Experiential Blues Identity:

Analyzing racial categories of difference in a Philadelphia blues club

Kate Edmundson
Senior Thesis
Anthropology Department
Haverford College
April 18, 2003
Abstract

The individual’s proper experience of blues music and other ‘African American’
music according to his or her race has been the subject of a controversial 20th century
debate. The black arts movement of the 1960s gave impetus to the popular black
nationalistic notion that blues music belongs exclusively to African Americans.
Subsequent anti-essentialist and pluralistic theories have problematized the black
essentialist notion of racial ownership of music. The work presented below, an
ethnographic study of Warmdaddy’s in Philadelphia examines two evenings of blues
culture at that blues club. My findings indicate that neither of the traditional poles of the
black music debate, essentialism and anti-essentialism, adequately describes the
experience of blues music for Blacks and Whites who participate in it.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 1

1) Introduction .................................................................................................................. 2

2) Blues: Historical background ..................................................................................... 5

3) Philadelphia: Cultural and Racial Dynamics ............................................................... 7

4) Warmdaddy’s – A data narrative ................................................................................... 9
   
   I- Location and General Description ........................................................................... 9
   
   II- Tuesday Night ........................................................................................................ 12
   
   III- Monday Night ....................................................................................................... 15
   
   IV- Monday vs. Tuesday: A Data Analysis ................................................................. 20

5) Black Music Ideology: The Black Nationalism Approach ........................................... 24

6) Pluralism: Towards a Warmdaddy’s Blues Meaning .................................................... 30

7) Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 43

Appendix 1 ....................................................................................................................... 45

Appendix 2 ....................................................................................................................... 46

Works Cited/Referenced ................................................................................................. 47
Acknowledgements

I feel endlessly lucky to have had such a broad support network while creating this thesis. I would like to extend my thanks first to Jimmy Pritchard, my informant and friend at Warmdaddy's.

Thanks go to my friends, so many of whom ‘selflessly’ offered to accompany me to my fieldwork. Their interest in my work was reinvigorating.

Many thanks go to my wonderful family, who understood and were not offended when I descended into my ‘thesis cave’.

Thank you to Professor Laurie Hart for her constructive ideas and leads. Thank you to Professor Maris Gillette for her invaluable, sixth-sense advice about the writing process.

Thank you, above all, to Professor Zolani Ngwane for his tireless generosity, his consistent optimism, and his love for sorting through heady material. I grew to love this process in large part through working with him.
1. Introduction

My personal relationship with blues music developed long before the conception of this project. Ella Fitzgerald and Carole King were the first to convince me that there was nothing greater than singing the way they did. I was a single-digit kid whose favorite activity was to put on impromptu shows for my family. What impressed me about Ella and Carole, the first a great jazz vocalist and the second a soulful pianist and singer, wasn’t that they sounded pretty, although they did. The thing that got me was that both of them had an incredible power, yet they made their music sound completely effortless. It was as if they opened their mouths to let the whole world come out through their sound. It would be a while before I referred to that as ‘soul’, and longer still before I realized how badly I needed to do music that would let me unleash my own soul.

Ella and Carole not only sparked my young interest, but they alerted me, as I got older, to innate difference and how people relate it to music. I was troubled by the idea that any music could be exclusive because as a listener, the one thing music had always made me feel was included. Ella, a black woman; Carole, a white woman; and my other favorites sang to me with emotion that was so tangible, I couldn’t believe one of them might belong to me less than another one.

In more recent times, my taste in what I like to perform has gravitated increasingly towards blues and jazz. I still have the same troubles about racial ownership of music. It has translated to a self-consciousness about where my place is in the world of music writing and performing. I wanted to take on this project in part to explore some of my own questions about blues music. Who should make and enjoy it? Who does? How do performers make blues music applicable to contemporary times? Do the blues
have a home in Philadelphia? I have confronted all of these questions throughout my research and attempt to give many of their answers in the following paper.

When I first imagined my ethnographic fieldwork, or how I would ideally have it, I pictured myself in an intimate soul and blues bar in a secluded yet lively corner of Philadelphia. I pictured a participatory and dynamic crowd of mixed races, ages, and genders in both the band and the audience. I thought of the performers as local masters who were both well known and deeply centered in the city of Philadelphia. I heard the music as definitively bluesy, but specifically personal, intellectual, and above all explicative of and pertinent to the locality of the City. I envisioned the kind of Philadelphia-positive message I get from listening to contemporary “Neoclassical soul” artists like Jill Scott. All of these elements exist in Philadelphia, but it was perhaps a bit too optimistic to imagine them colliding in one magical blues club. I was naïvely hoping for a quick and easy way to dispel my concerns about a racial imbalance in blues music and in Philadelphia.

What I found does not fit into this description, although it has proved to be more clarifying than I could have ever thought a hopelessly integrationist dream would be. My fieldwork has led me to see where racial stereotypes do indeed manifest themselves into reality. It has also showed me how we must examine these categories of difference with a careful and critical eye if we choose to make judgments about the ‘correct’ representations and the ‘real’ meaning of blues music. I do not make such judgments in this paper. I have found that people of all kinds involved in blues music necessarily import a part of their own experience into the blues even as they strive for a music that is pure.
The work presented below, an ethnographic study of Warmdaddy’s in Philadelphia examines two evenings of blues culture at that club. The binary is rich in contrast and common thread. In Chapters 2 and 3, I provide some brief background information on the history of blues music and on the racial dynamics of Philadelphia. These first chapters help to pave the way for an understanding of the racialized categories that figure prominently in my ethnographic work. I move into a description of Warmdaddy’s and of this study’s focus nights in Chapter 4, then into a comparative analysis of the focus nights. Chapter 5 is an explication of essentialist cultural theory as it relates to “black music ideology,” which has traditionally made up such a large part of the critical debate about racial authenticity and ‘black’ music. I also give a brief summary of the anti-essentialist critiques of black nationalism at the end of that section. My attempt is to demonstrate the polarity of the racial authenticity and black music debate, a binary that I problematize in Chapter 6. In that chapter I introduce pluralism theory as an informative middle ground, which some people have proposed as an alternative, and assess its applicability to this project. I find that the opposition of essentialism and anti-essentialism is false, and even a hybridity theory must be nuanced to explain the ways in which people create blues meaning at Warmdaddy’s. My findings are that both essentialism and anti-essentialism apply to the experience of blues-goers on the two focus nights. My hope is to provide some clarification about how groups of people in Philadelphia embody blues culture stereotypes, and show to what extent these divisive stereotypes are perhaps more uniting than we might have thought.
2. Historical Background

Blues music was created by African American slaves on antebellum southern plantations and, later, developed by “freedmen” struggling for survival during and after the Reconstruction of the post-Civil War South of the late 1800s. They made and relied upon the music as their only means to outwardly rise up against their oppressors and simultaneously build a cohesive and spirit-driven black community. Blues was the medium for the “uncorking of the censored histories” (Woods 1998:36), through which African Americans communicated with each other and spoke out the truths of their oppression. The blues enhanced an African American tradition of explanation (1998:25-39) in which knowledge and self-growth were obtained through a kind of storytelling—and that it was viewed as such is quite possibly the reason that white planters let it pass as something the slaves did by nature.

The birthplace and heart of blues land is widely recognized to be the Mississippi Delta, where the plantation regime was a force of domination long after the Civil War ended. African Americans struggled all through the Reconstruction and afterwards to create an identity in a time when they had much greater mobility than as slaves, but were still oppressed by post-Reconstruction laws. The blues played an enormously important role during this time by uniting them in an understanding of their Black cultural identity. According to writer Alan Lomax, as cited by Clyde Woods in Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta, “…the new song styles of the Delta symbolized the dynamic continuance of African social and creative process as a technique of adaption. Moreover, the birth of the blues and the struggle of its progenitors could be seen as a creative deployment of African style in an American setting…”
The effort to establish social democracy through the blues laid the ground for an African American ethic of survival, subsistence, and affirmation that still exists today.

The migration of blues from the South was largely due to the development of the recording industry (1998:109). The industry functioned in a sense like a modern version of the traveling blues singer, who imported the blues of his region into other schools of blues and picked up influences on the way. The recording industry operated on a more national scale and facilitated the beginning of a blues transformation in the early part of the 20th century. Blues also underwent a migration in the flesh when thousands of African Americans from Mississippi moved to Chicago in the 1910s through the 1930s in search of an escape from financial woes and the oppressive life of the plantation-nostalgic Delta. The large influx of Blacks into Chicago’s South Side created a definitive Black community in which the blues was the central means of voicing the collective identity of the community (1998:145).

Blues music is the parent of the vast majority of twentieth century American music, its influence beginning with jazz and infusing rock and roll, soul, funk, disco, bluesrock, rhythm and blues, reggae, country and western, and hip hop (1998:36). These blues descendants began emerging in the 1920s and continue today as blues inspires music movements like Philadelphia’s Neo soul, which we will see in the next section.
3. Philadelphia: Cultural and Racial Dynamics

Philadelphia was a relatively large urban center in the pre-Civil War era, when the blues were taking seed on the plantations of the South. It was decidedly separated from the culture of the South although it is just a short distance north of the Mason Dixon line. It was also not a part of the northward physical migration of the blues, which culminated in cities like Chicago and Minneapolis. It was clearly disconnected from the social and cultural moment when the blues came into being, and Philadelphia’s lack of place in that moment has interesting implications for the way in which blues exists in the city today.

Philadelphia has, however, been involved in the evolution of popular music in the 20th century, particularly in black music and specifically in soul music. “Philly Soul,” a polished and lushly produced soul music sound which came about a decade after the soul music of Motown, was one of the most popular forms of music in the 1970s (Unterberger 2002). Although it was primarily a style of the producers and not of the artists, it had a big influence on the urban R & B and disco that would follow. These days Philadelphia is hosting a new kind of soul renaissance that some refer to as Neoclassical soul, which combines elements from soul, jazz, blues, gospel, and hip hop and is headed up by talented and popular artists like Jill Scott. (LaVeist 2002) Neo-soul is a contemporary demonstration of the rich black culture in Philadelphia that has existed since the early part of the 20th century, when the city was a main destination for slaves and ex-slaves. Black artistic culture has flourished in Philadelphia, but always in the framework of racial segregation.

Today Philadelphia’s population is 43.21% black, 42.46% white, 8.85% Hispanic and 4.46% Asian (U. S. Census Bureau 2001:38). When I first began college in the
greater Philadelphia area and spent a fair amount of time downtown, I remember feeling that the nearly one-to-one white-to-black ratio was very apparent and was translating to significant interaction between the two races. It should be noted that I was coming from Vermont, a typically homogeneous and white place, but the close proximities in which I saw black and white Philadelphians going about their business gave me new hope for the existence of a racially integrated city. I realized soon thereafter that this was indeed a naïve assumption about the way things worked in Philadelphia, which is quite segregated both geographically and socially. The demographics of the city set up then an interesting set of questions regarding what geographical and cultural place the blues occupies, since it is a music deeply rooted in and sustained within black culture, but also enjoyed and performed by Whites. It is true that the jazz and blues clubs are spread all over the city, but then so are the pockets of white and black living and cultural communities. The segregation in Philadelphia widens the cultural gap between black and white and reinforces stereotypes of difference.
4. Warmdaddy's: A Data Narrative

Since 1995, Warmdaddy’s has celebrated the FOOD, CULTURE, and MUSIC that encompass the SOUTHERN BLUES EXPERIENCE. Serving up a menu of TRADITIONAL SOUTHERN CUISINE and HOSPITALITY, WARMDADDY’S provides an experience filled with the SIGHTS, SOUNDS, and EMOTIONS of LIVE BLUES MUSIC performed by LEGENDARY and EMERGING artists of today. (www.warmdaddys.com)

I. Club Description

Warmdaddy’s is a restaurant and live blues club located in the center of Old City, Philadelphia, at the corner of Front and Market Streets. This is a commercial, touristy area, criss-crossed by main avenues and with direct access to Interstate 95. As a bar and a business, Warmdaddy’s has a good location, but as a local cultural milieu fostering community it is a bit out of water.

When I first entered Warmdaddy’s, I had the sense of walking into a southern tavern. It is all dark wood floors and furniture. The main dining area is divided by a low wooden railing, vaguely reminiscent of a corral for diners. Customers can choose to sit in the section of dining tables and booths behind this railing, in front of the stage and extending all the way to the back of the room, near the entrance. This is the area most like a restaurant, with glossed wooden tabletops, heavy chairs with arms, and deep red carpeting. Diners here can take a straight-on look at the performers onstage or they can involve themselves in their supper and conversation at a safe distance from the performers. Customers can also choose to sit in the front section of the room, to the side of the stage. This area, with straight-back chairs, red tablecloths, and a perimeter bench seat, feels more like a casual music lounge. Indeed, during the Tuesday night jam
sessions, it is where the musicians hang out while listening and waiting to play. Although the performers onstage do not usually face this section, it still houses the most intimate and attentive of audiences in the room. The last seating options are at the wooden railing, which doubles as a kind of bar and runs parallel to the main bar; or at the main bar itself. The latter is long and built perpendicular to the far wall and the stage, such that customers can sit at the bar and be either quite near to the stage or be in the back of the room, near the entrance. It is built in a sturdy and traditional style, consonant with the atmosphere of the room.

On a shelf high above the bar sits a row of several antique pieces, including a suitcase, a globe, a pair of old works boots and a guitar. The first time I saw these pieces I was struck by how they, so casually placed, as if someone had forgotten to dust off the top of the bar, showcased what I took to be blues music themes. I have a similar impression of the function of the other art in Warmdaddy’s, which figures significantly in the Warmdaddy’s atmosphere. There is a series of brightly colored paintings on the walls that illustrate musicians in moments of musical intensity. The paintings are in a modernist, African American style that I can best describe as jazzy in part because the postures and expressions of the characters are illustrative of jazz music creation, but also for the paintings’ vibrancy and contrasting complexity and simplicity. What I found interesting, although it may not have been a deliberate choice of the artist, is that the skin color of the depicted characters in this series of paintings is an ambiguous tan-brown. Also on the walls are old photographs and drawings of blues pioneers and blues settings. The stairwell to the restroom is decorated by photographs and old posters for the past blues acts that Warmdaddy’s has hosted.
The various advertisements around the establishment also provide some interesting insight into its intended themes. Under the heading of one of the table tents, the club lists itself as “Rhythm. Blues. Soul. Food.” (Warmdaddy’s Table Tent 2) Another table tent advertising Monday Nite Gumbo, which I will describe shortly, uses specifically black art and wording to appeal to the targeted Gumbo crowd (see appendix 1). The recorded voice one receives upon calling Warmdaddy’s gives a short description of the club using a somewhat exaggerated southern inflection (see appendix 2).
II. Tuesday Night Jam Sessions

Tuesday night at Warmdaddy’s is known as the “blues jam”. It is an evening when local musicians, enthusiasts, or those passing through have the chance to participate in an organized open-mike in front of each other and the customers in the bar. On my first Tuesday night visit, what immediately struck me about this setting was that both the audience and the performers onstage were mostly white. I had expected a greater racial mix, and even a predominance of black listeners and performers.

I was not in fact very jarred by the primarily white landscape as I made my first entrance into the bar. The ambience, the mood, and above all the music that simultaneously enveloped me fit together cohesively into the category I envision as “country,” which has long been a musical and social arena in which Whites play a central role. Knowing the blues to encompass a large variety of music, each variation signifying “blues music” to its constituents, I settled into the idea that Warmdaddy’s was a blues bar that leaned a little more country. In addition, many blues goers that evening contributed to my sense of being in a casual, even stereotypically country atmosphere. I noticed several men and women wearing cowboy boots and jeans of various sorts, and one of these women took care to ask me politely if she could “just get on by.”

Another man, sensing the warm and informal mood, inquired if he could borrow my pencil. Indeed the audience has a large role in the character of the environment at these jam sessions. Customers’ motives for being at Warmdaddy’s on a Tuesday night seem to

---

1 It is of course possible that this woman actually was from the South or from another part of the country in which this particular phrasing is natural, in which case she was probably not being performative in exclusively that Tuesday night setting. I couldn’t hear a recognizable accent or otherwise get a sense of where she was from. But whether she was a native Philadelphian donning boots and a country affect for the evening or a country woman visiting Warmdaddy’s, her presence was certainly a significant part of the scene.
differ significantly. First, the musicians who listen and also play might be seen as one faction. They are intent on the music itself and on giving it an audience. They are not a rowdy or even overtly energetic group, but they do have visible respect, a sort of relaxed concentration, for blues music and for their peers’ musical successes. Some of the musicians come alone, but many arrive with friends or family who provide support in varying forms, from simply sitting, waiting and listening with them, to cheering and clapping loudly. In the case of this section of the audience, drinking and eating take a secondary position to witnessing the music onstage, although most musicians will drink or eat a little bit, or at least smoke cigarettes. I have, however, seen a couple of younger performers drink appreciably and maybe even eat a meal with the friends who have accompanied them. The musicians’ attentions are both on the music and on the time spent with their friends. These are usually the livelier of the blues patrons, and straddle the border between the observing musicians and the next category of jam session patrons I will describe.

The second distinguishable group of blues goers on Tuesday is made up of those who have come for a bit of casual nighttime entertainment. They are often of a younger crowd, are generally easygoing, and eat sometimes, although they mostly stick to having drinks. Their interest in the performances onstage is genuine, but the music is not the central focus. I have the impression that they enjoy the laid back atmosphere of Warmdaddy's on a Tuesday night and think of it as a time to unwind with their buddies.

Also among the jam session crowd are couples and small groups coming for a late supper. In this primarily white milieu, most of the black customers are those who are there to eat the southern food, which the waiters and regular patrons claim to be among
the best in Philadelphia. Each Tuesday there are several young to middle-aged, well-dressed black couples having dinner and enjoying the ambience that the music provides. Many white couples and groups of the same age bracket also come to enjoy the menu and the music simultaneously. All of these customers tend to sit in the section of the bar that I described earlier as “most like a restaurant.” They have a front view of the stage, and many watch the performers during and after dinner, but they can sit relatively far from the stage for a less noisy, more balanced synaesthetic experience.

Finally there are the customers who sit at the bar. The bar attracts a mix of people. Some have come alone and are just looking to have a drink or listen to the music, as is commonplace at most bars. On more lively Tuesdays, music watchers sometimes spill into the bar seating that is near the front of the room and face towards the stage, away from the bar. In addition, the Latina woman who bartends on Tuesday nights is often visited by a handful of friends who sit and converse with her. Because she is a Latina and the friends who come to visit are Latino and black, the greatest number of non-Whites ends up being at the bar. I have noticed that other non-Whites who are at Warmdaddy's alone come to the bar to find conversation with the bar dwellers. It was particularly striking to me to watch one night how the force of their presence attracted and created a miniature community of non-Whites at the bar.

The one feature that is a part of every patron’s encounter with the jam session regardless of where he or she sits, and could be called the most distinguishable characteristic of Warmdaddy's, is the music. More than any other single factor, the performance shapes the experience of Tuesday nights at the club. Regardless of the
unique intentions of the different groups of blues-goers, the music serves as the crucial backdrop for the nostalgic blues experience.
III. Monday Night Gumbo

If it were not for the existence of the same walls, artwork, and furniture, a Tuesday night regular of Warmdaddy’s who comes in on a Monday night might think she has stepped into the wrong club. The landscape of the bar and what goes on therein is almost entirely different, nearly as opposite to the blues jam as ‘black is to white’. In fact, Monday is the only evening of the week when there is no live blues music. Instead, it is the venue for an alternating series that showcases African American performing art forms—spoken word and slam poetry, comedy, gospel, and R&B (contemporary rhythm and blues) music—and is known as “Monday Nite Gumbo”.

Besides the absence of blues music, the most overt difference between Gumbo and the Tuesday blues jam is that Gumbo attracts an almost completely black audience. On the few occasions I went to Gumbo, I was either the only white in a room full of African Americans or I was one among no more than three. The feeling, regardless of which Gumbo event is occurring, is black-focused and black-positive. Even without being a part of the community, I had the sense each time that I was among a supportive coming-together of black Philadelphians. In fact, I have not otherwise seen Warmdaddy's as packed as it becomes on Mondays, the numbers alone testifying to the collective energy of the group.

The Gumbo crowd is more homogeneous than Tuesday’s is, not just racially, but in motivation. That is, it appears that Gumbo customers are all equally there to appreciate and participate in the performance and the community it creates. There is great enthusiasm uniformly throughout the bar when a performer is onstage; indeed, the arts performed on Mondays solicit dynamic participation. In addition, the Gumbo
performances feature *contemporary* black art, which tends to draw a younger, more energetic crowd. With regard to age, then, Gumbo is just as heterogeneous as the Tuesday blues jam is because the age of audience members ranges from early twenties up to middle-age and older.

A striking aspect of Monday Nite Gumbo is the way in which it is advertised. The target population is clearly African American, as is evident from the literature within the bar and on the *Warmdaddy’s* website, as well as from the voice message one hears when calling the bar directly. The literature contains language, catchwords, and other cultural references that are categorically African American. On Comedy night, for example, customers are advised that “Dress is casual, no hats, no sneaks, no tims,” (*see appendix 1*) referring to Timberlands, a kind of boot that is particularly popular among young African American men. The advertising blurb for Rhythm and Blues night touches upon a theme that is thought of as critical within the African American community, that of ‘community’ itself. The blurb describes the open mic Rhythm and Blues night as “where you come to be seen, heard, and loved as ONE.” The definition of Monday Nite Gumbo itself, also found in the literature, deals with another stereotypically African American theme—that of the relationship between food and the soul:

> **GUMBO** is a traditional New Orleans dish created with a mix of ingredients such as okra, pepper, seafood, and tomatoes to fill your stomach. As such, our Monday Nite GUMBO is created with a spicy mix of gospel, comedy, poetry, and music to fill your spirit. (*see appendix 1*)

The voice message one receives by calling *Warmdaddy’s* lists Monday Nite Gumbo separately from the regular week’s musical events. This is because it is the only night when the live entertainment does not file under blues music, but it also puts the evening on a more specific trajectory and gives it a space of its own in the mind of the person
hearing the voice message. I offer a closer look at the specificity of Monday Nite Gumbo by describing two of its constituent performance events.
Spoken Word and Slam Poetry Night

Poetry and spoken word night attracts a crowded house. It is a hip and dynamic environment, encouraged by the fact that it is a contest of local poets in which the audience plays the judge by making noise at given times. The audience and poets have all been young, twenty to forty-somethings and all-black except for two white poets who competed the first Monday I was there. The MC is also black, and reinforces the energetic, black-positive theme of the evening by thanking the audience “for supporting black art”. In addition, he engages the audience in a call and response each time a new poet gets ready to begin by asking, “Are you ready to welcome the next slam poet to the stage?” The audience has to answer with a loud, collective “Aiiight!” before the MC is satisfied.

People in the audience do some eating at the poetry contest, and a little bit more drinking, primarily of beer. But the emphasis of the evening is clearly on the performances. Spectators give their full and concentrated attention to the poets and develop favorites, whom they root for throughout the night. When people in the audience like what someone does onstage, they let them know with uproarious verbal support and clapping. The spectators are also not afraid to quietly voice disapproval if they do not relate to what a poet is trying to do at a given moment. They put a high value on cleverness, rhythm, storytelling, avoiding technical mistakes, and having interesting content. They especially prize content that deals with everyday black culture, even in simple references. Any black gesture or vernacular they use awards them a proud, appreciative response.
On my first poetry Monday, I was curious to see how the all-black crowd would receive the white poets, especially the one who made it to the final round of the contest. They were receptive to the white finalist, if not as keen on his style. They were more critical of him, but when he had a poetic success of some kind, they gave him all the more appraisal. I would hazard to say that the audience reacted out of pleasant surprise at these moments.

At every poetry night, the tone and subject matter of the poems varies greatly. There are light and funny poems about quotidian life, personal realizations and declarations, intellectual and black history poems, and poems that sound like heavy, lamenting blues songs. I heard several poems about slavery or the memory of it; they provided a chance for poets to synthesize a lot of the above elements.

_Gospel Night: “Joy Jambalaya”_

_Warmdaddy’s_ is more packed than ever on gospel night despite a $12-$15 cover charge. The people there—every one of whom was African American on all the gospel nights I attended—are of all ages and in varying degrees of dress, but overall everyone is dressed very well. They are dressed for church more than they are for a nightclub, especially the people over thirty. Indeed, the atmosphere is very much like a church gathering. People come to be entertained, to eat, to worship, and to celebrate community. There is less apparent drinking on gospel night, although the scene is very relaxed and social. The food of choice is southern hot wings, which the waiters bring out in huge quantities on trays. People have their attention on the performers, but they also stay engaged in their own parties of friends and family, and actually make a fair amount of
noise. Audience members show visible reactions to the performances by swaying, dancing, and singing along. The collective feeling is comfortable—the patrons act more like members of a congregation than they act like strangers.

The gospel performers share the same ease. They frequently talk and preach a little to the crowd. They are musicians, but all present themselves as faithful Christians and many of the traveling performers refer to their own congregations while they talk onstage. The singers all have the same sort of professional but very personal approach to performing; they treat the subject matter with great sincerity, but also engage the audience in a very comfortable dialogue. Many of the performers are relatively young, which reinforces the at times explicit message of dealing with contemporary life and its struggles. They are a big part of the positive, inspirational agenda of the performers. The audience participates without much prompting and takes what the singers say with equal sincerity.

The representations of church are so comprehensive that it is possible to forget one is in a bar. Gospel is at the intersection between the popular culture that a blues bar symbolizes and the religious life of the church. I have memory of several juxtaposing images from various gospel nights. One of them is of a group of middle-aged women, dressed in very nice church clothes, who waved their hands affirmatively in the air as they sat at the bar. The unifying aspect of church and black pop culture at Warmdaddy’s is the black experience. Gospel night, like poetry night, refers consistently to contemporary issues, but it draws upon the modern black community’s nostalgia for the black solidarity that was born out of the time of racial oppression, the blues moment.
IV. Monday versus Tuesday: a data analysis

I hope the reader has begun to derive an impression of the striking contrast between the Tuesday blues jam and Monday Nite Gumbo from the above descriptions. Both aptly engage the blues space that *Warmdaddy's* provides, in overlapping but very different formulas. I will argue throughout the rest of this paper that the events of each night share a part of blues culture. This section will be devoted to examining the two evenings in relation to one another as a precursor to understanding how blues music can create the meaning intrinsic in each of these circumstances.

The encompassing example of the disparity between Monday and Tuesday and the title role of this query—blues music itself—is apparently nonexistent at Gumbo but is the central focus of the Tuesday night blues jam. Gumbo, although absent of blues music as a technical form, features its own brand of blues culture which the blues jam does not. In the end, neither night at *Warmdaddy's* lacks the blues; rather blues meaning appears in divergent forms dictated by the people who engage in the atmosphere of each night. I identify the main categories of difference below.

After the fundamental difference in the type of art performed, we must cite racial demographics as the most visibly dissimilar aspect of Gumbo vis-à-vis the blues jam. The homogeneity of the audience and performers at Gumbo can be understood with respect to the black-central themes of the event, but the primarily white, but still mixed-race Tuesday blues jam is a bit more ambiguous. I point out this opposition to leave it hanging, because the question of why more whites than blacks have adopted a blues music jam session as their Tuesday night activity is big and well suited for a later section. For now it is only important to notice the significance of primarily white Philadelphians
performing and consuming the actual blues music on Tuesdays, while black Philadelphians who fill the same club on the night just preceding do so in support of other art, and not of open-mic blues music.

The two nights represent apparently different thematic categories as well, although I will show shortly how they converge. Monday Nite Gumbo is a series clearly committed to supporting the African American community through the performance of contemporary black art. In the substance of slam poetry night and gospel night are messages that confront modern and urban issues of importance to the black Philadelphia community. The messages also reaffirm black cultural characteristics and values. In this sense, Monday Nite Gumbo is very much in the blues music tradition of dealing with the quotidian concerns of performer and listener alike. Blues music is a personal expression of a collective emotion, and indeed the Gumbo performances pivot on the live and direct dialogue of the performer with the audience. The Monday night acts necessitate that everyone present be actively involved in the moment. Still, Gumbo involves a certain amount of black nostalgia for the time when black solidarity was born under oppression. The collective energy at both poetry night and gospel night demonstrates a black desire to sustain that solidarity and remember why it originated.

The guiding theme on Tuesday is nostalgia of both time and place. Blues jam musicians, for example, will often play variations on old blues standards en lieu of using more contemporary material. Part of the reason for this can be chalked up to the fact that many amateur musicians at the jam session have only a limited repertoire of music, of which tried and true blues songs will probably play a large part. But even the more seasoned players who frequent the jams tend to stick to the older music, with material
from Jimi Hendrix and his peers representing a sort of informal outer limit of modernity.
Many of the experienced musicians treat the blues jam as a sort of teaching opportunity—a
time to help spread the blues essentials to aspiring blues lovers and players. Jimmy
Pritchard, the *Warmdaddy's* house bassist who has been playing at the blues jam since the
bar’s opening in 1995, describes his weekly appearances as a way to give back by helping
to expose young people to the blues in hopes that the blues will move them like it did
him. (Pritchard interview)

The feel of the music and the affect of the Tuesday crowd in general reinforce this
feeling of nostalgia. I described the blues jam earlier as a little bit “country,” which it
indeed is in a certain sense. That is, the country mood is effected by nostalgia for the
rural origins of blues music, which people who have witnessed some degree of
industrialization tend to think of as home to a simpler time and place. Thus the nostalgia
at the blues jams combines longing for the rural South and for the past with a desire to
preserve the great blues classics.

Protocol and mood differ from Monday to Tuesday. Monday features a very
interactive audience-performer relationship. In some cases the Monday events are
emotionally and intellectually demanding, adding to the intensity of the dynamic between
audience and performer. Tuesday’s mood is more laid back. There is much less
interaction of offstage with onstage, although the audience claps in recognition of soloists
and particularly good music. Here again is a touch of nostalgia for the slower, simpler
time of ‘blues on the front porch’.

The motives of the focus nights are also distinct. Monday Nite Gumbo is a venue
where black art and black community converge. It is a space at which members of the
black community find entertainment and raise their voices. The irony here is that Warmdaddy’s is only temporarily a black space. Right in the middle of Old City, it does not normally play the role of a local community meeting space. Gumbo makes it that by attracting African Americans that construct a strong, if temporary black community.

Tuesday’s themes are entertainment, aesthetic enjoyment of music, relaxation and recreation with friends and family. It is a place for the musician to find a blues voice and for the seasoned blues musician to educate and spread blues music. It is a nostalgic blues music space in which the blues are ‘kept’.

What is the reason for the oppositions between Monday and Tuesday? Patrons of both focus nights perform certain categories when they come to Warmdaddy’s. They are not ‘faking’ anything, and their performances are not necessarily conscious decisions. In many cases, contemporary notions of racial boundaries outline these categories, some of which I explain in the next chapter on black nationalism. They are notions that most people buy into unconsciously. Segregationist thought and physical segregation create and sustain racialized categories, and as such historically segregated Philadelphia is a prime location for them to be enacted. In the world of black music, black nationalism has predominated the conversation about racial predisposition. Given the observably distinct musical practices of Blacks and Whites, it proposes innate racial difference and inheritance that then sustain our notions of ‘normal’ racial categories.
5) Black Music Ideology: The Black Nationalist Approach

Black cultural nationalism has informed a very significant portion of past and present critical thought on the social value and proper ownership of the blues. Proponents of the black arts ideology and its 1960s movement, which I will discuss shortly, commit to the separatist philosophy of black nationalism on its premise that racial equality must be attained through the cohesion of black Americans, who all share the common experience of oppression. Philosopher Cornel West describes black nationalism as stressing “unity, solidarity, togetherness in a quest for a black nation—a place of black safety and self-determination” (West 1999:524). Its earliest efforts can be traced as far back as the slave insurrections of the 18th and 19th centuries, but a more momentous birth was in early 20th century Oklahoma with Chief Sam’s organization of a group emigration back to Africa. During the Harlem Renaissance, Marcus Garvey, who found great influence from the earlier efforts of Chief Sam, started the first popular black nationalist movement by establishing the Universal Negro Improvement Association. The organization was “dedicated to racial pride, self-sufficiency, and the formation of an independent black nation in Africa” (Universal Negro Improvement Association http://search.eb.com/blackhistory/micro/613/42.html). Garvey’s ideals resonated especially with this urban Negro population which was left disenchanted after participation in the First World War (West 1999:527).

A few decades later in 1963, LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) wrote the book *Blues People*, a pivotal work in the history of black nationalism. Jones’s book pioneered the notion that blues, jazz, and other ‘black’ music can be called as such because the music essentially belongs to African Americans (Gerard 1998:xv). It also helped to
jumpstart the aforementioned black arts movement, which was firmly planted in black nationalist separatism. The movement was an effort to involve Blacks in black-specific culture and to “free the black community from the false consciousness produced by participation in mainstream American culture” (Payne 1996:66). The black arts movement stimulated the occurrence of cultural events and organizations in theater, poetry, literature, and especially music, while simultaneously moving critics to respond to current trends in black and ‘mainstream’ culture. Jones’s book itself spurred much controversy and has since remained a landmark work in black music ideology and black nationalism more generally. My intent in this chapter is to frame the key black nationalist arguments as they relate to black music ideology by discussing Blues People. The material here will make up one side of the opposition in critical theory that I will later show is essential to blues music meaning in Philadelphia.

“The term blues relates directly to the Negro, and his personal involvement in America…[Blues] is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially” (Jones 1963:94).

Blues People attempts to prove that blues and jazz essentially belong to black Americans. According to Jones, the music and its meaning derive directly from the peculiar circumstance of Africans’ importation to and oppression in America. Because blues is such a specific form, Whites and others cannot really participate in it without engaging in outright imitation. Black music influence on white culture has been in the form of direct white appropriation and material gain, which has led to the dilution of
black music because Whites lack the blues by nature. Jones bases his claim on the stylistic traits and the functions of the blues; he sees both as direct descendents of African culture. Slaves created the blues in an oppressive alien environment using traditions they knew in Africa and as such invented a music incomprehensible to white Americans. Therefore they are the “Blues People”, hence the title of Jones’s book. Jones posits African understandings of musical form and function in contrast with “Western” notions to explain how blues music is unique to African American people. (Jones 1963)

In speaking of aesthetics, Jones notes the African value placed on irregularity in musical phrasing. African singers and blues singers alike slide around notes in a way that Jones says Western musicologists have perceived to be an aberration from the diatonic scale. In fact they are “blueing” the notes, a practice which is highly valued in the African musical tradition. Slightly oblique phrasing in pitch, timbre, rhythm and accentuation is a way to personalize and enrich the song. Jones’s citation of musicologist Ernest Borneman further elucidates this aesthetic through a comparison to African language, which “aims at circumlocution rather than at exact definition. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative; the veiling of all contents in ever-changing paraphrases is considered the criterion of intelligence and personality” (Jones 1963:31). The European musical tradition, in contrast, values technical regularity, vocal control, and melodic phrasing. (Jones 1963:25,31)

---

2 Jones’s writing constantly evokes the kind of authentic black ownership that he implies here. Subsequent writers, like Jon Michael Spencer, have followed his lead. “Though I do not feel I can say ‘I am the blues,’ I can say comfortably (as can the other black scholars who have written on the blues) that I ‘belong to’ the blues, part and parcel, because I know what it means to be black and currently living at the underside of history” (Spencer 1993:xxv)

3 I am unaware of the origin of the term “blueing”, but I would guess it was first used colloquially among African Americans. The name itself is an interesting testimony to how Blacks would define the green and its vocabulary: as necessarily linked to the African musical traditions they knew or had inherited.
Jones associates the European tendency towards regularity and voice “cultivation” with the idea of beauty he also assigns to the Europeans: that the *product* of singing is beautiful. That music which one produces in the Western tradition, says Jones, is an artifact disconnected from the person producing it. The European-influenced (white) sound, therefore, is often more melodic or ‘pretty’ than the African-influenced (black) one because the sound instead of the act of expression itself is the artistic goal. This disconnection between music-making and audible noise is not possible for Africans and blues people, insists Jones. Expression itself is beautiful in the African tradition becomes it issues from life, and as such the music and its musician share a close connectedness—or rather, they are inextricable because the music should be a direct articulation of the musician’s self.\(^4\) (Jones 1963:30) Be the noise melodic or sharp and agitated, the music is beautiful as long as the musician seems to be sincerely “in” it. For this reason, Jones is confident to say that “the most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time” (Jones 1963:137).

Jones justifies the necessary connect between musician and music—life and art—in terms of functionality. He offers musical and non-musical folk tales, which Africans used as a primary means of passing wisdom down through the generations, as an example of how art is a part of everyday African life. Beating the drums also served a critical communication function. The slaves’ field hollers, and blues music later, imported the same functionality by providing the means for communication and lamentation among slaves. Jones describes what he calls “serious” Western music to be, on the other hand, exclusively artistic. It saw its way into the everyday life of a European through the

\(^4\) This is why Afro-American music is said to *have soul*. 
Church, but apart from that “has never been an integral part of the Westerner’s life; no art has been since the Renaissance” (Jones 1963:29). Citing Brooks Adams’s idea of the “triumph of the economic mind over the imaginative” to suppose how art and the rest of the Westerner’s life are so disconnected, Jones finally condemns it a “dreadful split”. (Jones 1963:28-29)

My extractions from *Blues People*, while they are specific, are representative of Jones’s argument. According to him, there are certain traditions inherent to African culture that reappear in African American culture as a direct result of the importation of Africans into slavery in America. What was African culture upon the slaves’ arrival became African American, then American Negro culture with the birth of subsequent generations of slaves on American soil; never having seen Africa, but still inheriting its traditions from their elders, the slaves developed art that was necessarily specific to them because of their forced adaptation to life in the South (Jones 1963:1,7). African American art therefore belongs to black Americans since they are the only people to whom it is comprehensible. Jones argues that a non-black American cannot therefore meaningfully engage in black American art because it is the slave experience, of which the non-black had no part.

Anti-essentialism is effectively the discourse that labels essentialism flawed. I include only a brief description of it here, within a chapter focusing on black nationalism, because it has had a far less prominent position in the debate over black music. For our purposes though, anti-essentialism serves to mark the theoretical pole opposite essentialist black nationalism. It problematizes essentialism on the basis that it simply
reverses the categories it intends to upset. It contends that categories such as ‘race’ and ‘nation’ are socially constructed in an effort to find group identity, and that oppressed groups must avoid such categorizations if they are to prevent the system of self-definition from backfiring into more pronounced oppression (Ashcroft et al. 1998:77-80). I discuss this point further in the next section.

In addition to theoretical anti-essentialist arguments, one should consider the existence of non-Blacks who do the blues. I am one of the countless white musicians whose connection to blues music has pushed me to pursue it despite my self-consciousness about whether people think it is mine or not. Jimmy Pritchard is another. His connection to making blues music has been profound since the first time he saw B. B. King play on television. “I just don’t buy the exclusive thing because I feel it, too.” (Pritchard interview)
6) Pluralism: Towards a Warmdaddy's Blues Meaning

Between essentialist and anti-essentialist theory there exists a middle ground: hybridity theory. Hybridity theory problematizes essentialism and anti-essentialism, dismissing each as either an incomplete or contradictory, or both, explanation of cultural patterns. The notion of pluralism in cultural analysis has gained popularity in the past decade with the support of writers like Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Michael Eric Dyson. I am most concerned with the latter two because they address black music theory, and I also use Ralph Ellison’s criticism of Blues People which, although he wrote it several decades ago, employs important notions of pluralism. Hybridity theory is the most closely related to my understanding of blues meaning at Warmdaddy’s for its situation midway between essentialism and anti-essentialism. But while hybridity argues that neither of the two extremes fully explains blues music, I argue that blues music at Warmdaddy’s demonstrates affirmation of both black nationalism and anti-essentialism. Nevertheless, I use pluralist theories throughout this chapter in close conjunction with my own in order to propose the significance of blues music at Warmdaddy’s. I focus primarily on hybridity theory’s arguments for the inadequacy of black nationalism because the prevailing blues music literature has been black nationalistic and not anti-essentialist.

A central reason for the hybridist’s refusal of black nationalism is that it contains a fundamental contradiction. Black nationalism resulted from the oppressed black population’s need to assert itself as a unique, proud, and powerful ‘nation’. It has been a primary tool in the African Americans struggle against the racist structures of 20th century America, structures that rely upon the slavery belief that Blacks are by nature
inferior. In contemporary times, far fewer white Americans are likely to profess that Blacks deserve a lesser position in society, but the idea that their race makes them necessarily different is nevertheless planted in the white American collective consciousness and propagates racist structures. Whether such configurations translate into unjust employment environments or the eroticization of black pop stars and athletes, contemporary racism confines African Americans to concrete racial limitations.

In the face of the debasing boundaries of black American life, black nationalism is a logical means by which to strengthen the black community with pride and autonomy. But the irony of black nationalism is that it relies upon its own essentialist categorizations of African Americans, based on African descent and unique historical experience. Black nationalists insist upon the very notions of racial difference against which they struggle; indeed, they reinforce them as they attempt to break them down. Sociologist Paul Gilroy describes essentialism in black music ideology as “paradoxically…consign[ing] these musical creations to a notion of the primitive that was intrinsic to the consolidation of scientific racism” (Gilroy 1993:76). Black nationalists, who are by definition anti-assimilationists, do not claim a desire to break down aesthetic barriers between white and black, nor to be included in many aspects of white culture. They do demand respect and equality, however, which has been historically impossible via physical separation and promises to be via cultural separation as well. The paradox of essentialism here sustains distance between black and white Americans and thus propagates traditional racist structures.

The primary source of black essentialist images, Africa, is an equally important point of irony in hybridist criticism of black nationalism. Africa, the place from whence
both people bound for slavery and certain musical traditions came, is of mythical proportions in the black nationalist imagination. The notion of Africa is rich and replenishing for a culture that is in constant search of authenticity, of art and of self (or perhaps Jones would say of art-self). It represents a simpler, purer time and place. Although many African Americans who consider Africa a cultural home have never even visited it, they have a striking nostalgia for it that black nationalism encourages. In fact the essentialist’s Africa is no short of fantastic in that it does not include contemporary conflicts within African societies. This fantastic conception of a motherland does not limit the meaning any person or group might derive from an imagined life in Africa, for picturing one’s cultural origins can have any variety of personal functions. Such a totalizing notion of Africa does, however, place limitations on black culture throughout the world by not doing justice to the scope of its adaptation and diversity. Gilroy describes peoples’ desire for reconnection with Africa as a

…new ethnicity [that] is all the more powerful because it corresponds to no actually existing black communities. Its radical utopianism, often anchored in the ethical bedrock provided by the history of the Nile Valley civilizations, transcends the parochialism of Caribbean memories in favour of a heavily mythologised Africanity that is itself stamped by its origins not in Africa but in a variety of pan-African ideology produced most recently by black America. (Gilroy 1993:87)

The idea of Africa still inspires awe and honor in many African Americans, much in the same way the ancient Greeks idealized Olympus and Christians idealize heaven. A Christian and an Afrocentrist can each benefit from faith in the existence of a holy land without needing to see it. Still, Gilroy insists that a predominating Afrocentrist vision impoverishes black cultural history by denying the transnationality of black culture
throughout the West that was the result of slavery and colonialism. Jazz musician and theorist Charley Gerard agrees that

in reality, there is a cultural continuum in which relatively few cultural attributes are exclusively African and relatively few exclusively European....By insisting on assigning cultural attributes and origins to two narrowly defined categories, Americans have perpetuated a long list of falsehoods. (Gerard 1998:71)

Hybridists like Jon Michael Dyson echo the sentiment that an Afrocentric vision is both limiting and false. He writes, “The quest for racial unity has largely represented the desperate effort to replace a cultural uprooting that should never have occurred with a racial unanimity that actually never existed” (Dyson 1993:xv). Afrocentrism turns out to be a limited rather than an enriching conception of black musical roots, although it is still important to note that individual African Americans continue to find artistic inspiration in an imagined homeland.

On both Monday and Tuesday nights at Warmdaddy’s, performers and audience engage in their own brand of nostalgic idealization wherein the South and the Country are the mythical homelands. Given its urban Philadelphia location, the likelihood is slim that most of the Warmdaddy’s patrons have lived in the South and amongst the music that came out of it. But in the same way that the idea of Africa has functional value for black Americans, so too an idealized image of the South provides a means through which people at Warmdaddy’s can envision a place of cultural origin. The idea of the South inspires the blues identity while simultaneously offering an escape from urban Philadelphia and its contemporary problems. Racial life in the early 20th century South was complex and violent as the historical background of blues music demonstrates, but still late 20th century Northerners maintain romantic, purist stereotypes of old southern
lifestyle. For contemporary black Americans, the South of course evokes the violent oppression of their own ancestors, while it simultaneously represents their African American cultural birth—a time when racial solidarity and resistance struggles were at crucial times stronger than the forces acting against Blacks. A piece by cultural theorist bell hooks about nostalgia for her own childhood experience just before the desegregation of schools is fitting here:

Nostalgic for a sense of place and belonging and togetherness I want black folks to know again, I learn anew the meaning of struggle. Words hardly suffice to give memory to that time, the sweetness of our solidarity, the heaviness of our pain and sorrow, the thickness of our joy. (hooks 1990:35)

hook’s nostalgia is for a real moment, but the imagined memories of the Warmdaddy’s patrons are no less sincere in their desire to understand a racial unity they may deem more profound and simple—essential—than what they experience. This image of a simpler cultural moment in the South appeals equally to many white Americans. For one, the “Deep” South symbolizes the romantic, unrefined country that allows people to imagine escape from modern industrialization. I would also claim that many white Americans have a desire to understand the striking profundity of the African American experience in the old South. Contemporary white Philadelphians have some degree of nostalgia for the elementally human event of blues creation under oppression despite how oppressive it actually was. Their detachment from oppression in the South is certainly what allows them to think of it nostalgically; in this respect they are no different from black Philadelphians, who also did not experience the blues moment except perhaps through family stories. Whatever the precise reasons for such a blues nostalgia, both black and white visibly perform it.
Warmdaddy’s provides the environment in which patrons can satisfy and sustain their nostalgia. As I described in Chapter 4, the interior of the club is outfitted with plenty of décor appropriate to the authentic southern experience. Indeed, its primary selling point is the complete blues experience, which its advertisements emphasize with phrases like “Welcome to Warmdaddy’s, Philadelphia’s home for live blues and southern cuisine” (Phone Message 2/20/03). Taken from the message on the club’s answering machine, this excerpt refers to a “home” for blues and southern food, implying that detached Northerners will find a personalized blues culture origin right in their own city. Once inside Warmdaddy’s, the ambiance refuels them with blues cultural imagery and the art and photographs remind them of the richly historical nature of blues music. The point of this environment is to transport visitors into blues land. To borrow a popular black saying that has double meaning here, “a trip” is exactly what Warmdaddy’s offers.

The club atmosphere enables people to perform the categories that we saw in Chapter 4. Differences between black and white categories might provide a wide-open chance for black nationalistic argumentation to swoop in with essentialized statements regarding appropriation and racialist treatment of the blues. I do not dismiss all the parts of essentialist theory in my analysis of category performance because the essentialist intent, which I will return to shortly, is crucial to category performance at Warmdaddy’s. However, as I said at the outset of this chapter, essentialist theory as a whole is not adequate for an understanding of blues meaning on these two focus nights. Hybridity theory’s handling of cultural appropriation is most relevant here, so I return to that now.

Hybridists argue that, just as there is no “one-way flow of African culture from east to west” (Gilroy 1993:96), the musical appropriation (or the even more nocuous
“stealing”) that I mentioned in Chapter 5 occurs multidirectionally. The nature of a diverse country that resulted from transnational movement is that its inhabitants adapt to and learn from each others’ creative cultures. The resulting cultural hybridity is too complex to be ascribed to a certain group’s appropriation. Novelist and theorist Ralph Ellison points to the active cultural borrowing of the newly arrived Africans to criticize Jones’s monocultural idea of appropriation in which American Blacks are the unique victims of music stealing.

Ellison’s argument profits from early citations of cultural swapping to emphasize that America was plural even before it was an actual nation. Blacks did as much learning as they did influencing. They adopted white culture and incorporated it into their own traditions as Whites did the reverse.

Cultural appropriation on Monday and Tuesday nights at Warmdaddy’s is multidirectional despite first appearances. At Monday Nite Gumbo, when the crowd is all black and the themes are black-positive, there are nevertheless underlying adaptations to white or European culture. Each Gumbo theme—slam poetry, comedy, gospel music, and R&B—represents white influence although, ironically, all four are at the cutting edge
of contemporary black artistic culture. Poetry and comedy signify relatively recent white influence. Both involve complex word play, which had a historically insignificant part in the African American experience. Black culture has highly prized storytelling and music, or a combination of the two, but language arts had no real part of their experience in slavery for the reason of its unavailability. As Gilroy explains,

The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves. (Gilroy 1993:74)

Slam poetry and black comedy are uniquely African American because they are hybrids specific to the black experience, not because they are essentially black. Gospel and R&B music must be understood in the same way. Gospel music’s central element is of course Christian worship, which the slaves fully adopted because it was the only spiritual outlet permitted to them. R&B resulted from the evolution of the blues, soul and funk. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, black music’s immersion in white ‘mainstream’ American culture and its recording industry greatly affected the path of its development. We might consider R&B one of the progeny of this journey through the primarily white-controlled American music industry.

Gumbo represents another black adaptation to white culture in its very geographic location. The primary reason for Warmdaddy’s being is to showcase a primary aspect of black culture; the audience is always at least in part black, many of the events and advertising media are geared to appeal to Blacks, and the owner is a black man. Despite the fact that Warmdaddy’s transforms easily into a black space, it is still located right in the center of Philadelphia’s central business district, as I described in Chapter 4. It sits
right near dozens of representations of white-dominated capitalism, including boutiques, tourist landmarks, fancy hotels, and Interstate 95. The fact that Warmdaddy’s benefits from its situation in the touristy part of town, enhances the hybridity symbolism of how a club dedicated to black music has literally bought into white capitalism.

Tuesday night at Warmdaddy’s, characterized by a mixed-race crowd with a greater number of white patrons and musicians, is full of its own symbols of black influence. The greatest is of course the blues music, which is one of the single biggest black artistic influences on America. White Americans have incorporated black music into nearly every corner of their cultural lives. The older, rural music that musicians sometimes play at the Tuesday blues jam that would later become country music is one example of how Whites have historically adopted the blues and fashioned it to their lifestyle. Country music, which many see as the epitome of white rural culture, presents a more exaggerated version of this music’s adaptation, although the music at the blues jam is still well within the definition of the blues.

Black and white attendees of the Tuesday blues jam attempt to engage in what I call a blues affect. It is a mode of behaving on and off stage that evokes a black demeanor, a country demeanor, or “old-time” themes, or all three. Without being able to comprehensively define what they entail, I can say that people I have seen performing these categories use a slight accent, employ stage posture or facial expressions that are stereotypically black, order southern food favorites like hot wings, or play songs with rural themes or old-fashioned style. These notions of the appropriate ways of being in the blues are common enough in the American psyche that nearly everyone who comes to the Tuesday blues jam engages in some form of the blues affect. Both black and white
patrons have incorporated elements of blues music culture into themselves through an image of what doing the blues means.

Monday Nite Gumbo and the Tuesday blues jam exemplify the fact that cultural appropriation is multidirectional and results in hybridity. But what should we make of peoples’ performances of categories, most of which seem so clearly and stereotypically defined? Hybridity theory does not sufficiently account for Gumbo patrons’ clear interest in black nationalistic solidarity and celebration. It also does not explain how the musicians and audience at the blues jam immerse themselves so fully in nostalgia for the South and for the blues affect. I argue that a theory of identity performance at Warmdaddy’s must include the notions of hybridization and essentialism. Identity performances on Monday and Tuesday night are essentialist in intent, but necessarily hybrid in practice.

Patrons of each night intend to involve themselves in something truly essential when they come to Warmdaddy’s. They go there because the club helps them feel full engagement in black art and the black community on Monday, and in blues music on Tuesday.

Gumbo patrons exhibit their essentialist intent first by simply coming to Warmdaddy’s on a Monday night. They come to be a part of an evening they have seen advertised as, or know to be, centered on contemporary black art. It occurs at an establishment that features black music nearly every night of the week and is by definition sprung from African American cultural history. Probably very few of the patrons stumble upon this place, one that is set in the middle of a commercial, white quarter, to which many must travel. They specifically seek out the Gumbo occasion, a
sort of “pure” black culture night in the middle of the complicated black-white interfaces of Philadelphia.

Once they arrive, customers at Gumbo participate in and consume the things that they commonly accept to be fundamentally part of African American culture. The audience engages in an intimate call-and-response\(^5\) with the performer onstage by giving verbal and physical signs of affirmation throughout the performances. What is more, their affirmative responses come at moments when the performer refers to some part of black quotidian culture or does an artistic technique that the audience knows as African American. In either case, the audience supports the performer’s success in incorporating the black community that they came to celebrate. Patrons also show preference for certain foods at Gumbo, with the far favorite being hot chicken wings. Spiced fried chicken is an element of “soul food”\(^6\), and thereby thought of as an integral part of the African American tradition. They have come to find entertainment and inspiration in black art, at a black establishment, and they congratulate and endorse the aspects of it they think it to be the most ‘black’.

The mixed crowd at the Tuesday night blues jam has similar essentialist motivations despite its racial heterogeneity. Patrons of the blues jam come for the true blues experience. They enter into this experience, first, by coming to Warmdaddy’s, one of the two or three blues clubs in all of Philadelphia. In so doing, they consciously seek out one of the only ‘true’ blues spaces. Once there, they engage in the blues affect I described above that the club’s atmosphere helps to inspire. Performing the blues affect

---

\(^5\) Writers like Jones have comfortably identified call-and-response as an element of contemporary African American music that came directly from Africa, then from slave work songs. (See Jones 1963:46)

\(^6\) Soul food is the name given to the traditional southern cooking style that the slaves developed out of the limited ingredients available to them.
means that the customers incorporate into themselves those personalities and themes that were integral in the blues’ original formation. Blues jam participants in effect transport themselves to what they perceive to be the most essential moment of the blues. Performing blues identities allows them to be close enough to that moment that they feel they can in a sense experience it, or at least understand it.

I do not attempt to answer the question of whether performing the blues affect does in fact allow a person to be closer to blues music. I certainly am of the opinion that there is no universal rule for such a proposal and cannot therefore assign any value judgments to a performed blues affect. One distinction I find imperative to make here is that, while the Tuesday patrons do perform blues identities, or even imitate them, the meaning they may derive from these somewhat temporary personalities is no less sincere. They are performing, but they are not faking a connection to blues music. The essentialist blues performance simply lets patrons feel that they are entitled to find meaning in the blues. The blues affect legitimates their presence in the blues space.

The reason we cannot end an analysis of the blues meaning people derive with the notion of essentialism is that the cultural products the patrons of each night produce are not essential representations of the blues. Their performances may be essentialist by intention, but the products of their actions are necessarily hybrid. Practice is by nature appropriative. In the ironic case of Gumbo and the blues jam, the more essentialist the patrons’ intentions, the more hybrid their practices will be. This is because the contemporary situations of both groups are disconnected from the essences they attempt to understand. The patrons may well find a meaningful union with these essences, but
their detached contemporary lives force them to bring something new, something *nonesential* to the practice of being at *Warmdaddy’s*.

What exactly are their hybrid practices? At Monday Nite Gumbo, hybridity is evident in the Gumbo elements I have discussed above: the location of a black-centered space in the middle of the white central business district of Philadelphia; Blacks’ worship of Christianity in conjunction with their own musical traditions, as seen in gospel music; and the incorporation of the European tradition of poetry into distinctively black artistic culture. But there is also hybridity at Gumbo that is not the product of a black and white/European mixture. This is the pluralism that derives from the meeting of two different black experiences: the essentialized, traditional southern black culture and the contemporary, northern black community that seeks to live its values through Monday Nite Gumbo. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Philadelphia was not a part of the original blues moment—the ‘birth’ of African American artistic culture—nor was it a destination for the physical migration of oppressed black Southerners during the Reconstruction. It has had, of course, a cultural evolution all its own, and has especially been a center for the creation of innovative black music in the past several decades. Philadelphia residents in 2003 bring some part of their morals, philosophies and customs to the performance of ‘essential’ southern black values. The result is decidedly hybrid regardless of the fact that the patrons at Gumbo have a common race with the people who were involved in the ‘founding’ moment of black culture.

The Tuesday blues jam patrons equally bring difference of experience to their performances of blues music. Their expressions are hybrid when they produce the blues, the music that they, whether white or black, were not involved in founding. Their
expressions of the blues affect are also plural interpretations of blues identities that they, in fact, imagine. I certainly do not attempt to establish the definition of the ‘real’ blues musician or the blues lover against which blues jam interpretations might be judged. It suffices for our purposes to say that the blues jam patrons produce hybrid identities as a result of their dislocation from the founding moment of the blues in the historical, the geographical, and the cultural sense. Their interpretations of what the music should sound like and what its participants should act like relies upon contemporary Philadelphian perspectives.
7) Conclusion

“Music is especially important in breaking the inertia which arises in the unhappy polar opposition between a squeamish, nationalist essentialism and a skeptical, saturnalian pluralism which makes the impure world of politics literally unthinkable.” (Gilroy 1993:102)

The derivation of blues music meaning at Warmdaddy’s both exemplifies and problematizes the existence of categorical differences based on race and cultural experience. Patrons of Monday Nite Gumbo and the Tuesday night blues jam sessions rely upon these essentialist stereotypes to formulate and situate their own blues culture identities. They perform commonly accepted identity categories that provide them with orientation in the confusing realm of musical authenticity. These categories come for the most part from essentialist black nationalism, whose theories regarding black art many people have since taken to be logical if they are controversial.

Essentialism does not sufficiently define the significance of the blues for Philadelphians at Warmdaddy’s. We have seen the flaws inherent to black nationalism, which, besides its fundamental contradictions, is too simplistic a theory to account for the vast array of black experiences. It certainly does not account for the variety of blues culture experiences at Warmdaddy’s on either Monday or Tuesday night.

Hybridity theory comes closer to explaining what happens when patrons pursue meaning through blues music on the focus nights. It argues against the simplistic black nationalist equation that insists on one culture, one art and one meaning. Hybridity reminds us that every human’s practice is necessarily appropriative and only naïve
idealism links a transnational practice to any one culture. But even hybridity theory does not adequately describe the experience of someone at Monday Nite Gumbo or the Tuesday blues jam.

The blues experience on both nights evokes aspects of essentialism and pluralism. Patrons’ intents in performing categories are essentialist; they attempt to locate and be a part of pure notions of blues culture. Their actions, however, are necessarily hybrid because of the difference in experience that each northern Philadelphian brings to a performed, ‘essential’ blues identity.

The explanation of the blues experience at Warmdaddy’s requires negating the opposition of essentialist and anti-essentialist theory in black music because neither can stand alone as a description of blues culture at Warmdaddy’s. Warmdaddy’s blues also requires a more flexible notion of hybridity theory. The new hybridity must account for the selective appearances of both essentialism and anti-essentialism in the contemporary Philadelphia blues experience.
Appendix 1: Warmdaddy’s “Gumbo” advertisement

front.

inside.
Appendix 2: Warmdaddy’s answering machine message

“Thank you for calling Warmdaddy’s, Philadelphia's home for live blues and southern cuisine. We are located at 4 South Front Street, of the corner of Front and Market, in the heart of old city. Tuesday through Sunday our doors open at 5 and dinner is served at 5:30, with featured live blues music nightly. Reservations are recommended. Be sure to check out Monday Nite Gumbo, a mixture of comedy, spoken word, R & B, and gospel. We are looking forward to seeing you here at Warmdaddy’s. If you would like to leave a message…[etc.]” [emphasis added]
Works Cited:

Dyson, Michael Eric


Ellison, Ralph


Gerard, Charley


Gilroy, Paul


hooks, bell


Jones, LeRoi


Keil, Charles


LaVeist, Will
Pritchard, Jimmy

2003 Personal Interview. 3/19/03.

Spencer, Jon Michael


Unterberger, Richie


U. S. Census Bureau


Woods, Clyde


West, Cornel


[No Author]

Works Referenced:

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin


Bane, Michael


Barlow, William


Béhague, Gerard, ed.


Carr, Patrick


Charters, Samuel B.


Cohn, Lawrence.


Davis, Angela Yvonne

Early, Gerald


Fanon, Frantz


Gayle, Addison, Jr., ed.


Hodeir, André


hooks, bell


Kofsky, Frank


Lane, Roger


Marcus, Greil

Oliver, Paul


Oliver, Paul et al., eds.


Otis, Johnny


Parrish, Tim


Payne, Michael, ed.


Radano, Ronald and Philip V. Bohlman, eds.


Small, Christopher


Stokes, Martin, Ed.

Walton, Ortiz


Ward, Brian.


[No Author]