultural styles and cultural values. These areas will be covered in further depth in the following chapter, but it is important to bear in mind that the basic building blocks that all these compositional forms have in common have remained more-or-less consistent over the past two hundred years.

The Guyanese Tabla

Peter Manuel has described the Indo-Caribbean experience as “unique in its distinctive forms of isolation from and links to the ancestral homeland culture” (Manuel 2014: 133). Like most Hindustani music played in Guyana, style and practice attempt to duplicate the East Indian

² For example, ek taal is a 12-count cycle that is divided with 6 vibhags to make counts of 2 between other vibhags.
traditions of their ancestral home, while also reflecting their country’s relative isolation. In the absence of tablas or tabla teachers, new musical lineages developed that departed from the tabla’s role in Hindustani music, while retaining the prominence associated with percussion in their treatment of the dholak hand drum. The Indo-Guyanese community not only managed to preserve the tabla’s stylistic features in the performance gestures of the dholak, they also fashioned new stylistic practices.

Much of the devotional Hindustani music played by substituted instruments and improvised playing styles in Guyana marks an attempt to mimic the sound of traditional Indian bhajans and khirtans using available means. But it is far from clear how much actual influence Hindustani music had upon indentured servants arriving in Guyana, and how much of their traditions were the result of attempts made by enthusiastic amateurs to recreate styles with which they did not possess much personal familiarity. Most of this information has to come via oral histories to fill in the blanks left by an incomplete archival record.

Most scholars and musicians with whom I have spoken attribute this gap in formal knowledge of the tabla to the following factors: the tabla is expensive to purchase, and assembly requires skilled training unavailable to Indo-Guyanese musicians. The instrument furthermore requires teachers trained in gharānic traditions, but no evidence of these teachers making the journey over to Guyana exists. According to my interview with Mahendra Doobay (Pandit of the East New York-based temple Bhavanee Maa Mandir), “the dholak was the only means of drumming that we [Guyanese Indians] knew about, until the early ‘80s, when a few people were able to obtain a tabla” (M. Doobay 2017). Indeed, the journeys undertaken by indentured servants between India and Guyana were poorly documented, but they were not known for carrying music instructors in general, as music teachers were valued in India during the mid-
nineteenth century and the majority of indentured servants arriving in Guyana came from poorer classes. Taking the trip to Guyana would not have been worthwhile for these teachers. This situation resulted in certain instruments and music being transplanted, but a formal teaching model did not take root in Guyana until more recently.

The absence left a need for a percussion instrument to take the tabla’s place in the Hindustani music ensemble. Most of my interlocutors pointed to the dholak as the instrument largely responsible for filling this gap. The dholak is a two-headed hand-drum lacking either an exact tuning or a formal playing tradition. It made its way to Guyana along the same routes as the first Indian immigrants. The instrument is lighter and smaller than the tabla, cheaper to manufacture, and simple to learn—in other words, well suited to the needs of an immigrant community without access to financial means or trained teachers. Indo-Guyanese performers used this drum as their primary percussive accompaniment. The dholak became a substitute, albeit one with definite limitations, for the tabla. Although the instruments occupy distinct roles within a Hindustani musical framework, their construction is similar enough to where one could be interchanged with the other in a situation where instrumental variety is scarce. Both instruments are also considered descendants of the pakhawaj. This drum bears both sonic and material characteristics common to the dholak and tabla drums.

The transposition of the tabla to the dholak necessarily required several changes be made. The dholak has a much smaller timbral range than the tabla. This means that its textural range is fairly limited. It also has a vastly reduced number of tonal areas. The tabla has over ten distinct pitches and over fifty discrete tonal areas. According to Akash Doobay, the dholak is capable of generating only three distinct sounds, each with varying dynamic energy. He explained that these are created by
striking the larger end of the dholak near the middle with the flat of your middle and ring fingers. This produces a low, bass tone. Striking the larger side of dholak produces a more muted bass note. Quickly striking the smaller side of the dholak between the center of the drum and the rim with the tip of your middle finger produces a sharp, staccato note. (A. Doobay 2017)

This limited vocabulary means that the dholak affords a limited range of musical choices. This did not present a problem in India, where the dholak’s marginal role in performance demanded little of performers. Players in Guyana, however, without access to either the tabla or its traditional teaching methodologies, were challenged to place the drum in a more demanding function.

After developing a distinct musical style over the last 150 years, a particular dholak playing tradition has become firmly rooted in Guyana. In New York City, the relationship between the tabla and dholak has now come full circle. Many of the practices associated with the dholak have now been imported back to the tabla. The dholak has been described by my interlocutors as enormously important in determining the playing style of New York City-based Indo-Guyanese tabla performers. These include a tendency to conduct stroke patterns in quick succession at tempos around 130 beats per minute. Performances also include a high degree of improvisation with abrupt transitional phrases placed between most rhythmic cycles. These transitional areas are built from short cadential phrases referred to as mukhras and laggis. Mukhra and laggi are terms that identify non-repeating, cadential formulas usually found at the end or beginning of a cycle of theka. These formulas vary repetitive percussion patterns, called taals. The decision of which mukhra and laggi to play is left entirely to the musician. The choice made reflects on a player’s skill in improvisation (Kippen 1998; A. Doobay 2017).

Anand Prashad, a respected Indo-Guyanese tabla player and former student of the aforementioned Pandit Samir Chatterjee, told me that “three forms of Hindustani religious song,
bhajans, kirtans and ghazals, are played loosely by Guyanese tabla players, allowing the percussionist the freedom to throw in more mukhras and laggis” (Prashad 2017). In a performance at Hindu Milan Mandir in Queens, New York, Anand Prashad accompanies Pandit Ajay Jha in playing the tabla for the bhajan, “Ab guna chit na karo.” Improvisatory gestures are placed in short succession that temporarily increase rhythmic feel. These gestures rapidly increase in number and degree as the music progresses, until they virtually take over the rhythm entirely.

Indo-Guyanese tabla players also place a significant emphasis on improvisation. While improvisation is certainly considered an important marker of virtuosity in Indian practices, and indeed in all schools of tabla playing of which I am aware, Guyanese tabla players tend to emphasize longer, louder and more active periods of improvisation in their playing than do their Indian counterparts. Comfort in improvisation is especially useful when accompanying players without formal training, a situation that arises often in Indo-Guyanese performance settings. For instance, Mahendra Doobay would practice playing the harmonium alongside Lall Singh, who had learned to play in what Doobay describes as “the right way,” meaning from Indian teachers, but the rhythmic cycles that Singh expressed did not quite match the rhythm of Doobay’s harmonium. According to Doobay: “I would tell him, this beat you’re playing does not work for me, can you change it up? And he would say, no, this is the appropriate beat. So Lall Singh had this attitude, I am the tabla player, you don’t tell me what to do” (M. Doobay 2017). In order to accompany Doobay on the tabla, Singh needed to move away from the strict rhythmic patterns he had learned from his Indian teacher, but in this case, he had difficulty doing so.

This account reflects a common tension found between Indo-Guyanese modes of playing established in Guyana, and traditions adapted by Indo-Guyanese performers from Indian
teachers. Students of Indian teachers understand how to play an instrument by memorizing a strict set of rules governing stylistic competence, but otherwise Indo-Guyanese musicians draw from styles learned through observation within an informal social setting. Playing style requires adaptation for musicians hailing from either of these traditions to produce music in concert. In this case, Lall Singh improvised musical details in order to accommodate the informal playing style of his partner. Learning the tabla from an Indian instructor legitimizes Guyanese tabla players, but performance settings require that they play in an adapted style compatible with Indo-Guyanese expectations. The question of which styles to import from Indian traditions, and which to retain from Guyanese traditions, is crucial to locating emerging New York City-based Indo-Guyanese tabla playing styles.

**The Diasporic Tabla in New York City**

How does musical education practiced in New York City both reflect Indian and Guyanese practices within a diasporic setting? The tabla’s relationship with Indian-ness is more a product of the Indo-Guyanese imagination than a reflection of India’s current social and cultural realities. Indian indentured servants arrived in Guyana during the 1840s—a century before Indian independence. Immigrants came from all over the subcontinent, and in some cases were forcibly kidnapped from their homes and made to serve lengthy periods in a foreign environment. The majority of those settlers had few material means to access their paternal home, and popular views of India from Guyana reflect this temporal and spatial distance. In this absence, a vision of Indian-ness was constructed that failed to reflect the changing reality of their homeland, creatively capturing the diasporic spirit of a utopian homeland instead. Literary scholar Vijay Mishra articulates this attitude: “Homeland is the desh (in Hindi) against which all
the other lands are foreign or videsh. When not presented in this “real” sense, homeland exists as an absence that acquires surplus meaning by the fact of diaspora” (Mishra 2005). This vision of desh as surplus meaning becomes a reality in the formal education that Indo-Caribbean immigrants fund for young Indo-Guyanese music students learning Hindustani music in New York City.

An example drawn from formal and informal learning processes illuminates some of the winding cultural paths that tabla instruction takes in this urban space. In the summer of 2014, I attended a trip where the two co-founders of the Indian Cultural Center, Akash Doobay (son of Mahendra Doobay) and his colleague Ravi Mistra, took twenty young students on a weekend trip to the Pocono Mountains to teach them classical Hindustani tabla and singing in a setting far removed from the urban sprawl of New York City. Most of these students were second-generation immigrants, growing up in and around the Richmond Hill area of Queens, NY. In this secluded atmosphere, the children were able to focus on the intricacies of Hindustani tabla instruction with little interruption. Students received daily instruction for long periods of committed group learning.

Each morning, students were encouraged to play the tabla together in small groups while singing corresponding bol syllables out loud. In the afternoon, students concentrated on improving their performances of specific repertoire. In the evening, they wrapped up their practice with an informal performance in which they displayed what they had learned, and solicited feedback from their teachers and one another. While not taking tabla lessons myself, I sat with the students and observed these exercises. I also provided accompaniment to the students by playing acoustic guitar. The weekend concluded with a short recital in which several members sung and played tabla together, demonstrating new skills and greater familiarity with a
Hindustani semi-classical repertoire. In the process, students also gained familiarity with Hindustani religious and social traditions. When I asked Akash Doobay to explain his teaching model, he impressed upon me the importance of meditation techniques in inculcating values of mindfulness and concentration for his young students (A. Doobay 2017).

According to Doobay, he named his school Indian Cultural Center to conjure a rhetorical relationship with Georgetown, Guyana’s Indian Cultural Center. Both schools have a few philosophies in common. Each organization places an emphasis on community learning, and Hindustani music instruction to provide greater community solidarity through a shared learning experience. This is similar to the rhetoric of the East Indian Music Academy. In 2015, Doobay changed his school’s model to focus exclusively on the guru-shishya method of transmission traditionally offered in India. He also changed the school’s name to Matra to reflect this switch in pedagogical emphasis. The pedagogical philosophy of Matra does not explicitly profess to offer students a connection to Indian values and traditions. His goal is to establish new traditions that give tabla players the opportunity to expand their playing beyond the level of playing expected of students in Mandir spaces. Says Doobay, “I want them to rise above and explore tabla on another level that dwarfs temple playing” (A. Doobay 2017). Matra’s methods find a balance between East and West Indian methods of musical education that are emerging as common in diasporic locations. Doobay’s school emphasizes private settings associated with guru-shishya transmission, while also emphasizing techniques that allow his model to speak favorably to parents whose goals are to give their students this kind of grounding. Doobay’s efforts negotiate a space between traditional gharānic rhetoric, while encouraging students to expand their level of tabla playing outside of traditional Indian and Caribbean musical roles.
But this model of teaching is not typical for many Indo-Guyanese music students. Apart from the formal model espoused in this example, a majority of instrumental teaching continues to happen orally, and is later reinforced in performance. There is a video hosted on YouTube of two young Indo-Guyanese students performing an improvised peshkar in Brooklyn, New York during the city’s Guyana Folk Festival from 2010 (GreenFairy1014 2010). A peshkar is a highly improvised structure that demands a level of improvisational skill of the performer. Structurally, it contains three sections (similar to the vocal ālāp form), and it is usually heard performed during a solo recital (Clayton 1996). In the video, one of the students plays the tabla while the other plays the dholak. Together, each references the other’s instrument during their improvisatory flights. These two players trade parts back and forth throughout the video’s approximately two-minute duration. The video demonstrates a musical transmission between the dholak and tabla typical of Indo-Guyanese diasporic musical settings. Both the dholak and tabla player exhibit a playing style slightly ahead of the beat, loud and sharp attacks, and a frequent application of full palm gestures.

The video demonstrates a process of mimesis, which Toynbee and Dueck (2011) argue is typical of migrated music. They demonstrate how migrated music often moves through an initial period of mimesis, followed by a period where the copied object becomes familiar, localized, and indigenized by the local culture (Toynbee and Dueck 2011: 10). Such is the case with the relationship between the dholak and tabla drums. While encountering the tabla and mimicking the sound of Indian gharānic traditions, performers are at the same time complicating established stylistic rules by adding their own traditions. Thus producing friction between adherents of different stylistic positions and the cultural values these styles represent.
The dholak marks a primary historical precedent to the emerging style of Indo-Guyanese diasporic tabla playing. For many Indo-Guyanese and Indian tabla players however, the dholak, and the stylistic practices associated with this instrument, is also responsible for corrupting the stylistic practices of Indo-Guyanese tabla musicians. Many Indo-Guyanese musicians are routinely forced to defend their stylistic practices against charges of musical corruption. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. Uncle Dex is a fantastic tabla player. Just because he lives in Trinidad doesn’t mean he doesn’t know his stuff. Indians aren’t always superior to Trinidadians. Let’s not get carried away with trying to make this into a culture battle” (dholakguy 2008). This comment is typical, written in response to various comments critical of a performance from popular Indo-Trinidadian tabla player Dexter Raghunanan, whose performances display a stylistic resemblance, in his dynamic and improvisatory energy, to Indo-Caribbean dholak players. Similarly, Indo-Trinidadian tabla player Tony Ramasar is often attacked for his faster, distinctively Indo-Caribbean style of playing. A particular post responding to a 2008 performance uses strong language to dismiss Ramasar’s unorthodox playing style: “unfortunately the tabla player, Ramasar, plays with purloined fingers since he became the embodiment of deception” (trinitabla 2011).

These quotes highlight the tension between the assumed authority of Indian music when compared with the regional characteristics associated with Guyanese traditions. Guyanese music is often referred to as a lesser imitation of the “real thing.” This reputation even extends to many Guyanese performers themselves. Akash Doobay, for instance, acknowledges stylistic differences between Indian and Indo-Guyanese playing styles but prefers the softer, and stricter attention to styles associated with classical Indian tabla playing traditions. For many Indo-Guyanese performers, however, style is a fluid notion that travels across a shared, international
Indian cultural network. This network traverses space to include an imagined ancient India, as much as it traverses time to also include the present realities of the urban United States. These relationships connect to issues of authenticity that separate audiences and performers across generational boundaries in the Indo-Guyanese community.

The tabla is assumed to represent Indian-ness, but the instrument is also recognized as a universalizing force. In an interview with Chicago classical music radio station 98.7WFMT, the celebrity tabla player Zakir Hussain described his own history as a tabla player connected to global religious traditions: “Every day I grew up studying the Quran, singing Christian hymns, and playing Hindu devotional music” (Raskauskas 2016). He goes on to say “India is an interesting concoction of so many different cultures – Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu – all coexisting and working in a unified way” (Raskauskas 2016). Hussain’s India encompasses the world’s monotheistic religions in a universalizing discourse, with India placed at the center. This discourse positions Hussain’s tabla practice as appropriate to music projects far removed from the stylistic requirements of Hindustani devotional music. He has participated throughout his career in world music groups, Jazz festivals, and Afro-Cuban ensembles. This kind of rhetoric is common to contemporary tabla instructors. Universalist notions place their subjects in the center of history and marginalize other areas towards the peripheries.

Hussain’s words are accepting of difference, but establish a hierarchy where Indian classical music lies at the center of his rhetoric. Indian music, according to this rhetoric, has a vocabulary large enough to capture the spirit, if not the letter, of other cultures. Indo-Guyanese performance style sounds a relationship shared between cultural partners that is continually responding to these tensions. This style responds to particular geographical and temporal circumstances, allowing subaltern populations a voice even while marginalized in other areas of
their lives. This particular snapshot of Indo-Guyanese tabla performance illuminates a culture in transition, and the musical characteristics accompanying these shifts.

I propose that the stylistic negotiations made in tabla drumming between gharānic aspects of style and the changes made to accommodate an Indo-Guyanese audience through dholak drumming and oral transmission is sounded in individual musical performances. These musical performances are subsequently cultivated into broader socio-cultural associations. Socio-cultural associations destabilize national identities in favor of diasporic cosmopolitanisms. Cosmopolitanism, as practiced by Indo-Guyanese tabla players, contains traits that are theoretically similar to George Lipsitz’s concept of anti-essentialism. Indo-Guyanese players participate “…in so many communities and cultures all the time that expressing their ‘essence’ means exposing the plurality of their cultural and personal identity“ (Lipsitz 1994: 64). Disconnected culturally from their current residences in the US, and geographically from the diasporic homeland of India, Indo-Guyanese musicians use the tabla as a form of anti-essentialism that places this group in several places at once. In the following study of the community’s repertoire, I examine another area equally responsible for generating the particular stylistic character of Indo-Guyanese tabla performance.
CHAPTER 2: HEARING THE TABLA – THE COMMUNITY SPACE

Teaching provides a useful model to transmit musical and social values from one generation to the next. Diasporic tabla practice is also influenced by the repertoire that players perform and listen to in their daily lives. This repertoire does not find its way into teaching situations, but instead grounds a range of additional musical practices. Indo-Guyanese players use both repertoire and personal style to produce new musical and cultural characterizations while simultaneously upholding traditional stylistic models.

Especially for diasporic groups, music does not identify the particularities of a single culture; instead, music identifies relationships shared and negotiated between cultural groups. The multiple diasporas experienced by twice-migrated cultures characterize a web of “affiliation and affect” (Gilroy 1993: 16) that multiplies this community’s creative output in numerous cultural directions. These affiliations point eastward to India and south to Guyana and the Caribbean. Particularly for younger community members, a pan-Caribbean identity often carries greater importance in stylistic practice than do their Indian roots. This speaks to a larger recognition of the shared West Indian identity informing playing style for many Indo-Guyanese musicians. “West Indian-ness” is a term unique in its ability to cut across racial barriers of the British Caribbean. There are many signifiers that Indo-Guyanese people use on a daily basis, especially in diasporic settings (e.g. Caribbean, South American, Guyanese, Indo-Caribbean, Indian, and British). “West Indian,” despite the term’s racialized origins, is uniquely suited to describe the Black and Indian racial identities of the British Caribbean. Although the West Indies
is often used synonymously as a means to describe the whole Caribbean, it is most often invoked politically to describe the part of the Caribbean that includes the original British colonies (Gampat 2015; Lowenthal 1972).

Guyana, however, is located in South America. Indeed, the term West Indies also speaks to the difficulties in geographically framing this destination. Guyana shares strong cultural connections with countries with which it does not share a physical border, including the British Caribbean and India, but finds little cultural currency in common with actually neighboring Latin American countries. But the phrase “West Indian,” as used in the genre designations of music produced by Black and Indian artists, has explanatory power in describing the cultural and musical ties formed historically between these two communities. In soca and chutney music, musical links shared between the West Indian nations of Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Guyana, St. Vincent, Barbados, Jamaica, and others imagine a common cultural link between the black and Indian residents of these nations.

It would be overly reductive to attribute the complicated West Indian identity entirely to two genres of music. Historical moments have also brought these communities into close cultural contact over the past two centuries. Africans worked as slaves in Guyana and the British Caribbean from the late sixteenth century until emancipation in 1838. Indian indentured laborers replaced this workforce, but the two cultures maintain an active dialogue. Cultural discourse is often tense and sometimes violent, as nations progress from colonialism to independent nations (Younger 2009).

For many nations of the British Caribbean, repeated contact made between their country and the Indian homeland also contributed toward cultural development. During the late twentieth century, there was significant cultural contact made between Trinidad and India for instance. In
1974, the Sai Baba religious movement created and maintained schools in and around Port of Spain that were based around religious studies that included Hindustani religious music. Indian teachers, such as Pandit Anindo Chatterjee to Swapan Chaudhuri, came to Trinidad in the 1980s to set up well-funded musical schools based on gharānic pedagogy. These imports allowed generations of musicians to gain familiarity with Indian traditions amidst a multicultural context. Due to political instabilities, this same pattern did not follow in neighboring Guyana. Indeed, Indo-Guyanese people have faced a number of obstacles in preserving Indian culture that is particular to this country’s history. Through a number of military coups, orchestrated both within and outside the country (including the CIA-sponsored dismissal of President Jagan in 1964), Indians have been consistently denied representation in their home country (Galeano 1997: 137). The move to New York City increases contact with Indian traditions, while maintaining generations of West Indian stylistic production.

Multiple diasporas are particularly evident in how tabla players interact with repertoire. The tabla is found in virtually all genres of West and East Indian music. Members of New York City’s Indo-Guyanese community hear the tabla performed when they turn on the radio or stream a Spotify playlist, attend a dance performance at their neighborhood mandir, walk the streets during the annual West Indian Parade, or stream a Bollywood film on Netflix. In each of these examples, performance style determines which cultural relationships are highlighted and which are minimized. Bhajans and kirtans heard during satsang services identify cultural encounters with India. Chutney, calypso, and soca music played during parades and nightclubs identifies a specifically West Indian relationship. This chapter explores how tabla players actively construct these cultural relationships through their stylistic choices in performance.

Style refers to the set of structures, functions, contexts and meanings generally associated
with a given musical practice. According to Anna Schultz, diasporic communities use style to “articulate particular social positions” (Schultz 2014: 393). Especially for younger tabla players, style marks an area where performers articulate shifting social positions that identify broader socio-cultural associations than are referenced through direct education. I argue that the choices made when negotiating and challenging these boundaries is aurally evidenced in this community’s emerging tabla practices.

Players use style to widen the boundaries of Indo-Guyanese-ness in diaspora. As Zoe Sherinian relates in her study of Tamil Christians, “style becomes the determining factor of and primary marker for changing socio-religious identity and meaning” (Sherinian 2007: 275). Players maintain classical Hindustani playing styles in many of their performance approaches. At the same time, they also introduce new styles familiar to listeners of West Indian popular music into their playing. Such practices challenge stylistic traditions that imagine a link to an ancestral Indian homeland and produce a friction that serves as a powerful creative force in performance.

Friction, according to Anna Tsing, provides a metaphor for the diverse and opposing social interactions that make up our present-day world. I observed stylistic friction as the root of this community’s emerging tabla practices and their wide use of available repertoire. As Tsing relates in the introduction to Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection: “friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing 2005: 5). Indo-Guyanese tabla players construct new arrangements of culture and power by negotiating style through a wide range of repertoire located in the Caribbean and India.

The first chapter discussed educational settings where leaders of schools instruct students in tabla practice, either in formal or informal settings. The concern in this chapter is how cultural groups, unlike educators and culture brokers, negotiate stylistic practices in West and East Indian
music as markers of shifting social identity. Tabla players actively rearticulate the sound of the tabla through their choices of repertoire, methods of playing, and the spaces where they perform. Through bhajans, popular styles, and performance in temple spaces, younger members of this community are inventing new performance traditions from existing musical sources and challenging what music is heard in temple spaces.

**Bhajans**

A number of classical Hindustani repertoires can be heard during Indo-Guyanese mandir services, including bhajans, ghazals, thumrīs, qawwālis, and scriptural recitations. Tabla players ground their engagement with these semi-classical styles by creatively interpreting the music’s raga-based melodic framework, only loosely following performance conventions. Ghazals and qawwālis mark sensual and devotional musical traditions associated with Islamic traditions. Thumrīs are associated with ecstatic Hindu traditions, including Krishnaism and Vaishnavism. Performance style is light, repetitive, and poetically texted. As texts are non-liturgical, these styles are not generally performed during temple services and are not as highly regarded as the bhajan and ghazal forms, which tend to be played in a looser and more flexible structure. Bhajan and ghazal forms usually take their texts from the Puranas, compositions of Bhakti movement saints, or spiritual themes from Hindu scriptures (Wilke and Moebus 2011: 33–37).

All of these practices share a musical root common to all forms of Hindustani classical music: the melodic framework of the raga. Singers and instrumentalists possess the freedom to weave in and out of each musical space with remarkable flexibility because of this common framework. In Indo-Guyanese temples, it is not uncommon to hear a thumrī move into a ghazal with ease. Although these two forms express different stylistic goals, their similar frameworks
allow this kind of flexibility. This is significant as it identifies a departure from East Indian temple services, where it would be unlikely that a performer would engage with this repertoire consecutively. Of all these forms, the most commonly encountered repertoire is the Bhajans performed regularly during temple services. According to Akash Doobay, “these forms are most common because those who do not know classical music or the raga system are still able to express feelings through Bhajan singing” (A. Doobay 2017). Indeed, bhajans contain a highly flexible form that invites congregational participation at all levels of skill.

The several two-hour to three-hour services at Bhavanee Maa Mandir that I have attended between 2010 and 2017 each began with a solo performance of devotional songs (bhajans). This is followed by the fire ritual (havan) accompanied by Sanskrit chants led by Pandit Mahendra Doobay, more bhajans, a short sermon on the scriptures by the pandit, bhajans again and announcements by the temple elders. After the puja portion of a mandir’s satsang service, congregants again typically engage in the singing of bhajans. These bhajans vocalize the Bhakti tradition of Hinduism, consisting of songs of praise devoted to a particular Hindu god. A solo vocalist sings these in a loose and improvisational style. A harmonium usually adds harmonic accompaniment to the texture, and the tabla provides rhythmic accompaniment and metric momentum. Congregation members remain seated, joining in the performance in a language of swaying movements and expressive hand gestures. During services, I would usually sit with the congregants on the floor of the temple, but occasionally would accompany with acoustic guitar on the stage alongside Akash Doobay and the other musicians.

Bhajans are traditionally chosen according to the Hindu god associated with a particular mandir. For instance, if a mandir belongs to a Vaishnavic tradition, its congregants and Pandit would likely sing Bhajans such as Hari Hari Narayana in devotion to Lord Vishnu, their
temple’s namesake. In Guyana, however, this practice is far less restricted. According to an interview conducted with Mahendra Doobay, resident Pandit at Bhavanee Maa Mandir, Guyanese Indians are just as likely to sing a Bhajan directed towards Vishnu, as one directed towards Shiva during a given Satsang. This echoed sentiments expressed by his son, Akash Doobay, during a phone interview I conducted: “Guyanese folks come from all kinds of [Hindu] religious practices, and kept those songs in Guyana” (A. Doobay 2017). This cosmopolitan attitude towards temple worship has been carried over during the trip Indo-Guyanese immigrants took when moving to the US and reflects the means through which this group has learned and incorporated Indian heritage within their belief systems. This cosmopolitan attitude towards religious practice is also characterized visually. Upon entering Bhavanee Maa Mandir, I was struck by the number of different Gods occupying positions of prominence on the temple’s stage. Krishna, Shiva, Lakshmi, Ganesh, and others share equal billing at the temple stage (see Figure 1).

Bhajan devotional forms are not the only form of musical plurality found in Indo-Guyanese Bhajan performance. For many Indo-Guyanese immigrants, filmi music represents a clearer connection to their heritage than do the Bhakti bhajans more commonly found in East Indian temples. While Indo-Guyanese congregants are familiar with the religious music of their East Indian counterparts, they have also incorporated bhajans originally recorded for Bollywood films into mandir services. These include well-known bhajans like “Satyan Shivan Sundaran” from the movie of the same name (originally sung by legendary playback singer Lata Mangeshkar), and “Madhuban Mein Radhika Nache Re,” taken from the 1960 film Kohinoor. This music fashions diasporic subjects in temple services, not unlike the role of Bollywood bhajans heard at the Minneapolis-based mandir where Anna Schultz conducted research in 2014.
Schultz discusses the lack of notice of these songs to diasporic subjectivities in her article. “Despite the normative nature of popular Hindi films, surprisingly little attention has been paid to how the films are used to fashion diasporic lives deemed traditional” (Schultz 384: 2014). As a tabla player, musicians such as Akash Doobay are responsible for providing appropriate accompaniment for these works that responds to a specifically diasporic social setting. This demands a stylistic flexibility not required in traditionally Indian tabla performance settings.

Though songs focus on religious themes in their lyrics, they were not originally composed for a religious context. Bhajan appearances in Bollywood films are performed along with the dance ensembles, colorful outfits and dense instrumentation usually associated with the film industry. However, this music is important to New York City’s Indo-Guyanese Hindustani community because songs are recognizable to congregants who had heard these bhajans performed in their associated films while living in Guyana. Bollywood bhajans represent specific historical trajectories in the Indian diaspora. While Bollywood films participate in nation-building projects in India, but they also acquire new meanings when disseminated globally. Bollywood offers Indian diasporic youth a platform for organizing their cultural life that is “acceptable” to the West and at the same time retains a measure of difference (Ray and Mukherjee 2014: 114).

The popularity of Bollywood films across the global Indian diaspora places the interests of Guyanese Indians within acceptable boundaries of taste. The stars of these films represent popular cultural exports originating from the Indian homeland. Filmi playback singers Anuradha Paudwal and Lata Mangeshkar not only impart feeling of cultural pride for Indo-Guyanese people in diaspora, but their standard, urban Hindi (rather than Caribbean Bhojpuri) is unmediated through Caribbean time and space, representing a direct connection to an imagined
Indian subcontinent. These stars both universalize India in the global popularity of their films and appeal to Caribbean ideals of Indian nationalism. Tabla players utilize their stylistic knowledge in the service of this wide range of content, often having to adapt playing style to accommodate. When accompanied by a tabla, Bollywood material becomes connected more directly to gharānic traditions associated with India.

This connection is demonstrated when the Bollywood bhajan “Madhuban Mein Radhika Nache Re” (lit., “In the honey gardens, Radha danced”) is played during a mandir service. The tabla player, Anthony Balram reinterprets this music as one would only hear it played at a Guyanese Mandir (Kilawan 2013). The vocalist in this video is Benny Parag, a respected musician within New York City’s Indo-Guyanese community. The bhajan is performed here with a high degree of artistic customization. Parag begins by singing the work slowly, gradually stringing the words of the text together between long, melismatic phrasings by singing vocables for several phrases with only a harmonium as accompaniment. He eventually adds lyrics to the developing melody, and members of the congregation join him in singing. After an extended introduction, the bhajan gains tempo and eventually draws to a climax. During the height of the song, Balram takes over with a solo that mirrors both Parag’s vocal patterns and the dholak player’s volume. The playing here is loud, fast, and highly improvised. The musicians are not recreating an existing work but rather are artistically reinterpreting the song as a West Indian work. The melody and lyrics historically and culturally connect this song to Bollywood, and therefore India, but the loud, fast, and improvised gestures made by the tabla and dholak player connect the bhajan to popular West Indian styles like chutney and soca music. As happens often in Hindustani musical performance, the tabla here serves as a bridge between the melodic virtuosity of the lead vocalist and the rhythmic accompaniment of the dholak.
Popular Styles

Hindustani classical music informs much of the content of Indo-Guyanese music but only partially influences playing style. Indo-Guyanese tabla players have incorporated this music, but are not beholden to it either. According to Jason Toynbee and Byron Dueck, “through mimesis, both powerful and subordinate groups appropriate and transform aspects of one another’s difference, and in doing so attain power over that otherness” (Toynbee and Dueck 2011: 7). These kinds of markings also exist in uses of the tabla that incorporate markers of popular music. More than most other stylistic formations, Indo-Caribbean popular music marks a constant process of borrowing, acculturation, and incorporation of a wide range of cultural materials. These cultural materials are constantly shifting and jostling for attention. Nowhere is this more present than in the hybrid mixes of African- and Indian-derived popular styles. The treatment of African derived styles by the Indian community marks racial tensions historically complicating relationships between African and Indian Guyanese communities.

Popular forms of Afro-Caribbean music predate popular forms with Indian representation by a number of years in the form of calypso. Calypso was one of the earliest forms of popular music to take root in the English Caribbean. The style’s origins are located in Afro-Caribbean styles popular in Trinidad and Tobago dating from the mid-nineteenth century. The genre eventually spread outwards to enjoy popularity throughout much of the Caribbean and traveled northwards to the US and Canada when Harry Belafonte brought the style international success through his 1956 hit “Banana Boat Song.” Calypso marks a common root for several popular British Afro-Caribbean music styles (Ramnarine 1996, 1998; Manuel 2000).

Popular Indo-Caribbean music arrived in the mid twentieth century. Chutney music marks a more recent stylistic development with roots in the religious Hindustani music of the
Indo-Caribbean population. Its first stars date from the 1960s, when British Caribbean countries first gained access to recording equipment. The ensemble is lifted entirely from the traditional kirtan associated with Hindustani music, but it is updated with electronic elements. The rhythms move significantly faster and lyrically range from themes of seduction and desire to reflections on the global pathways of immigrants. Much of the lyrical content found in chutney music addresses issues of travel and mobility from the Caribbean to various urban destinations throughout North America. Texts discuss transnational mobility for Indo-Guyanese artists reiterating cultural and physical connections to diasporic points across the Americas, while retaining a sense of home in the Caribbean.

The tabla used in chutney is played fast, light, and very repetitive. The instrument is played as accompaniment amid a large ensemble that usually includes bass guitar, drum machine, electric guitar, synthesizer, dholak, harmonium, dhantal, and tassa drums. Its more popular players include Sundar Popo and Ravi B; both hail from Trinidad. Gajraj was one of the earliest Indo-Guyanese musicians to attain pan-Caribbean popularity. He is arguably the most well-known figure in Guyanese chutney music due to his contributions to a style more commonly associated with Trinidad. His song lyrics reflect a diasporic subjectivity commonly located in chutney texts. Gajraj’s popular 1992 song “Guyana Baboo” expresses this diasporic identity. There, he discusses traveling between Guyana and the US as a singer.

Me come from de country dey call Guyana
Land of de Bauxite, de Rice and Sugar
Me say pack up me grip and leh me go
Me gat fe go back ah Guyana some more
Singing in de US and Canada
I am coming back man fe nice up Guyana
Me say pack up me grip an leh me go
Me gat fe go back ah Guyana some more
In these lyrics, Gajraj projects a self-fashioning with mobility at its core. He establishes himself as an authoritative representative of Guyana (“baboo” referring to a courtesy title bestowed to a Hindu man), directly as a result of the amount of traveling he is able to conduct to and from his country of origin. Sundar Popo’s 1976 song “Scorpion Gyal” likewise relates that singer’s attempts to bed a woman, centering on themes of mobility to relate his desires:

Darling I can roam from place to place
Singing and searching for your special face
Tell meh the number ah yuh plane, meh darlin
When we go meet up again, meh darling

Popo’s pleas keep him engaged in a constant state of travel. Although chutney music is traditionally identified with the Indo-Caribbean community, there are also instances where Afro-Caribbean performers have contributed to the genre’s stylistic formation in soca music. Soca music is perhaps the most popular contemporary style found in the British Caribbean. Primarily an Afro-Caribbean style, the genre remains one of the most popular global exports of the British Caribbean today. Its transnational roots lie in Jamaican dancehall and reggae, along with soul and funk imported from the US. Historically, this genre has been unusually open to incorporating elements from outside cultures within its carnivalesque atmosphere. Guyanese audiences regard Shorty as primarily responsible for incorporating the tabla into soca music. Notably, Lord Shorty fused soca and gospel in a style he called Jamoo during the late 1980s. But it was not until several popular songs released in the mid-1990s from Trinidadian calypso singer Black Stalin that a recognized blend of soca and chutney began taking shape (Ramnarine 1996).

Black Stalin expresses themes of Black Nationalism in songs including “Black Man Feelin’ to Party” and “Look on the Bright Side.” These songs politically engage with black Caribbean empowerment. In 1995, he unexpectedly sung in chutney style for the song “Tribute to Sundar Popo.” While soca music usually contains drum machines, synthesizers, and guitars,
this song’s texture includes all the trademarks of chutney music: guitar and synthesizer combine with the dholak, harmonium, dhantal, tassa, and tabla. The song was a hit with the Indian and African Caribbean public, while carrying significant social and political ramifications. “Tribute to Sundar Popo” allowed Indian Caribbeans into the space of soca music. Along with Drupatee Ramgoonai’s album *Chutney Soca*, this song led a movement towards performance combining African and Indian derived genre elements (Ramgoonai and Jai 1987). Chutney and soca today maintain popularity in Guyana in both Indian and African communities.

For a number of tabla players in diaspora, the instrument is well suited to incorporate gestures associated with these popular West Indian music styles. According to Peter Manuel, “a typical New York West Indian may have overlapping ethnic self-identities, for example, as Trinidadian, as West Indian, as Black, and as American (Manuel 1995: 209–10).” Accordingly, in New York tabla performance, chutney, calypso, and soca come together alongside Indian-originated rhythms. New York City, Toronto and Orlando-based tabla player Veronica Vimla Budhan told me that she routinely mixes chutney rhythms with ceremonial rhythms in performances: “I add beats from chutney and soca music together with Indian bhajan rhythms when I play. Otherwise, it gets boring” (Budhan 2018). According to Budhan, these additions include speeding up the rhythm and adding different styles of notes. “That way the listener can recognize the original beat while still being able to differentiate the added in piece” (Budhan 2018).

Budhan is able to challenge the dominance of ideologies that promote the virtues of Indian authenticity by her ability to cross over stylistic boundaries during performance. This practice contradicts the rhetoric of older members of Hindu temples, where discussions of Hindustani music emphasize a playing style of traditional Indian classical music. Tabla player
and instructor Lall Singh, for instance, positions Indian music as a means to separate the diasporic community from the corrupting influences of Guyanese music. Singh, who was among the first generation of New York Guyanese adopters of the instrument during the late 1980s, ascribes its value as possessing the ability to promote classical Indian music. For members of Singh’s generation, the tabla was a means to position Indo-Guyanese culture closer to India. During our interview, Singh remarked that the West Indian playing style lacks “clarity and class” and negatively evaluated the playing style of popular West Indian players, including Trinidadian tabla player Tony Ramasar (Singh 2017).

Second generation immigrants have different musical priorities. For this younger generation, stylistic hybridity is an important marker of Indo-Guyanese playing style. Veronica Budhan’s ability to maneuver successfully between varying styles on the tabla in a given performance has allowed her a distinct voice and reputation among her community. Indo-Guyanese audiences likewise identify with her performance choices. Budhan explained to me that the “aunties” in her temple often approach her after performances and excitedly (but in hushed tones) relate that they were able to pick out, and enjoyed hearing, an underlying phrase of chutney or soca music in her playing (Budhan 2018). These private encounters identify common musical ground between older and younger temple congregants. There is evidence here that both generations appreciate Budhan’s stylistic inclusions. Tabla players are judged by their ability to tastefully mix classical and popular styles together in performance, while communicating respect for traditional East Indian values in public settings in their rhetoric.

In videos published of Budhan on YouTube, fast and loud movements alternate with the slower and more measured style of playing traditionally associated with temple tabla performance. Her tabla playing appeals to both West Indian and Indian proclivities, while
contradicting rhetoric celebrates East Indian culture. Akash Doobay finds similar issues in representing his culture while performing the tabla during weekly worship services at Bhavanee Maa Mandir (his father, Mahendra Doobay, serves as head preacher, or Pandit, at this location). In an interview, he related “every day and moment I played I felt the West Indian pressure. The reason for this is that vocalists are used to the West Indian drumming style so they expect the same from me” (A. Doobay 2017). Doobay’s first teacher was Lall Singh. Within that relationship, Doobay was taught to value traditional Hindustani modes of tabla playing. Today, he has developed his own style that draws from several East and West Indian traditions. But these stylistic choices provoke commentary when he plays in spaces where temple attendants are expecting a more West Indian-styled performance.

**Spaces of Repertoire**

In what setting, and in what manner are styles such as chutney, calypso, and soca and Indian-originated rhythms brought together? Is this a relationship of consonance or dissonance? In practice, these stylistic interrelationships are never equal. Power asymmetries exist that favor certain modes of playing over others. Stylistic boundaries between cultural groups are often expressed by the spaces where their music is performed. Space and distance are created and made visible through cultural practices. Cultural practices embody, according to Edward Said, the poetics of space, where “the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us” (Said 1978: 55). In Said’s writing, imaginative geographies and personal identity are closely connected. As Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault have theorized, space and subjectivity are mutually constitutive (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1992). According to Lefebvre, space is a social product. He positions space as a complex
social construction based on values and the social production of meanings that affects spatial practices and perceptions. Subjects define a particular space, and a given space produces particular subjectivities.

The connection between produced space and subjectivity is demonstrated by the places where Indo-Guyanese tabla players choose to perform. In digital spaces for instance, musical practices become amplified when broadcasted to platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, BandCamp, and SoundCloud. These applications serve as a platform for musicians to broadcast performances and to connect with globally based musicians in communities back home in the Caribbean. Digital spaces also imagine new communities as they extend the possibilities of playing styles into an ever-widening number of musical practices. Many players I spoke with had learned playing techniques by copying performances viewed on YouTube or Vimeo. Julian Murphet describes the interaction of media and cultural innovation in A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism: “Historical tectonics, in which migrations of people and clashes between unevenly developed media systems crystallize into unprecedented conditions for cultural invention” (Murphet 2013). Historical tectonics, in this definition, connects with Tsing’s metaphor of friction as responsible for new arrangements of culture and power. Mediascapes increase the number of repertoires available to this culture, increasing the conditions for cultural invention, while challenging traditional models of music performance.

These inventions and challenges are visible in their representations in New York-based Hindu mandirs. Various repertoires find their way into the weekly worship services conducted at neighborhood temples. Unlike services conducted at Indian mandirs, Indo-Guyanese temple services routinely include repertoire ranging from Bollywood bhajans to Arabic ghazals and antiphonal kirtans, in an international playlist that marks the formation of an acute musical
cosmopolitanism. This big-tent approach to repertoire is summed up well in an interview conducted by Peter Manuel, in which a Trinidadian singer criticizes the repertoire of Indian musicians: “They just sing one style all the time, while we sing everything— thumrī, ghazal, you name it,” or most pithily, “That music ain’t got no spice to it” (Manuel 1997: 20).

Mandirs serve as one of the few spaces in New York City where one can expect to find classical Hindustani music performed weekly, in an enclosed space. I have attended about forty events hosted at the mid-sized Hindu temple Bhavanee Maa Mandir between 2012 and 2018. This mandir is located at the intersection of McKinley and Sheridan streets in the East New York region of Brooklyn. Across the street, there is a 24-hour bodega run by a group of first- and second-generation Dominican immigrants. Bachata music can be heard blaring outside this deli at all hours of the day. In the other direction, the adhan can be heard throughout the day from the tower of a nearby mosque. A few short blocks in the other direction, there is a protestant church adjoining a public school. Walking the length of Sheridan Street, the sound worlds of each of these destinations intersect with one another in a competitive soundscape. But inside the mandir itself, the only sounds heard are particular to the Hindu worship services taking place inside. The temple’s ability to produce an aurally autonomous environment is a significant part of its value to attendants.

But while the sounds produced inside the temple define an autonomous aural setting, worshippers arrive from neighborhoods that place their lives alongside cultures far removed from Hindustani ritual. Most congregants are largely urban, working class, and local (within a few miles) to the temple. Many of the younger congregants attend clubs where they hear chutney and soca music played loudly on Saturday evenings and wake up early the next morning to attend temple services. The placement of Bhavanee Maa Mandir is strategically situated between
Richmond Hill, Ozone Park, and East New York, areas where a number of Indo-Guyanese people reside. Attendants are usually not more than one or two generations removed from Guyana, but several generations participate in temple services. Part of this temple’s appeal is its ability to include young and old alike in shared services.

Established in 1993 in a small residential basement, the center is now located in a sizable three-story building, and includes over a hundred active members, each hailing from various locations across Guyana before settling in East Brooklyn and neighboring Queens. Pandit Mahendra Doobay is the head preacher at this location, while his son, Akash Doobay, often accompanies weekly worship services on the tabla. Before this temple was established, members of this community did not have a common space to gather where they would be able to celebrate their culture autonomously. For years, congregants worshipped together in schools they would rent on the weekends. Some members travelled lengthy distances to worship at mandirs located miles away. Today, Bhavanee Maa Mandir serves as a valuable local space for congregants to celebrate their culture and provide a shared sense of community to their members.

Weekly events follow strict guidelines that maintain a sense of continuity and expectation for parishioners. On Sundays, the first floor of the temple is used to conduct worship services. These services include the kirtan ensemble that plays during all portions of the satsang service. The pandit preaches his message from the stage’s lectern and the musicians echo his words if called upon to do so. A spontaneous bhajan fills the hall. After the pandit finishes, there is an extended period where music can last anywhere from one to two hours before congregants eventually end services to enjoy a communal lunch downstairs. This ensemble usually consists of a harmonium, sarangi, dhantal, vocalist, and tabla. In India, all of these instruments are actively
practiced, with the exception of the dhantal. While in Guyana, all of these instruments can be located except for the tabla.

Satsang services are conducted regularly on Sunday mornings and on special holidays throughout the year. During weekend evenings, the basement floor is often converted to an event space, where various groups regularly perform. The temple has hosted various musical ensembles in the basement, from popular touring tabla musicians including Zakir Hussain, to local favorite Benny Parag. Certain genres are unacceptable in the upstairs space but are allowed on the basement floor. Tassa drumming for instance, is only heard in the temple’s basement. Tassa drums are large, bowl-shaped drums usually played in an ensemble that consists of drums of different shapes, coordinated in to a loud, fast, and highly improvised style. The sound is not unlike Brazilian samba drum ensembles. While tassa is historically a popular Indian folk music, it has acquired new meanings in the Caribbean. In Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, the style is most commonly associated with Carnival parades that celebrate West Indian identity. As such, the drumming is considered incompatible with Hindustani religious music (Manuel 2015). The pandit and other elders of this temple do not allow tassa drumming on the first floor of the temple due to concerns that certain worshippers might “jump and wave” at the sound of this West Indian identified instrument. However, there have been events in the basement space that featured this style.

Finding the correct sonic balance between these spaces is a constant concern, especially among members of the older generation. The phrase “jump and wave” refers to the loud and raucous dance forms common to the Caribbean. To many Indo-Guyanese immigrants, this phrase carries negative connotations of a hedonistic lifestyle they would rather leave behind in the Caribbean. It also carries racial connotations due to the practice’s associations with Afro-
Guyanese customs. But it is not only tassa drums that carry these connotations. Certain styles of tabla drumming contain similar associations for members of this Mandir. The temple’s basement, and not its first floor, is the appropriate place to perform these cultural tensions.

Akash Doobay organizes coordinated tabla events in the basement for his musical school, Indian Cultural Center. During the early 2010s, he had organized dozens of events that featured star performers from India, the Caribbean and Canada playing alongside local students at varying skill levels. These groups perform a wide variety of music, from bhajans to ghazals to filmi music. Audiences also hail from several parts of the world. At a performance given in the summer of 2013, several members of the audience arrived from the Caribbean; others came from Minnesota or Canada to see well-known musicians including Pt. Ramesh Mishra and Shri Nandlal Jadoonanan perform. The event, entitled “Shyam Kalyan,” was hosted in the basement of Bhavanee Maa Mandir. Throughout the evening, bhajans and ghazals were performed alongside filmi music. Extended improvisations showcased player virtuosity, while younger students did their best to keep up. The performance provided a careful balance between experimentations of form and respect for tradition.

Within the temple’s same physical borders, the tabla assumes different affinities and performance goals. While West Indian drumming patterns are indeed inserted into traditional settings, they are only allowed in so far as their content remains hidden from official discussion or consideration. While the instrument performs religious repertoire upstairs, it is only appropriate to be used in a more experimental fashion when performed downstairs. This flexibility speaks to this community’s ability to imagine alternate spaces emanating from the same instrument. Relationships expressing a connection to a classical Indian tradition are celebrated upstairs, while other relationships are discussed downstairs. These other relationships
are often discussed in the hushed tones that “aunties” expressed to Budhan privately following a performance.

An example of this spatially defined treatment of musical genre is in the performance of Bollywood bhajans. According to Anna Schultz: “The multifaceted nature of Hindi film song has made it a rich resource for Indian-Caribbean singers as they fashion new modes of Indian-Caribbean American worship” (Schultz 2014: 399). This music is routinely placed within religious contexts, but content is edited to the extent that a song’s meaning can be reconstructed as appropriate for the temple setting. Often, as was the case with “Madhuban Mein Radhika Nache Re,” only the chorus of the song is retained. The song is performed as a repeated phrase of the track’s title, with tempo and melodic variation marking the song’s development. When played in the downstairs area on the other hand, these songs are often performed in full, and retain their original associations in this new setting. This flexibility in the treatment of a song’s text is part of the self-positioning of this diasporic community.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these stylistic incursions in which various repertoires compete for space in New York City’s thriving diasporic spaces, Indo-Guyanese musicians have kept Hindustani religious practices stylistically intact, while allowing a high degree of flexibility in presentation. The cosmopolitan sociality of the Indo-Guyanese music community acts, in some sense, as a bulwark to the pressures that New York, Indian, and Caribbean cultural boundaries demand of this community. The Indo-Guyanese diasporic community is an important site for the formation of musical communities that resist dominant musical culture, utilizing a hybridity in their music both particular to their own community, while responding to the sounds of their cultural neighbors. Such features give Indo-Guyanese tabla players significant cultural capital and “soft power” to resist a number of different hegemonies.
The musical relationships identified in this chapter speak to the fluid boundaries of Indo-Guyanese-ness in diaspora. Musical settings pull this community to embrace foreign styles within tabla performance, potentially weakening the center of the cultural formations they seek to preserve. At the same time, embracing these relationships also strengthens the Indo-Guyanese community by allowing these styles to be included as part of an increasingly larger Indo-Guyanese expression. The constant state of friction expressed in space and sound results in new stylistic procedures, and constructions of repertoire meaningful to this community. Tsing’s friction is responsible for determining much of the development of this community’s structures as they expand to accommodate the pressures of New York City, while consolidating to respect the desires of first-generation immigrants.

Repertoire presents this larger cultural debate in a snapshot of performance. Space determines where certain genre formations can be performed, and likewise, genre formations determine the materialization of the temple space. These considerations both strengthen and challenge existing cultural and geographic structures. The following chapter will discuss how artists use the tabla in physical and material spaces to expand subjectivities.
CHAPTER 3: PERFORMING THE TABLA – THE PERSONAL SPACE

In a 2017 interview produced for the Caribbean fusion talk variety web series “Lets Talk with Lakshmee,” popular New York City-based television and radio show host Lakshmee Singh (step-daughter of Lall Singh), Indo-Guyanese tabla player Avirodh Sharma took a few minutes to explain some of the difficulties he has experienced while working with Indian performers:

I had always felt like we had to gain the respect of the Indian community. This is because of our lack of education, and [Indian performers] not knowing that there is a whole culture out there in the Caribbean that exists... they are quick to judge and see from the outside that these people [West Indian performers] are brown. They look like us, but they don’t speak the language, and maybe they’re not Indian. They look like Indians, but they are wannabe Indians. That used to get to me a lot as a kid growing up. (Sharma 2017)

Sharma rarely discusses cultural tensions so directly. This interview was a rare opportunity to hear him discuss some of the difficulties he has experienced in becoming accepted by East Indian peers. Despite the history of rejection outlined in this anecdote, Sharma has been able to position himself among the East Indian community both by gaining familiarity with the Hindi language and by fashioning his tabla playing style as primarily East Indian. In this interview, Sharma explains that “all Indians share the same DNA,” and repeatedly asserts himself primarily as a practitioner of East Indian performance styles: “That was intentional, because I always felt like we [West Indian tabla players] had to gain respect from the Indian community.” This rhetorical strategy can be interpreted as an effective means to gain the respect, and economic opportunities of both East and West Indian communities, but it can also lead to tensions in self-presentation. In response to Sharma’s answer about his cultural identity, interviewer Singh responded that she identified as Indo-Caribbean herself. Sharma immediately agreed and
confirmed that he, too, identified primarily as Indo-Caribbean. Within three minutes of this interview, Sharma moved his subjectivity from the West to the East and back again, expressing himself in each of these moments with practiced, strategic fluidity. This exchange outlines the broad array of positions available to performers like Sharma, and the constant state of performance required of Indo-Guyanese musicians in successfully and fluidly practicing these positions.

Diasporic subjects are in a constant state of performance, where social and musical relationships continuously respond to persistently shifting positionalities—a state of becoming as opposed to one of being. Stuart Hall’s writings on the Afro-Caribbean diaspora provide a potent reminder: “the boundaries of difference are continually repositioned in relation to different points of difference” (Hall 1990: 227). Boundaries, in this case cultural boundaries that mark differences in ethnicity and culture, are in a continual state of movement and adaptation when located within a constantly shifting environment. In New York City, cultural and social boundaries are a fact of life.

Encounters while riding the subway, working in an office, and walking the streets provide a constant reminder of New York’s dense cultural landscape. Throughout the five boroughs, and especially in Queens, neighbors may speak in any number of languages. According to a study conducted by *The New York Times*, there are more languages spoken in Queens, New York than in any other city. There is a greater chance of hearing certain native languages spoken across New York City, in fact, than in their country of origin (Roberts 2010). Each of these encounters requires that subjects respond using creatively demanding strategies appropriate to a given situation. I argue that artists ground these strategies in a combination of intercultural awareness and urban mobility that Kaley Mason refers to as empathetic musicality:
“the ability to understand and feel aesthetic values beyond one’s culturally specific musical frame of reference” (Mason 2018: 5). Looking at subjectivity through an examination of Mason’s empathetic musicality has the additional benefit of shifting focus away from challenges presented by environment alone, and towards a focus on the creative gestures employed by the diasporic subject in response to their environment. I examine subjectivity as a confluence of fluid strategies to acknowledge the degree of agency necessary for artists to strategize their representation in a given space. Artists also acquire the power to shift borders around challenging and imposing cultural structures, whether performing as a female or gay artist, or professional touring musician.

For Indo-Guyanese performers in the diaspora, successfully strategizing one’s identity along East and West Indian conceptions of subjectivity is of paramount importance. These immigrants are leaving behind a situation where the consequences of embodying a racialized identity can be serious and deadly. According to the World Health Organization, Guyana has the second-highest per-capita suicide rate in the world, and ethnic Indians make up the vast majority of those deaths (Gampat 2015). This stark statistic frames the stakes of an emergency for Indo-Guyanese residents in their home country. It also illustrates how important it is for members of this community to establish meaningful social structures in New York City’s diasporic setting, a cosmopolitan urban space located thousands of real and imagined miles from Guyana.

Several pressures make life difficult for this community. New York City’s environment can be taxing and alienating. In US popular culture, Indo-Guyanese members are routinely misrepresented, when they are represented at all. The Indian community also rejects them for reasons stated above. Interviews with various subjects revealed a sharp cultural and social divide between Indo-Guyanese and Indian tabla players. Where social relationships do exist, they are
usually cast in unambiguously vertical power structures. As Akash Doobay succinctly related in interview: “Indians don’t come to our mandirs, we just meet in school” (A. Doobay 2017). An Indian guru might teach a young Guyanese boy the tabla, for instance, but they otherwise do not congregate together in shared social settings. A significant generation gap also places pressure on Indo-Guyanese youth. New York City’s difficult economic and social environment requires that young first- and second-generation immigrants forge their own paths in the US, while their elders also demand that young people respect the desires of older generations that young performers uphold the musical values of classical Hindustani music in their tabla performances.

Participation in Indo-Guyanese religious events hosted at neighborhood mandirs gives players a measure of subjective power to successfully manage these situations. All subjects I have spoken with emphasize the value of temples in facilitating a sense of local community.Tabla performers use these spaces to creatively confront issues of race and gender in circumstances far removed from the experiences of their parents and grandparents in Guyana, fashioning personal strategies where they position themselves as spokespeople for their generations while balancing the expectations of older, first-generation immigrants. Indo-Caribbean mandirs provide a welcoming urban space where tabla players effectively assert personal subjectivities. In various interviews, young tabla players describe the temple space as a safe and nurturing environment where they feel comfortable expressing themselves, even while performing subjectivities that often run counter to established community roles. In neighborhoods such as Richmond Hill, Queens and East New York, Brooklyn, mandir temples are of primary importance in developing the bonds necessary for cultivating a healthy and supportive environment. In several cases, teenagers and people in their twenties successfully navigate environmental pressures through tabla performances that forge personal pathways
through challenging economic and social circumstances. Tabla players are able to challenge a lack of representation in traditional US media by using the temple space to celebrate Indo-Guyanese values. Their participation also destabilizes traditional roles within the temple setting, challenging older community members to accept their social and cultural differences. A hybrid relationship exists for this group within the temple setting, as it does in the rest of their lives.

This thesis’s first two chapters explored how players use repertoire and instruction to express an Indo-Guyanese diasporic performance style. This final chapter explores how younger New York City-based Indo-Guyanese performers use tabla practice to perform their own diasporic subjectivities. Just as choices in repertoire expresses musical relationships between Indian-ness, West Indian-ness, Indo-Guyanese-ness, and New York-ness in determining how the tabla is performed, twice-migrated Indo-Guyanese tabla players use the instrument to express their own relationships with these cultural constructions. For these performers, creative self-expression in otherwise challenging circumstances offers an opportunity for (re)invention in musical performance, community structures, and labor practices. Several questions guide this chapter’s investigation: What role do religious spaces serve in the formation of these creative self-expressions? In what other spaces are performers using the tabla to creatively express themselves? How is gender, race and class challenged and constructed in these locations? Their answers addresses how and why Indo-Guyanese music sounds the way it does in diasporic settings.

Tabla as Marker of Generation

Generational respect is an important feature of Indo-Guyanese culture. Several customs in Indian and Guyanese culture ritualize demonstrations of respect offered to older members of
the congregation. During temple services, younger members commonly greet elders by kneeling at their feet in order to demonstrate respect and deference to senior members of the community. More broadly, people seek out parents’ and grandparents’ permission and advice regarding important life choices, such as new jobs, new cars, and marriage proposals. Generational respect also offers a means to discuss the choices younger people make in determining the instruments they play, and how they approach musical performance.

First-generation Indo-Guyanese immigrants fix different desires on the tabla than members of younger generations. In interviews, older members of the community prioritize the tabla’s potential to inculcate Indian values in the younger generation of immigrants. This attitude is similar to practices of Marathi devotional performance described by Anna Schultz in *Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism*, “An idealized past sets the troubles of the present in relief, and the prestige of pastness is embodied through sonic markers of performance lineage” (Schultz 2012: 135). For the younger generation, West and East Indian musical repertoires serve different community functions. West Indian repertoire safeguards cultural memory, but it is not regarded with the same degree of class and respect afforded to East Indian repertoire. Instruction in East Indian music is valued as a shared connection to heritage that has the potential to disrupt the potentially negative social and cultural influences found in New York City. Within this formulation, older community members view classical Hindustani repertoire as a means to ground the values of their children in East Indian traditions, whereas West Indian repertoire is valued as a means to remember Guyanese identity. But members of the younger generation hear and perform different constructions in East and West Indian music.

The two styles do not represent binary structures, but rather fluid relationships that intersect in expressive gestures during performance. These styles imagine new meanings for
existing traditions that reflect this generation’s twice-migrated lives in New York City. Tabla performance, far from serving as a model for heritage, instead becomes a means to challenge old values, while forging new subjectivities. These styles are fluid and identify a global flow that disrupts fixed notions of an imagined homeland.

Tabla player Lall Singh, a first-generation Indo-Guyanese immigrant to New York City, uses the instrument to reposition himself away from his Guyanese musical roots and closer to East Indian markers of excellence (Singh 2017). Before moving to the US in 1985, Singh had never picked up a tabla and played it. Like most Indo-Guyanese, Singh did not have access to the tabla in Guyana, but he immediately developed an affinity for the instrument after seeing a tabla performance at a restaurant in Richmond Hill. As he related to me, “I could not believe I had never heard playing like this before. I was immediately overwhelmed by the power of this music.”

Mahendra Doobay and Lall Singh each share the experience of having emigrated with their families from the Georgetown region of Guyana to Brooklyn, New York. They have maintained a close friendship since first meeting in 1978. One evening during the spring of 2000, Singh told Doobay that he would like to teach his young son, Akash Doobay, how to play the tabla. Although it was a kind-hearted gesture, Doobay found the idea laughable. Singh had no experience teaching the tabla and was still at that time a student himself (studying under Indian tabla teacher Ustad Kadar Khan), so the proposition of Singh teaching the instrument to his son struck Doobay as presumptuous. But teaching Akash was important to Singh. Singh was not learning the instrument solely to establish himself as a virtuoso. His goal was to teach young tabla players in an effort to establish a Hindustani music community in New York City. With
these goals in mind, Singh continued to ask Doobay for permission to teach Akash the tabla, and he eventually received permission.

Lessons commenced, and after years of persistent effort (practicing up to ten hours daily throughout his childhood), Akash Doobay became a skilled player in his own right. Today, he not only performs during weekly satsang services (Hindu temple religious services), he is also responsible for creating his own school, the Indian Cultural Center of New York (recently renamed Matra), in order to train the next generation of Indo-Guyanese tabla players. Both Akash Doobay and his father have years of experience playing and learning this instrument. Together, they have helped make the tabla grow in popularity within their community. This anecdote illustrates not only Singh’s tenacious and successful support of tabla education in New York’s Indo-Guyanese community, but also expresses the intimate connection between tabla performance and cultural identity for Indo-Guyanese immigrants.

Lall Singh grew up in Berbice, Guyana in a rural area with little access to material and cultural resources. Among other Indian instruments like the sitar and sarod, the tabla was largely absent in the rural destination. Singh had been saving money to immigrate to the US for years, and was finally able to arrive in New York City by the mid-1980s. After seeing the tabla performed at a neighborhood restaurant, he became enthralled and immediately decided the instrument was important for him to learn. After acquiring enough money to purchase his own set, Singh painstakingly taught himself how to play the tabla by copying the gestures he saw neighborhood musicians perform. Learning the tabla primarily through observation is highly unusual, but it allowed Singh a means to learn how to play without requiring he spend large sums of money on teachers. Eventually, he became established in his community as a tabla player possessing a high degree of competence on the instrument.
Along with his wife Dolly Singh, Lall Singh was enthusiastic to bring traditional Hindustani music to the Indo-Guyanese community. By the early 1990s, they achieved this dream; setting up a private teaching space in the second floor of the dry cleaning business they ran together. As a prominent member of an early generation of post-independence Indo-Guyanese immigrants, Singh and his family are responsible for providing much of the institutional foundations present-day Indo-Guyanese artists depend upon. Singh’s stepdaughter, radio personality Lakshmee Singh, for instance, today hosts a prominent program geared towards giving Indo-Guyanese New York-based artists heightened visibility. Dolly Singh is co-responsible for bringing the annual Holi/Pagwah festival to Richmond Hill. Lall Singh’s success as a teacher relied on his ability to recruit students from his local community, so he was constantly on the lookout for new pupils. Lall Singh wished to use music to demonstrate that Indo-Guyanese immigrants were as capable of producing high quality Hindustani classical music as immigrated Indians. His idea of a successful diasporic culture is one that successfully reproduces the Hindustani music he is conversant with in an unfamiliar space. The process is similar to the relationship that a Moroccan migrant profiled in Carolyn Landau’s “My Own Little Morocco at Home” has to music. She provides a potent reminder of music’s importance during her subject’s global journeys: “As people make the journey from village to city, from country to country, from culture to culture, and from child to adult, the music they consume and relate to during these migrations can shed important light on processes of identity construction, negotiation and cultivation” (Landau 2011: 38).

Similarly, Timothy Rommen has written about Trinidadian gospel believers’ use of multiple musical styles to position themselves in diasporic communities, arguing that US-based gospel music is more accepted in Trinidad than local styles like jamoo or gospel dancehall
because the location of this music separates congregants from conflicts within local churches, connecting worshippers to an imagined global church instead (see Rommen 2007b). Lall Singh and other older congregants at Bhavanee Maa Mandir similarly use the tabla drums to look beyond their local mandir’s social circumstances and towards a larger community of the imagined Indian homeland that is not riddled with the class- and race-based conflicts that this community experiences in Brooklyn. The instrument sounds an imagined Indian homeland, while also shaping the material and performative means for future generations to locate Indian values in diasporic settings. Younger members, however, are more likely to promote fluid encounters in tabla performance. For this next generation of students, placing the tabla in spaces that speak to their particular needs challenged these assumptions.

**Tabla as Marker of Labor**

Young performers use the tabla to gain visibility in competitive music marketplaces. Most Indo-Guyanese immigrants enter into the US working class as manual laborers, working in vocations ranging from service to industrial jobs. For many Indo-Guyanese tabla players, the instrument offers a means to escape this work by materially profiting from music performances. Martin Stokes (2004) has suggested that global music is in a state of flux, in which its rules and strategies are constantly shifting. Drawing from Slobin’s work in *Subcultural Sounds* (1993), Stokes writes that global music’s “only consistently organizing force is consumer choice, which offers modern subjects more-or-less limitless opportunities for self-fashioning” (Stokes 2004: 49). This attitude is manifest in many of the performance practices that younger Indo-Guyanese immigrants use to engage with the tabla. Avirodh Sharma has fashioned a means to translate his expertise on the tabla into business success. The instrument has allowed him to invent a labor
practice that uniquely serves the needs of his Indo-Guyanese diasporic generation. His business model takes advantage of his performance expertise and reputation within the Indo-Guyanese community.

Sharma is the son of Ravideen and Bharati Ramsamooj, the couple responsible for opening Richmond Hill’s East Indian Music Academy. He teaches tabla with his family, but also uses the instrument in a variety of other functions. Sharma works with an array of musicians in myriad performance and recording projects. The 2017 record from his latest project, Melodic Intersect, has recently been nominated for a Grammy in the World Music category. Sharma and his band members each contribute their expertise to events that have brought him to the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, New York’s Lincoln Center, and other venues across the world. Sharma gains access to materially and culturally profitable settings through these experiences.

At the December 10, 2017 Indo-Jazz Festival hosted at Lincoln Center, Sharma collaborated with Melodic Intersect and Jazz group Jazz Carnatica. Each of these groups focused on their ability to traverse between eastern and western musical styles. A promotion for the event on the popular Indian blog “Lassi with Lavina” framed the performance by asking the following rhetorical question: “Can east and west embrace and the result be pure, unadulterated joy and energy?” (Melwani 2018). In the interview conducted with Singh referenced earlier (Sharma 2017), Sharma promotes the event to West Indians, telling the audience to come out and celebrate “one of their own.”

For Sharma, the tabla fills different needs depending on whether it is played inside or outside of the temple space. Within the temple where he practices, the tabla expresses a ritualistic function when performed during weekly satsang services. In these spaces, his music hews closer to East Indian models. But when using the instrument to perform at public events,
his playing style shifts closer to West Indian practices. But his rhetoric about the instrument often downplays West Indian themes, and celebrates his knowledge of traditional Indian expressions. In interviews, Sharma focuses on the value of his “traditional” education and the Indian guru, tabla player Anindo Chatterjee, responsible for his classical music education. This establishes Sharma as performing Indian-ness even within a non-traditional Hindustani performance setting. Outside of traditional temple space, Sharma emphasizes an ability to move among diverse popular musical genres with ease, effectively taking advantage of digital spaces to promote events and appearances. In the video “West Indian Impressions” for instance, tabla player Avirodh Sharma portrays himself as a West Indian tabla player well versed in classical Hindustani repertoire. The video imagines Sharma as a West Indian player, while simultaneously promoting Stealth Productions, a friend’s videography service. The black backdrop creates a neutral cultural setting, while Sharma’s gold kurta places him in an approachably East Indian context (Stealth Productions, LLC 2010). Contextual fluidity removes the centrality of place from performance, emphasizing mobility as a core dimension of the musician’s identity.

Videos are a part of the Indo-Guyanese diasporic community’s mediascape. Media provides an invaluable connection to home. Nearly all interlocutors interviewed for this thesis have a wide public presence made available through social media applications and consider publicly shared videos invaluable to career development. Digital spaces such as YouTube, Instagram, and BandCamp give tabla players new options for promoting their playing styles and self-fashionings to new communities. Most Indo-Guyanese temples do not themselves have a presence on the Internet, but many of the performers using this space do. In her research on music in the Albanian diaspora, Jane Sugarman views CDs and cassettes as mediating between “poles of experience relating to distant homelands and lived realities” (Sugarman 2004: 21). A
similar behavior can be identified in how Sharma’s Instagram images and YouTube videos are actively viewed, “liked,” and streamed across the Internet. Through this media, Indo-Guyanese immigrants contribute to a global musical flow that transfers content and notions of heritage to and from their home country.

In media spaces, this musical flow is accentuated through imagined digital communities. In videos produced for YouTube, Sharma promotes his videos and upcoming events in videos that co-promote his own work and the video services of fellow community members, as in the West Indian Impressions video referenced above. On Instagram, he is able to take a more active voice in self-presentation and associated commentary. There, Sharma posts pictures from previous productions, “selfies” with well-known East and West Indian performers, and offers a glimpse into his personal life through pictures taken with his young child. Instagram offers musicians an expressive means to communicate directly with an audience, and audiences a means to comment and respond in real-time.

Mediascapes are important means through which congregants establish and extend networks transnationally. Indexing, according to Appadurai, connects “the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai 1990: 9). It is nearly impossible to separate the local scenes generated through digital applications from the global flows simultaneously created through the use of media. These two areas are increasingly one and the same field, but do not exactly identify “community without propinquity,” as sociologist Craig Cahoun has characterized it (Cahoun 1998). Local scenes bear distinct characteristics from the global flows through which they are extended, but they also remap the globe according to the connections shared between scenes. For many Indo-Guyanese tabla players, Georgetown, Guyana remains further afield from New York.
City than does Calcutta, India. For others, it is just the opposite. Artists who travel to and from these destinations actively remake these scenes through their individual global flows.

**Tabla as Marker of Female Empowerment**

Veronica Budhan uses the tabla to empower herself and serve as an example for other young women in the Indo-Guyanese community. Like many Indo-Guyanese immigrants, she has been traveling most of her life. Her parents arrived from Georgetown, Guyana in the 1980s, but she grew up in Toronto in an ethnically mixed neighborhood. While a young teenager, the family moved to New York City, then to Florida, followed by a move back to Canada, where she has spent the bulk of her childhood. Each of these locations has contributed to her sense of the global imaginary and adds to her available vocabulary. In each of these urban spaces, Budhan’s music performs global cultural flow as local music production.

From a young age, Budhan developed an affinity for the tabla that she shared with the boys in her temple more so than with the other girls. In an interview she explained, “most of the girls would learn how to sing at the temple. The boys were able to choose between singing and tabla playing” (Budhan 2018). Budhan had to deal with the expectation that she learn to sing Hindustani classical music, but she did it in a way that allowed her the time needed to learn how to play the tabla, too. Budhan sang along with her two younger sisters at weekly mandir services, practicing lessons daily. After these lessons, she secretly practiced the tabla by playing on an unused set of tablas that the family kept in their basement. This instrument was in a state of disrepair but sufficed for her early lessons.

When she was twelve, Budhan decided to join a local class where the tabla was being taught mainly to Guyanese and Trinidadian adolescent boys. At first, the boys poked fun at
Budhan. They were not accustomed to seeing a girl participate in their school and did not expect much from her playing. About an hour into their studies, the students were given a relatively difficult exercise to execute. According to Budhan, every student had trouble performing the exercise correctly, but Budhan surprised her fellow students and instructor by flawlessly playing the series of bols as instructed. This surprised and won Budhan the respect of her classmates. Following the event, Budhan began to regularly arrive for lessons weekly. After some time, she decided to begin private lessons, adopting a gharānic guru and receiving private education today, she also teaches several young male and female students herself.

Her background in singing provides her with insight when working with vocalists. Budhan claims she is able to think about the tabla from the perspective of a singer because of her background in Hindustani classical singing. This helps her respond nimbly to the needs of singers during performance, by understanding how to interpret the physical movements of singers as signs that they are about to alter their pitch. Budhan explained to me, “If a vocalist is going to hit a higher note, they usually lift their chins higher in the air. I accompany this on tabla by changing my tone, and altering the tempo” (Budhan 2018).

Since that event, Budhan has continued learning the tabla by taking lessons daily. In the past few years, as her confidence in performance has increased, she has recently begun performing in various non-religious locations. Like many tabla musicians of her generation, Budhan feels comfortable playing the tabla both inside and outside the mandir setting. In each of these spaces, she alters her playing style according to the expectations of her audience. When playing inside the mandir, Budhan adds in certain gestures that identify markers of chutney styles. When playing outside the mandir in informal party atmospheres, Budhan utilizes her background in Hindustani performance to add a level of competence and skill to her playing,
allowing her to play fast-paced and rapidly shifting improvisatory variations with relative ease. Her temple-based performances mimic the classical sound of Hindustani music, while her playing in other spaces is more flexible, combining several genres into fluid combinations that can change repeatedly, depending on a given situation’s circumstances.

The ability for women to play in public spaces—without being derogated as prostitutes—is a relatively new phenomenon for female Hindustani performers that also marks cultural differences between East and West Indians. Women’s inclusion within the private sphere of performance is also predicated on certain differences expected between men and women playing in these circumstances. Budhan’s behavior at private events similarly mirrors her behavior when playing in more private spaces. Budhan does not typically charge for tabla performances. As is customary with a number of Indo-Guyanese musicians, she accepts donations as offered, but does not otherwise charge a fixed rate to her clients in exchange for her services. This can create some friction, as certain clients will take advantage of her time. But it also allows her a degree of freedom to perform in venues without the expectation of needing to perform to specific client demands. Budhan sees performance as an end in itself, both for the sake of the music and to position herself prominently among her male peers.

Budhan’s story illuminates the gendered social structure of Indo-Guyanese tabla performance and its supporting social structures. In Hindustani music there is a performance patriarchy that generally seeks to cultivate young male players, and that has difficulty in accepting women as equals within these traditions. Finally accepted, however, Budhan still has to maintain balance between her presence as a novel source of entertainment, on the one hand, and as a symbol of Hindustani musical lineage, on the other. Budhan is able to participate in the private sphere with her labor, but is distanced from direct participation in the economic sphere.
Conclusions

Several works in diasporic studies avoid neatly cohering models in favor of more fluid accounts of performers’ use of style to articulate particular social positions (Appadurai 1996; Chakrabarty 2000; Rommen 2007a). In these accounts, diasporic subjects find personal and fluid means to express themselves in challenging environments, resisting fixed identity structures in favor of an anti-essentialist plurality in their cultural and personal identity (Lipsitz 1994). Tabla players Anthony Balram, Avirodh Sharma, Veronica Budhan, and Anand Prashad continually shift social positions during performance. Likewise, congregants who choose to sing also have the opportunity to occupy shifting social positions because of the tabla’s role as vocal accompaniment.

Players’ success in navigating competitive cultural boundaries speaks as much to their particular identity formations as it does to the identities of the cultural groups to which they support and foster during performance. It is the tabla player’s responsibility to situate varying levels of vocal skill within a song style that reinforces the Indian roots of shared traditions. So while the use of the tabla connotes a degree of value associated with its Indian origins, mandir congregants are encouraged to sing no matter their specific vocal abilities. An inclusive song ethic exists here in tension with a hierarchy of song styles informed by issues of class and diasporic identities in transition. Players such as Avirodh Sharma, much like the example of Lall Singh performing alongside Akash’s father Mahendra Doobay, carefully balance their knowledge of traditional Indian playing techniques (a repertory they are respected for), with the need to communicate to a culture that may not be personally familiar with these procedures. While these subjects do not speak for all experiences of this cultural group, they provide useful
examples of representative strategies employed in navigating pathways through diasporic performance spaces.

One the larger takeaways from this study has been finding that Indo-Guyanese communities also adopt an essentializing attitude toward cultural practices inherited from their ancestral homeland, while East Indian groups are often less visibly associated with ancient cultural traditions. Many interlocutors report that their Hindustani practices are more strictly practiced in New York City than they are in India. In Lakshmeen Singh’s interview with Avirodh Sharma for instance, she relates that her East Indian friends frequently remind her that she “acts more Indian than they do” (Sharma 2017). This speaks to the value that Indo-Guyanese members place on ancient cultural traditions while living in a culturally saturated urban environment.

Competition for cultural space in urban centers provides motivation to retain practices, while equally requiring that Indo-Guyanese engage with their neighbors by allowing other influences into their music. Through the gharānic associations of their tabla accompaniment, individual musicians situate their efforts within a universalized pan-Indian tradition, promoting a sense of embodied ownership through the feeling of connectedness that these styles symbolize. At the same time, the improvisational and content choices of Guyanese tabla players identify stylistic traits common to West Indian groups and specific to their own subjectivities.

In Cultural Identity and Diaspora (1990), Stuart Hall outlines two opposing positions that many immigrants occupy simultaneously in diasporic settings. On the one hand, there is a “conception of a rediscovered, essential identity, imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation,” while, on the other hand, members possess “critical points of deep and significant difference” (Hall 1990: 224). Cultural identity is a matter of becoming, as well as of being. It belongs to the future and is not something that already exists
(Hall 1990: 225). Simon Frith elaborated on this position further, stating, “identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being” (2004: 23). It is only by treating subjectivity from the position of becoming that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the diasporic experience, and the need for stylistic bridges like the tabla for Indo-Guyanese immigrant communities that access varying modes of diasporic identity at once.

Members of mandirs in New York City come to temple with a wealth of content borrowed from generations of Indo-Guyanese immigrants who have adopted Bhajans heard in a variety of sources, from various Hindu denominations to the soundtracks of Bollywood films. This fragmentation is allowed within a temple setting that provides a unifying center in the alien setting of New York City.Tabla playing imagines a coherence that transcends social differences—at least temporarily—offering congregants a means to connect individual expressions of worship to larger themes of diaspora. Benedict Anderson wrote about imagined communities as responsible for constructing the political boundaries of the nation-state (Anderson 1983), but diasporic subjects imagine communities that transcend national boundaries and that are far more geographically dispersed. New York City’s Indo-Guyanese community has unique values and expectations that cannot be marked discretely as Indian, Guyanese or US-based. Their community encompasses all of these regions, while remaining unbounded by each of these categorizations. As this group constructs communities that share new cultural values in their sprawl across the globe, the tabla is a reminder of where the Indo-Guyanese community came from, where they are now, and where their community is headed.
Figure 1: Bhavanee Maa Mandir, Temple
Fieldwork Interviews

Budhan, Veronica. [2018]. Interview with the author, [February 12]. Via telephone.

Doobay, Akash. [2017]. Interview with the author, [September 12]. Via telephone.


Prashad, Anand. [2017]. Interview with the author, [August 12]. Via email.

Singh, Lall. [2017]. Interview with the author, [August 24]. Via telephone.
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