

A Multisensorial Affective Ecology of Sonic Worship: The Sikh Sacred Song Culture

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Abstract: In this paper, I investigate the ecology of multiple sensorial activities associated with a listening practice to analyze its affective and epistemic implications. Ethnographically drawing from Sikh sonic worship, I explore the role of the aural, ocular, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory, and propose that the resulting mutuality between bodies, human and non-human, invigorates and sustains this affective ecology and its epistemic potential. My ethnographic analysis contributes to the growing recognition in ethnomusicology of multisensorial integration in perception and its significance in meaning and knowledge making.

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'interroge l'écologie des multiples activités sensorielles associées à une pratique d'écoute afin d'analyser ses implications affectives et épistémiques. À partir d'une étude ethnographique de l'adoration sonore chez les Sikhs, j'explore le rôle de l'auditif, de l'oculaire, du tactile, du gustatif et de l'olfactif, et suggère que la réciprocité qui en résulte entre les corps, humains et non humains, vivifie et entretient cette écologie affective et son potentiel épistémique. Mon analyse ethnographique contribue à une plus grande reconnaissance de l'ethnomusicologie de l'intégration multi-sensorielle de la perception, et de sa signification dans la création de sens et de savoir.

After a correction of Western modernist ocularcentrism toward an appreciation of “varieties of sensory experience” (Howes 1991) not limited to the five exteroceptive senses only (see, for example, Classen 1993; Seremetakis 1994; Geurts 2002a, 2002b; Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2012), sensory studies has increasingly recognized that each sense is not a separate modality but most often implicates other senses in perceptual processes. This recognition of multisensorial integration in perception has come from scholarship in the arts, humanities, and social sciences (such as Stoller 1989; Classen 1990; Taussig 1993; Kahn 1999; Ingold 2000; Howes

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2003; Connor 2004; Hirschkind 2006; Machon 2009), as well as cognitive and physical sciences (such as Stein and Meredith 1993; Cytowic 2002 [1989], 1995; Calvert, Spence, and Stein 2004; Stein and Stanford 2008; Stein 2012). Also significant has been the understanding that perception is differentially constituted across cultures and ecologies. In his recent edited volume, *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Modern Age*, anthropologist David Howes provides an overview of the scholarship on “the ‘social formation’ of perception,” tracing the contributions of a number of scholars over the last century (2014: 27-30).¹ The role of environmental factors has been argued by psychologist James Gibson (1966, 1979) and anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000). Based on Gibson’s approach, musicologist Eric Clarke has postulated the same for music listening. On listening, anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2006) has explicated the cultivated and culture-specific sensory responsiveness in the context of Islamic sermon audition.

Ethnomusicologists too have begun to analyze more centrally the multisensorial aspects of musical practices. Recent articles focused on intersensorial modalities have added to earlier discussions of synaesthesia (such as that by Alan Merriam 1964) and to the significance of the auditory modality brought about by the work of Steven Feld as well as other sound studies scholars, particularly those writing on listening.² In her article, “Visual Excess: The Visuality of Traditional Music Performance in South Korea,” Hilary Vanessa Finchum-Sung discusses the role of “sound and sight collaborations” (2012: 396) in contemporary performances of kugak, “complete with the extramusical effects of video, photographs, painting, word, stage setting, dress, and colors” (422). Drawing attention to their contextual embeddedness, she analyzes how “incorporation of visuals serves to enhance performance meaning as well as feed contemporary desires for a multisensory experience” (405). While contemporary aesthetics are no doubt being globally shaped by the proliferation of new media and its plurisensory capacities, traditional musical practices have long functioned in multisensorial ecologies. The multisensory environment of Temiar ceremonies has been noted by Marina Roseman (1998). The interaction of music with other sense modalities in Andean fiestas has been discussed by Henry Stobart (2002). More recently, Helena Simonett has explored how, for the Yoreme community in Northwest Mexico, the perception of musical meaning is deeply tied to the visual perception of landscape (2014). She notes, “Among the Yoreme, there are no musicians that are blind from birth because a blind person does not have images he can sing” (121). Recent studies of dance cultures that have drawn attention to kinesthetic experience in particular include Hahn 2007 and Spiller 2016.

On the methodological front, sensory ethnography, as expounded on by anthropologist Paul Stoller and cultural analyst Sarah Pink, is particularly useful to the investigation of the experiential aspects of culture. Stoller argues for understanding the ethnographic process as not only mental engagement, but also as a corporeal one involving the ethnographer's sensorial experiences (1997). Pink emphasizes that sensory ethnography focuses on the actual sensory practices and experiences, while understanding them as continuously in a state of formation (2009).

In this paper, I contribute to the conversation on the multisensorial aspects of music cultures with two interventions informed by a sacred musical practice from South Asia, Sikh *Sabad Kīrtan*, which thrives in a sensorial ecology that extends beyond the aural and visual to the tactile, olfactory, gustatory, gestural, and kinesthetic. First, I investigate the affective affordances in this plurisensory ecology. Second, I examine its epistemic implications. Thus, I propose that repeated interrelated multisensorial activities mutually *amplify* intersensorial effects, and mobilize and intensify an affective dynamic between bodies, human and non-human, invigorating and sustaining an affective ecology and enhancing its epistemic potential.³

It bears emphasizing then that what I am suggesting is not simply that the context is multisensorial, but that the multisensoriality invigorates certain dynamic processes of affective affordances which are vital to the intensification of experience as well as to meaning and knowledge making. The mutual enhancement is critical, due to which the affective ecology enables a whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts, so to say.

The notion of “affective ecology” has been used in sound studies to denote an ecology of affect mobilization and contagion (Goodman 2010). I use affect broadly in the Spinozan sense as a change in a body affected by another. I understand affect as an intensity that gets produced in the interaction between bodies, human and non-human; a potential that lurks in connections between people and things; a mutual force relation between them. The force may be strong or barely perceptible, well below the conscious realm. The force can attract or repel, bind or separate.

An affective ecology is one where certain affects not only become emergent but are sustained over time and across events, and thereby develop significant affordances. Elsewhere, I have argued that what makes diverse musical means of Sikh sonic worship effective in deepening affective sensations is precisely their successful participation in what I have called a Sikh affective ecology (Kaur 2016a). I have also argued that the transnational circulation of this sonic worship along with its multisensory affective ecology is an important means of transmission of affect among Sikhs worldwide, and the shaping of

their individual, unique, and fluid “transnational worldings” as opposed to translocal transpositions of affective lifeworlds (Kaur 2018).

In this paper, I explore this affective ecology in greater detail, and the sensory modalities implicated in the various worship-related activities, to foreground the experiential aspects of sonic worship and its associated practices. Such an approach is particularly absent in Sikh studies. My methodology rests on sensory ethnography, which is key to getting beyond a surface level understanding of the components that make up the affective ecology. My fieldwork was conducted during the last decade in different parts of India and the US, including concentrated fieldwork in the greater San Francisco Bay Area in California beginning in 2014. I have conducted semi-structured interviews with Sikhs living in the US, Kenya, England, and India, and engaged in many casual conversations with them (with disclosure of my project, of course). My field research has included the study of internet resources such as blogs, forums, YouTube postings, and other websites. In addition to deep hanging out in the field, insights about and from Sikh sonic worship practices, and their settings and activities, have also been gained from close study of the sacred song-texts that form the entire content of Sikh primary scripture and core aural material. My interlocutors are devout Sikhs spanning a cross-section of genders, ages, education types, and professions. To anonymize I use pseudonyms. It is pertinent to note that Sikhs vary considerably in their worship and other cultural practices, and these continue to change with time. At the same time, certain core practices are adhered to by the majority, and these are largely the ones with which my paper engages.

The Guru’s House (*Gurdwāra*)

Central to the Sikh affective ecology is the spiritual preceptor, the Guru. Guru refers contextually to the ten human Sikh Gurus (1459-1708) who founded and shaped the faith’s traditions;⁴ or to the primary Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, in which their teachings are enshrined in the form of their Word (*Sabad*, or *Bāni*, lit. speech, utterance); or to the divine (*Waheguru*, lit. awesome guru); or to all collectively. These bear some phenomenological continuity, being experientially comprehended in overlapping ways. For devout Sikhs, the ten human Gurus embodied the unblemished divine spirit (*Satguru*, lit. the True Guru, another term for *Waheguru*).⁵ The ten are therefore recognized as the same spirit. Sikhs find further corroboration of this in the *Sabad* in Guru Granth Sahib (Fig. 1), the sacred scripture which consists of about 5,500 song-texts of different Sikh Gurus but bears the signature (*chhāp*) of the founding

Guru, Nanak. The Sabad also instructs Sikhs that the same divine spirit dwells in the Sabad/Bāni itself. Sikhs believe that the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, decreed before his passing that henceforth Sikhs recognize the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal and only Guru of the Sikhs as well as the manifest (*pragat*) body (*dēh*) of the ten human Gurus, and that they find the divine within the Sabad (*khōj sabad mēn lei*). Devout Sikhs thus comprehend the scripture as a living Guru, and refer to its pages as *ang* (body part, limb). My analysis below explores how this understanding is multisensorially and affectively nurtured in a worship context, and how this in turn contributes to the epistemic potential of listening to the musical rendering of sacred texts.

Sikh congregational worship occurs typically at a public place of worship, *gurdwāra* (lit. doorway to the Guru, also known as *guruḡhar*, lit. Guru’s house). The Guru Granth Sahib is the presiding entity at worship sessions (*divān* lit. court), enthroned centre stage in the sanctuary on a dais (*takht*, lit. throne) covered with ornate scarves and under an ornate canopy with an attendant at service, swaying an ornate fly whisk; thus it is endowed with the same majesty, respect, and authority due to royalty. The “enrobing” of the scripture is an elaborate process with defined etiquette; it is enacted daily with love and reverence and is accompanied by the chanting of sacred verses.⁶ This process is most elaborate at the preeminent *gurdwāra* Harmandir Sahib, where the Guru Granth Sahib is carried on a palanquin in a procession (*pālki*) from its house of repose (*sachkhand*, lit. realm of truth) to the sanctuary, with sacred chanting and the sounding of the *narsinghā* (horn) announcing its arrival.

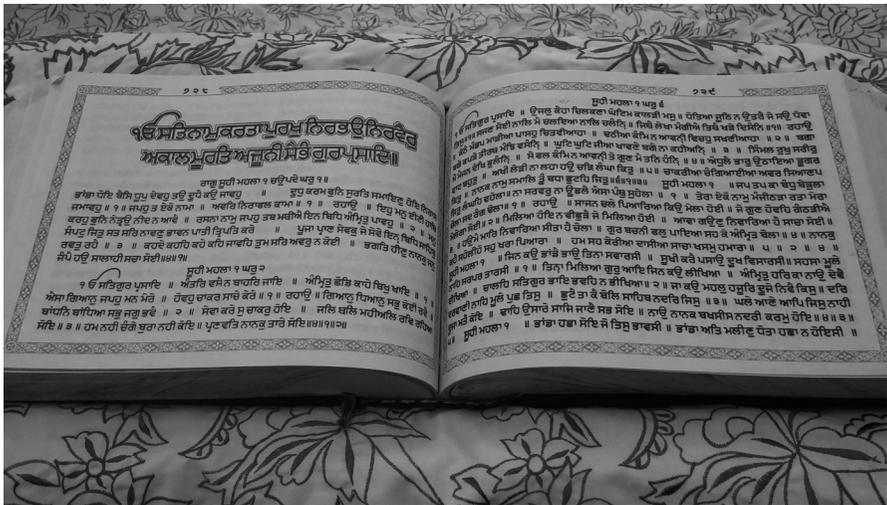


Fig. 1. Guru Granth Sahib (photo by Inderjit N. Kaur, July 30, 2016).

That this happens at 3:30 every morning is no dissuasion for devout Sikhs who join the procession in throngs and try to get a quick touch of the palanquin. Meanwhile, the sanctuary has been cleaned and the dais area washed with milk. For my interlocutor Rupinder, who remembers partaking in similar practices growing up in Nairobi, the loss of such embodied practices in many gurdwāras is tantamount to a loss of faith (see Kaur 2018).

Once the Guru Granth Sahib reaches the sanctuary, it is placed on the dais and elaborately enrobed. The morning session begins with the ceremonial opening of Guru Granth Sahib (*prakāsh*, lit. illumination) and the reading of a verse (*hukamnāmā*, lit. command) to serve as guidance for the day's actions, followed by the chanting of a collective prayer (*ardās*). The last session



Fig. 2. Bowing to Guru Granth Sahib at Gurdwāra San Jose (photo by Inderjit N. Kaur, August 21, 2016).

of the day ends with the ceremonial closing (*sukhāsan*, lit. pose of ease) of Guru Granth Sahib when it is carried back to its seat of repose in a separate room, accompanied by processional singing. Thus, the entire process is one in which listening, seeing, touching, and moving all come together to create an experiential presence of the Guru in all its connotations and enhance the intensity of feeling for the Guru.

A similar process, at a much smaller scale, occurs in many Sikh homes. In Sikh belief and practice, each person is allowed and encouraged to learn and perform all worship activities; there is not a system of ordained clergy, though there are professionals. Sikhs are encouraged to have a dedicated worship room in their homes with the Guru Granth Sahib similarly enthroned. It serves not only to replicate the multisensorial and affective space of the gurdwāra, but also, by enabling each Sikh to personally engage in the tactile, gestural, and kinesthetic processes of attending to and reading from the scripture, amplifies the affective intensities in both the gurdwāra and at home. Having performed all the multisensorial worship activities oneself, the embodied experience is also lived vicariously when watching another's performance. The Guru's House and Guru's Room thus interplay as public-private spaces of affect circulation.

At the gurdwāra, when congregants enter the sanctuary (*darbār*, lit. court), many pause at the doorway to swipe the palm of their hand on the threshold and then touch their palm to their forehead as a gesture of humility and of imbibing the qualities of virtuous congregants through the "dust of their feet" (*charan dhoor*). Song texts in fact speak of yearning to "drink" the foot-bath water of the virtuous, and this is often paired with obtaining *darsan* of (communion with) the virtuous.

Upon entering the sanctuary, worshippers walk up a centre aisle toward the Guru Granth Sahib and pay their respects by placing an offering of money, *bhētā*, at the "feet" of the Guru and bowing on all fours to touch their foreheads to the floor, a gesture of submission to the wisdom of the Guru (Fig. 2). They may stand in prayer posture for several seconds in thanks or to ask the Guru for blessings. They proceed to circumambulate around Guru Granth Sahib, pausing behind the dais to bow their forehead to it, giving a tip to the performer of *kīrtan* or *kathā* on the side stage, and receiving in their cupped hands the sweet sacrament, *karāh parshād* (a moist bread pudding made of equal parts clarified butter [*ghee*], whole wheat flour, and sugar), which they eat with their fingers as they sit down cross-legged on the floor, rubbing the excess butter on their hands and arms, and even faces and beards (though napkins are increasingly replacing this practice in urban areas) (Fig. 3). The congregants then enjoy the worship in progress, which is primarily sonic, including the chanting and singing of scriptural verses (*pāth* and *kīrtan*, respectively), their exegesis (*kathā*),



Fig. 3. Receiving *parshād* at Gurdwāra San Jose (photo by Inderjit N. Kaur, August 21, 2016).



Fig. 4. Typical Sikh *sabad kīrtan* ensemble with harmonium and *tabla* drums (photo from the Gurdwara San Jose Facebook page; used with permission).

and collective prayer (*ardās*) (for a view of the typical Sikh kīrtan ensemble, see Fig. 4).⁷ At the end of the worship session, congregants proceed to the communal kitchen (*langar*) for a free vegetarian meal cooked by volunteers, also eaten with the fingers (though increasingly supplemented with spoons). Finally, volunteers from the congregation wash and clean up.⁸ Embodied service (*sevā*) activities such as this, and dusting the congregants' shoes, is said to inculcate humility, essential for understanding the divine. Additionally, the practice of langar, where all are seated and served equally irrespective of socially constructed differences including religion, and particularly caste in the South Asian context, is an enactment of social equality and human dignity, again essential for comprehending the divine.⁹

Thus, auditory, visual, haptic, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, gestural, and kinesthetic sensations are all enjoined in a gurdwāra experience. Congregants behold the grandeur of the Guru Granth Sahib, touch sacred spaces as they gesticulate, breathe in the gentle fragrance of the sweet parshād and the spice-infused aroma of langar, taste and ingest, and infuse sweet butter on their skin (thereby also carrying its scent along with them). It is with their senses thus enlivened, and affects thus mobilized, that they listen to and sing along the sacred lyrics extolling the virtues of the Guru and an ethical life.

Listening (*sarvan*)

Listening is considered the most important activity in the gurdwāra. The gurdwāra is a compelling place because of the sacred song and chant. It is sonic worship that brings the congregation (*sangat*, lit. of similar gait, pace) together. Sacred song configures not only the congregation but also the subjectivities and identities of its members, as well as their sociality (Townsend 2011; Jacobsen 2012; Kaur 2016a; 2018). Kuljit, a middle-aged devout Sikh in San Jose, California, is a regular gurdwāra attendee with a Guru's room and daily worship practice in her home. She tells me of the many benefits she experiences when listening in sangat. Most important to her is the effect of listeners who are more devoted and advanced than her: "It breaks my ego" (interview, January 14, 2018). According to Sikh belief, egoism is not only an ethical weakness, but also impedes the ability to hear and heed the Guru and comprehend the divine.

Notably, despite the variety of sensorial ritual engagements in the gurdwāra, for listening to be most effective, the recommendation and etiquette is for congregants to sit still, cross-legged, with a straight back, palms together (*hath jōr kē*), and eyes closed. My interlocutor Baljit, a devout middle-aged Sikh in Santa Clara, California, tells me that this is how she likes it best: "It

gives me comfort and I feel connection with Waheguru” (interview, December 16, 2017). While she participates in the various sensorial activities described above, they are not forefront in her awareness. It is listening she talks about. This is typical of most of my interlocutors. Ranjit sees the “ritual” activities as preparation for listening: “It prepares you for calming down and listening ... getting in the mood ... telling yourself to open your mind” (WhatsApp text message with author, January 13, 2018). For Ramneek (from Connecticut) and Harpreet (from Los Angeles), both in their forties and accomplished singers of Sikh kīrtan for many years, all ritual activities apart from listening are irrelevant, but they participate in them and like them (WhatsApp text message with author, January 12, 2018). According to Jagminder, a devout elder Sikh from San Jose, the use of exteroceptive senses is to engage people who are at different stages on the “steps,” but ultimately none of the ritual activities are needed (interview, January 13, 2018). Jagminder holds much knowledge of sacred texts and quotes the following Sabad lines to me:

ਫਲ ਕਾਰਨ ਫੂਲੀ ਬਨਰਾਇ ॥ ਫਲ ਲਾਗਾ ਤਬ ਫੂਲੁ ਬਿਲਾਇ ॥
ਗਿਆਨੈ ਕਾਰਨ ਕਰਮ ਅਭਿਆਸੁ ॥ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਭਇਆ ਤਹ ਕਰਮਹ ਨਾਸੁ ॥

Plants blossom to produce fruit. When the fruit takes hold, the blossoms wither away.

To gain knowledge of the divine, people enact and practice rituals.
When knowledge is obtained, the usefulness of rituals ends.
(Guru Granth Sahib: 1167)

The multisensorial delights savoured at the gurdwāra are therefore important priming modalities that collaborate to enhance the efficacy of listening in meaning and knowledge making. These sensations are to be literally physically folded into the body by crossing the legs, joining the palms together and interlacing the fingers, and closing the eyes. As my interlocutors indicate, the multisensorial rituals are for aiding a shift from the mundane to the spiritual, for preparing the body to become receptive to the divine. In a similar vein, cultural historian Constance Classen explains that, for Andean cultures, “The use of the proximity senses in ritual ... is usually meant to underscore the message conveyed through the dominant media of hearing and sight” (1990: 727). Anthropologist Billie Jean Isbell has also reported that in South American indigenous rituals synesthesia is used to aid in the transition from one social stage to another (1985). Importantly, the sensorial engagements are not meant to become “sense appeal” (Haug 1986).

Thus, for Sikhs, looking at the Guru Granth Sahib, touching sacred spaces, imbibing the Guru’s grace through blessed food, and then listening

aims to intersensorially and affectively increase the productivity of audition. As Charles Hirschkind explains about listening, “The entire sensorimotor apparatus, with its mnemonic layers of kinesthetic and visceral experience, will form the auditory membrane” (2006: 27). South Asian scholar Xenia Zeiler, writing about the role of *yantras* (geometric artwork) in Hindu and Tantric traditions, posits: “The inclusion of further senses also implies the inclusion of further network activities between the different senses involved. The senses are thus elevated” (2014: 175).

I take this argument further to the amplification of affect from this elevation of senses, and the epistemic potential — the potential to know the divine — of the affective sensory elevation. In the context of Islamic sermon listening, Hirschkind finds that, “Beyond the cognitive task of learning rules and procedures, careful listeners hone those affective-volitional dispositions that both attune the heart to God’s word and incline the body toward moral conduct” (2004: 132). Listening in Sikh worship and understanding the Guru’s ethical guidance becomes a particularly affective modality, synesthetically heightened by the earlier seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and ingesting. The Sabad lyrics intensify this experience through repeated emphasis on “drinking,” “tasting,” and “savouring” divine essence, and further underscore that this is the way to know the divine.

My interlocutor Samina tells a fantastic story of cross-modal sensorial activation, though we were not discussing this topic in particular and were focusing on her experiences in general during *kīrtan* listening. Samina, a millennial raised in California, belongs to the highly devout community of Sikhs, Khalsa (lit. morally pure), for whom the Sikh initiation ceremony is deeply meaningful. Known as *amrit sanchār* (lit. transmission of ambrosial nectar), it consists of the devotee drinking amrit received from a group of five deeply spiritual Khalsa (*pañj pyārē*, lit. the five beloved; those who embody the spirit of the Guru). The amrit is prepared at the ceremony by the five beloved with water and sugar puffs in an iron bowl. It is stirred with a *khandā* (double-edged iron sword, symbolizing spirituality and temporality) while the five beloved chant sacred verses. By ingesting the amrit, the devotee is believed to be infused with love for the Guru and the spirit of a *sant-sipāhi* (warrior-saint), one who has the courage to uphold moral values in daily conduct and stand up for human rights. The amrit ceremony is also known as *khandē dī pahul*, literally awakening by the *khandā*. Samina especially loves the worship sessions during the festival of Vaisakhi (celebrating the day the tenth Guru instituted the amrit ceremony and the Khalsa tradition), and her favourite portion of *kīrtan* is the chanting (*simran*, lit. meditation) of the divine name, which she describes to me.

The most powerful experience of simran for me is on Vaisakhi occasions when those who have just taken amrit join the kīrtan. They come into the room led by the panj pyāre. Everyone stands up. If any among them can sing they lead the kīrtan. In that simran the amrit just comes into my mouth by itself. I can taste it. It is sweet. (phone interview, June 25, 2016)

Such a multimodal sensorial experience has also been reported by Joy Barrow who was told by an informant in England that, during the wāheguru chanting, “*amrit* from inside his very being came into his mouth in a physical sense and he swallowed it” (2001: 102). Barrow quotes him as saying, “When you repeat the name you taste this nectar, sweeter than anything you’ve ever known. You take sips of it on your tongue, same as the amrit, but you keep drinking it all the time” (102).

It is also pertinent to note that Sikh congregants, while listening and singing, may read along the song text from hymnals (*pōthi*), and now, especially in the diaspora, overhead projections of song texts with translations. However, this viewing of the sacred text is an intersensorial affective experience too, not a static glance at static print material. In fact, since the sacred songs were first sung and circulated orally and aurally, before the texts were compiled into scripture, their sound is integrated with the print. The same sacred song texts are read, chanted, sung, expounded on, respectfully bowed to, and lovingly touched, and their essence is ingested and savoured. There is not a binary between sound and print for Sikhs. Both are referred to as *Bāṇi* (lit. utterance). For Sikhs, the experience and agency of the Guru Granth Sahib is therefore not separable into components.

Scholarship on faith traditions is increasingly recognizing the complex role of sacred items in spiritual practices. In the context of South Asian religions, Albertina Nugteren writes about emotional and sensorial responses to material items among Buddhist practitioners, particularly to the sacred *bōdhi* tree (under which the Buddha obtained enlightenment):

The tree is both material and transcendent: its material dimensions evoke visceral and sensorial responses; it is involved in enactments of religiosity; it bridges the broader connections between the material, the mental, and the spiritual. The “materiality of the beyond” (Biles 2010: 73) is both physical, belonging to the material realm of belief, and a transcendent state, symbolizing Buddha’s awe-inspiring enlightenment. (Nugteren 2014: 212)

Thus, one cannot separate the devotee's experience of sacred items into material, mental, and transcendental.

In contrast, Sikh studies scholar Anne Murphy pushes a binarized material/immaterial interpretation of the Sikh sacred scripture in her book, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition* (2012). She utilizes a Western-centric textual, visual, and representational approach in which sacred items are objectified as representing something rather than being direct multisensorial experiences. Conceptualizing “objects” in a paradigm of “images,” “looking,” and “interpretational frame” (2012: 22), she argues for a separate “object-role” and “object-nature” of the scripture “outside of” and distinguishable from “its role as a vehicle for the Word, which is not material” (2012: 55). Such an argument of objectified stark discontinuity between material and immaterial has little applicability for something as sacred and experientially complex for Sikhs as the Guru's *Bāṇi*. As sensory studies scholar David Howes has cautioned: “[It] is only by developing a rigorous awareness of the visual and textual biases of the Western episteme that we can hope to make sense of how life is lived in other cultural settings” (Howes 1991: 4).

In her article “The Scripture as a Living Guru: Religious Practices among Contemporary Sikhs,” religious studies scholar Kristina Myrvold provides an informative account of Sikh ritual practices in Europe. She reports that devotees “usually do not speak about their acts as being merely symbolic, representing something else, but more often as services that permit a real and immediate interaction with the guru and the guru's place” (2014: 177). However, Myrvold does not explore this experiential dimension. In this paper, my purpose is precisely to go beyond the surface level description of cultural practices to how they are experienced, and how meaning and knowledge are gained from the experience.

Another important point to be emphasized about a plurisensory affective ecology is the role of repetition in ritual practice. With repeated engagement, past sensorial and affective experiences project on to the current one; they accrete in the sensing body. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor has analyzed the importance of “repeats” of performative events in leaving “traces” using Derrida's notion of hauntology (Taylor 1999).¹⁰ Within and across successive visits to the gurdwāra, each of the sensorial and affective activities gain interactive force. In other words, they build affordances — beneficial mutualities within the ecology. They also link with greater strength to the ecology of the Guru's room in private homes. As James Gibson has argued, perception hones into mutually beneficial possibilities in the environment (1977, 1979). Based on this argument, anthropologist Tim Ingold has posited that cultural knowledge is

developed as “specific dispositions and sensibilities” in particular environments so as “to attend to its features in particular ways” (2000: 153). Also drawing on Gibson, music perception scholar Eric Clarke has postulated perception as “a self-tuning process, in which the pick-up of environmental information is intrinsically reinforcing, so that the system self-adjusts so as to optimize its resonance with its environment” (2005: 19). In Clarke’s ecological model of listening perception, environmental factors are significant in selectively shaping attention and attunement.

Awe, Affection, Attunement

According to Sikh belief, the role of affect, and its mobilization and circulation, is crucial for the knowledge gained from sensory perception.¹¹ Awe and affection, in particular, are considered key. A Sabad succinctly asserts their role, arguing against the efficacy of mechanical and mentalist means:

ਦਿਸੈ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਜਾਣੀਐ ਸਾਉ ਨ ਪਾਇਆ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਰੁਹਲਾ ਟੁੰਡਾ ਅੰਧੁਲਾ ਕਿਉ ਗਲਿ ਲਗੈ ਧਾਇ ॥
ਭੈ ਕੇ ਚਰਣ ਕਰ ਭਾਵ ਕੇ ਲੋਇਣ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਕਰੇਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਕਹੈ ਸਿਆਣੀਏ ਇਵ ਕੰਤ ਮਿਲਾਵਾ ਹੋਇ ॥

An understanding based on simply listening and seeing will not bring knowledge of the Emperor.

How can one without functioning limbs and eyes run towards and embrace the Emperor?

It is by making awe your feet, affection your arms, and attunement your eyes.¹²

Says Nanak, O wise ones, this is the way to unite with the Beloved.
(Guru Granth Sahib: 139)

In Sikhism, the very word for the divine, *wāheguru*, builds on an expression of wonder and awe — *wāh* (wow)! Sabad after Sabad speak of the wonder of the Divine, such as in the following example:

ਬਿਸਮਨ ਬਿਸਮ ਭਏ ਬਿਸਮਾਦ ॥

Awe-struck by the awe of the awesome (divine). (Guru Granth Sahib: 285)

The divine is described in the Sabad as infinite (*be-ant*), all-pervading (*saravyāpi*), incomparable (*anoop*), immeasurable (*atōl*), unfathomable (*agādh*), incomprehensible (*agam-agōchar*), indescribable (*kahan na jāī*), and imperishable

(*avināsi*), as well as all-knowing (*antarjāmi*). The divine is also a moral ideal par excellence — an ocean of moral virtues (*guni gahīr*), the epitome of munificence and largesse (*dātā dātār*), and benevolent (*meherbān*). These terms permeate the speech of devotees as well. These Sabad lyrics, when musically experienced within an affective ecology, deepen the comprehension of an awesome divine.

Equally important is the feeling of affection and love (*prem, pyār*) — for the Guru, the congregation, and all humanity and nature. As a sabad asserts:

ਅੰਦਰੁ ਖਾਲੀ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਬਿਨੁ ਢਹਿ ਢੇਰੀ ਤਨੁ ਛਾਰੁ ॥

Without love, the body is empty; after all it just crumbles into a heap of dust. (Guru Granth Sahib: 62)

For listening to be effective, it is considered important that the heart be engaged. Listening must be practiced with feeling, particularly love, affection, and regard (*bhāo*), as expressed, for example, in the sabad:

ਗਾਵੀਐ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਮਨਿ ਰਖੀਐ ਭਾਉ ॥

Sing, listen, hold affection in the heart and intention. (Guru Granth Sahib: 2)

Kirtan performers often preface their singing with an invitation to the congregants to listen (*sarvan karō*) with love (*prēm*) and devotion (*shardhā*), and to fill their bodies with affection (*āo, pyār nāl bhar jāiyē*). Listeners' responsorial singing contributes significantly to the embodied and affective capacities of listening as well. The Guru is also understood as ever loving, caring, and non-discriminating. In worship occasions the congregation is typically addressed as the beloved of the Guru (*Guru-pyāri sangat*).

Awe and affection are thus important parts of the Sikh spiritual technology. It is for this reason that the affective ecology of the gurdwāra is geared toward creating awe and affection for the Guru and enlists diverse modes of engagement for this purpose. As psychologist Daniel Stern has emphasized, “an affect experience is not bound to any one modality of perception” (1985: 53). Thus, multiple sense abilities are shaped to inhabit a certain affective relation with the Guru. The variety of sensorial engagements, along with feelings of love and awe for Guru Granth Sahib, as well as the sociality of the congregation, infuse the gurdwāra experience with affective power. The sonic worship occasions are thus affective listening ecologies where several such connections come together to be renewed time and again, not in the same exact manner, but still leaving traces that accumulate and feed back into the ecology.

Along with awe and affection, attunement (*surat*) is considered critical. Affective attunement is a central Sikh spiritual technique. One's consciousness must be attuned to the teachings in the Sabad texts (*sabad surat*), not just intellectually, but affectively. Further, this process is considered most efficacious in the company of a virtuous congregation (*sādh sangat*), that is, by means of intersubjective experiences in an affective ecological setting. As social and political scientist Teresa Brennan has argued in her book, *Transmission of Affect*, a person is not an "affectively contained" being, but subject to affective energy in the social and physical environment, with the body's biochemical system playing an important role in the transmission of affect (2004: 2). Sound, sight, touch, and smell all elicit such responses in a group. In addition to the multisensorial practices in the gurdwāra described above, it must be mentioned that on crowded days, sitting knee-to-knee, bodies are literally in contact, transmitting vibration and affect.

The notion of "affect attunement" was developed by psychologists such as Daniel Stern in the context of infant-mother intersubjective experiences (Stern 1985). The sabad texts repeatedly use metaphors of family and friend for a caring and nurturing divine, and of a child for the devotee. During kīrtan occasions all ages are intermingled and participate in the same space. Tired infants are rocked and young children are patted to sleep to the beat of sacred song. Floor seating enables them to rest comfortably as and when they need. Langar, stocked and staffed by volunteers, runs continuously in an adjacent dining hall.

Thus, the gurdwāra, being a site where the congregation gathers to listen to and experience the Guru's wisdom, provides an ecological setting for the requisite intersubjective affordances. It is a space in a physical sense, where congregants are situated, but also in a phenomenological sense (à la Merleau-Ponty), having the power to engender a particular relationship among the congregants. Sikhs also meet in smaller private gatherings in their homes to sing sabad kīrtan, chant sabad compositions that have particular liturgical functions (*pāṭh*), or discuss their meanings (*vichār*).

The Sikh affective ecology also extends to the Sunday school at the gurdwāra and similar at-home activities. The affects are inculcated from a young age, transmitted socially and through morally inspiring life-stories (*janam-sākhī*) of the Gurus and other Sikh historical figures. These are available now in illustrated books and comics in Punjabi, Hindi, and English, as well as new media including animated films and mobile apps. Using human actors to portray the Sikh Gurus in film or theatre has been considered inappropriate as it risks exalting humans to the status of a Guru which is believed to go against the edict of the tenth Guru. This, along with the hagiographies, create an aura

of the ten Gurus as divine-like beings, and nuances the love and admiration for the Guru with feelings of awe.

Audiencing (*darsan*)

While, as discussed above, listening and chanting are the most emphasized and valorized activity in Sikh worship, *darsan* (seeing, audiencing with, communing with) of the divine is the goal. *Darsan* refers to an experiential understanding of the divine. Even though in Sikh belief the experience of the divine does not occur in exteroceptive sensations, the knowledge of the divine is expressed in terms of the ability to “see” (*pékḥ*) the divine. While this may seem to resurrect the hegemony of the visual, this “vision” in fact takes aim at the gaze as the generator of ego and perceiver of difference, which are considered impediments to divine knowledge. The knowledge of the divine according to Sikh conceptualization consists of grasping non-duality in a comprehensive sense. The following *sabad* lines are among many that state this:

ਸਫਲੁ ਜਨਮੁ ਜਿਨਾ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਪਾਇਆ ॥ ਦੂਜਾ ਭਾਉ ਗੁਰ ਸਬਾਦਿ ਜਲਾਇਆ ॥
ਏਕੋ ਰਵਿ ਰਹਿਆ ਘਟ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਮਿਲਿ ਸਤਸੰਗਤਿ ਹਰਿ ਗੁਣ ਗਾਵਣਿਆ ॥

Successful is the life of those who find the divine. With the help of the Guru's *Sabad* they destroy their love of duality.

They find the same divine pervading in each and every one. In the company of the virtuous, they sing of the virtues of the divine.
(Guru Granth Sahib: 129)

A person whose consciousness is attuned with divine knowledge “sees” the divine everywhere and in everyone. In our conversation on *darsan*, Jagminder quoted several *Sabad* lines that state this. A person who has obtained *darsan* of the divine does not perceive difference in any dimension and does not construct Others. Since vision is the chief sense through which difference is perceived (though sound is also liable, as, for example, Born and Hesmondhalgh discuss for music [2000]), this is what is aimed to be fundamentally changed by using “seeing” as the metaphor for having grasped divine knowledge.

Darsan is also used in the sense of having audience with. Sikhs will typically say they are going to the *gurdwāra* to listen to *kīrtan*, *kathā*, or *pāṭh*, and also to do *darsan* (*darsan karan*) of the Guru and virtuous congregation (*sādh sangat*). During the times of the human Gurus, the congregation would gather to have audience with the Gurus, not simply to see them but to listen

to their words of wisdom and seek their advice. Thus, darsan implies seeing, listening, heeding, and knowing. It does not allow a separation of seeing and hearing, nor a hierarchy of the former as knowing and the latter as heeding. Since the Guru Granth Sahib contains the wisdom of the human Gurus in the form of Sabad, it affords the same darsan as the human Gurus, and is therefore understood as a “living” Guru.

In their *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, Fenech and McLeod define darsan as audience, visit, and communion along with sight (2014). I have used the verb-form audiencing, since it is an active process — Sikhs do darsan. Interestingly and significantly, according to Fenech and McLeod, the semantic connotations of darsan also include blessing and, in their interpretation, a special visual touch. I would also emphasize sonic touch, since the sonic is a key part of darsan. As sound studies scholars have explicated, sound is haptic; its vibrations literally touch us (see Schafer 1977; Connor 2004; Eidsheim 2015). In a religious context specifically, Leigh Schmidt’s work on early modern auditory Christian practices has argued for the recognition of multisensory complexity (2000). Thus, though darsan includes seeing, it does not fit into a modern Western visualist paradigm. It is a multisensorial experiential encounter with the Guru, and also with the congregation, replete with positive affect, meaning, and knowledge.

Concluding Comments

In this paper, I have analyzed the role of multiple sense modalities in invigorating and sustaining an affective ecology of a musical practice, and the epistemic potential of such an ecology. While sensory and affective approaches to the study of musical cultures have both seen an efflorescence in recent years, the recognition of the interplay and integration of multiple senses, and their affective and epistemic implications, have just begun to be foregrounded.

In Sikh sonic worship, listening (sarvan), audiencing (darsan), and other sensory modalities are understood in more than mechanical terms. Along with ingestion and savouring, they all refer to an experiential encounter, which is how the body registers them. The cross references among sensorial modalities are not mere metaphors, but indicate experiential ontic and epistemic dimensions.¹³ Drawing from this understanding in Sikh sonic worship, as well as through ethnography and close reading of sacred song texts, my analysis has contributed to the understanding of the affordances in the multisensorial activities associated with a sonic practice.

With this analysis of the role and interplay of multiple sensorial modalities and this experiential approach to the study of Sikh sonic worship and its affective ecology, I have also contributed to an understanding of Sikh practices that goes beyond surface level representational conceptualizations, as has been common in Sikh studies. Visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, gestural, and kinesthetic activities are not mere mechanical rituals enacted by Sikhs, but are interrelated sensorial practices that synesthetically and affectively combine with aurality to amplify its effectiveness as spiritual technology.

This analysis has shed light in particular on the agency of the Sikh scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib* — a repository of sacred song texts that is at the centre of Sikh sonic worship and its affective ecology, and is revered as a “living” preceptor by Sikhs. This agency is at once sensorial-affective, affective-cognitive, and transcendental; these components cannot be separated, but form a gestalt for devotees. The scripture is “a living Guru” for those whose senses are enlivened in its presence to feel the Ineffable. The scripture speaks to them and touches them — they can hear, they can feel, they are affected, and they gain knowledge. *Guru Granth Sahib* has agency and power to stir them and to move them — into spaces, times, and knowledge realms.

The recognition in scholarly literature of the multisensory in musical practices and the social formation of perception has no doubt added much to our understanding of both perception and culture. What I hope to have contributed, by foregrounding the affective and ecological, is that affordances among the senses lead to intersensorial enhancement, affective amplification, and epistemic enrichment. Such an approach, foregrounding the mutuality between the plurisensory modalities of a sonic practice and the affordances between bodies, human and non-human, furthers considerably the understanding of the complex and distinctive means by which diverse musical cultures make meaning and knowledge, and understand the world. 🌿

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Notes

1. Including Benjamin (1973 [1936]), Mauss (1979 [1934]), McLuhan (1964), Ong (1967), Berger (1972), Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), Corbin (1986 [1982], 2005 [1990]), Howes (1991), Taussig (1993), Classen (1993), Bull et al (2006), Smith

(2007), Pink (2009), and Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk (2012).

2. See, in particular, Feld (1982, 1999). For a review of the scholarship on listening and the interplay of different modes of listening, see Rice (2010).

3. It is pertinent to note here that I am not using “ecology” to draw wide parallels with natural ecologies or evoke notions of harmonious nature. For a critique of such approaches see Keogh and Collinson (2016). My purpose is to bring attention to the mutuality between the various sensory modes and the resulting amplification of affect, meaning, and knowledge, and also to the cultural mediation of perception.

4. Sikhism is a 500-year-old faith tradition from India, now recognized as the fifth largest world religion with about 25 million followers and a diasporic presence around the globe. Sikhs form less than 2 percent of the Indian population, with 80 percent living in the state of Punjab, and form less than 0.5 percent of the world population with the largest diasporic communities in the UK, Canada, and the US.

5. According to Sikh belief, the divine spirit dwells in each person as well, but is occluded by egoism and egotism (*haumai*) along with other vices (*avgun*), prominently lust, fury, avarice, and attachment (recognized as the Five Thieves — *kām*, *krodh*, *lobh*, *moh*, *ahankār*).

6. To view this process, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMklwRlImEco>; accessed January 21, 2018.

7. For descriptions of the main musical genres of Sikh *kīrtan* and YouTube links to performances, see Kaur (2016a, 2016b). For additional listening, an example of the classical style can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1383tV6DKA>, and an example of the popular light style at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38qesQdwe_Y.

8. Increasingly, *gurdwārās* serving large congregations also employ workers for these tasks, and employees and volunteers work together in the kitchen.

9. *Langar* is a cherished Sikh tradition. At the preeminent Sikh temple, *Harmandir Sahib*, *langar* is served around the clock daily to an estimated 80,000–200,000 visitors of all backgrounds, free and without restriction. To view this process, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdoJroKUwu0>; accessed May 20, 2019.

10. I am grateful to Heather Sparling for pointing out this reference.

11. For an elaboration of this point drawing from cognitive studies, see Kaur 2016a.

12. I have chosen to translate ॐ (*bhai*) as awe even though it is often translated as fear because it does not have connotations of fright, terror, or dread. Awe more closely captures the congregants’ understanding of the power of the divine along with feelings of reverence and regard. For Raminder (from Los Angeles), “God fearing is more like God loving — I have always seen it this way” (WhatsApp text message with author, January 11, 2018). In Punjabi, the feeling is explained as *nirmal bhau*, lit. unblemished fear, or awe.

13. As cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson have proposed in their conceptual metaphor theory (1980), bodily experience, which is the basis of knowledge, gets mapped onto the domain of linguistic expression.

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