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Edited by Andy Bennett
and Richard A. Peterson

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The Symbolic Economy of Authenticity in the Chicago Blues Scene

David Grazian

During the first half of the twentieth century, Chicago blues music helped to define a certain kind of urban life for local blacks seeking refuge and entertainment in the South Side and West Side neighborhoods where they worked and resided. But during the 1960s, blues music would develop as a viable moneymaker in a handful of the city’s white neighborhoods as well. In the 1960s, the emergence of the folk music revival brought many of Chicago’s bluesmen to pseudobohemian pubs and countercultural clubs in gentrifying neighborhood areas such as Lincoln Park. By the mid-1980s, the patronage of these clubs gave way to a flood of suburbanites and tourists in search of the globally diffused cultural images made popular not only by internationally successful blues legends like Muddy Waters and Junior Wells, but also by blues-rock icons such as Eric Clapton and the Allman Brothers, and Hollywood motion pictures like The Blues Brothers. In recent years, the commodification of the city’s local blues scene has exploded into a full-blown tourism industry, and the blues music once made popular by classic standards such as Robert Johnson’s “Sweet Home Chicago” can be heard throughout the week in more than fifty venues located not just in predominantly black neighborhoods, but in all areas of the city: South Side, North Side, West Side, and the downtown area, known locally as the Loop.
Urban entertainment zones are dense commercial areas of the city that feature a concentration of businesses oriented toward particular kinds of leisure activities, such as dining and dancing. From Bronzeville to the Loop, entertainment zones have always served as anchors for Chicago's blues clubs (Reckless 1933). In part, these clubs rely on the reputation and drawing power of their entertainment zones to attract patrons with specific kinds of consumer tastes. Downtown clubs attempt to draw affluent tourists and business travelers; established clubs in neighborhoods that surround the downtown hub attract a mix of tourists and city residents; off-the-beaten-path venues draw on an exclusive patronage of Chicago residents; and small local bars serve regulars who reside on neighboring streets. By establishing niche-based commercial districts that consist of businesses that offer similar kinds of social and aesthetic experiences, local entrepreneurs transform urban neighborhoods into nocturnal playgrounds ripe for specific kinds of cultural consumption.

However, to fully comprehend how cultural commerce operates in the city, one must also understand how consumers themselves invest entertainment zones and other spaces in the city with personal significance and import. Urban dwellers adopt neighborhood terrains for themselves by reconstructing their spatial identities and reputations through active strategies of consumption. In the case of the Chicago blues scene, tourists and residents alike evaluate local clubs according to the reputations and images which their entertainment zones evoke vis-à-vis other areas of the city, and organize their consumption accordingly. Because consumers frequently grow anxious and skeptical about the intense commercialization of tourist-oriented clubs, they often seek out what they perceive to be the "authenticity" found in venues in neighborhoods outside the city's central entertainment district, and they value those clubs over their downtown counterparts.

The search for authenticity in the urban milieu presents a fascinating example of the social production of collective meaning and myth. In spite of the importance placed on authenticity by cultural consumers in the postmodern era, sociologists and historians serve us well by reminding us that authenticity itself represents little more than a "fabrication" and "invention" (MacCannell 1976; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Peterson 1997). Like similarly loaded terms such as "community," "authenticity" is not so much an objective quality that exists in time and space as it is a shared belief about the nature of the places and moments most valued in any given social context. Likewise, since authenticity is as subjective as any other
social value, it follows that different kinds of audiences measure authenticity according to somewhat divergent sets of criteria, and therefore find it in somewhat remote types of cultural experiences (see Cohen 1988). As authenticity, like beauty, can truly exist only in the eye of the beholder, the search for authenticity is rarely a quest for some actual material thing, but rather for what consumers in a particular social milieu imagine the symbols of authenticity to be.

Along these lines, participants in Chicago's blues subculture invest in a network of signs and spaces that one could call a *symbolic economy of authenticity*, in which various interpretative communities evaluate local music scenes according to multiple definitions of authenticity. According to many consumers, clubs located in transitional entertainment zones with romantic and storied reputations seem less commercialized and thus more special than those in the downtown area. Since local tastemakers organize the city's blues clubs and their entertainment zones along a sliding scale of authenticity from the most seemingly "mainstream" to those they consider the most authentic and hip, tourists begin their search by patronizing clubs located downtown and work their way toward the outer limits of the city center until they reach what they imagine to be a satisfactory level of authenticity.

This sliding scale of authenticity not only represents how musicians, consumers, and cultural critics manufacture authenticity through their reliance on stereotypes and urban myths, but also demonstrates how they rank venues and their locales in relation to one another according to those subjective measures. For example, *spatially* marginalized entertainment districts in transitional areas may depend on *socially* peripheral yet romantic identities for their survival by serving as ideological counterpoints to more centrally located and less risqué nocturnal zones. Likewise, just as working-class subcultural scenes frequently establish reputations based on what consumers imagine to be a heightened sense of exoticism and authenticity, late-night revelers frequently seek out these dramatic spaces of entertainment in the hopes of increasing their own nocturnal status as consumers. In the case of Chicago blues music, consumers draw on highly elaborated images of local place and racial difference when comparing local clubs in terms of their alleged authenticity, and direct their consumption on the basis of those stereotypes.

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**Studying the Chicago Blues Scene**

I first discovered the world of the Chicago blues for myself during my first year of graduate school as a student at the University of Chicago. In a way, the city's blues clubs represented a place where I could take a break from the world of sociology, free from the rigorous demands of the academic world and the drabness of the university library. But despite my best efforts, over time I discovered that the Chicago blues scene provided an ideal laboratory for analyzing cultural processes in the urban milieu, at least in comparison to the sterile and bookish environment of the university. Consequently, I began conducting intensive ethnographic fieldwork at a local North Side blues bar, appropriately (if unimaginatively) named B.L.U.E.S. That activity transformed the world of the blues club from my space of leisure into a research site for social inquiry.

On multiple evenings during the week, I would arrive at the club shortly after its house band began its first set, order a beer, and strike up open-ended barroom conversations with musicians, bartenders, tourists, bar regulars, and club owners, during which I would ask them about their tastes in music, expectations of the club, and reflections on the contemporary Chicago blues scene. At the same time, I would document the club surroundings, with special attention to the onstage performances of the entertainers. After a certain point in the research, I began playing the alto saxophone at a number of jam sessions at various nearby clubs, and that participant-observatory fieldwork offered me the opportunity to observe the world of the blues club from the point of view of its stage musicians.

At a certain point, I realized that my emphasis on B.L.U.E.S., while providing me with an increasingly familiar space in which to conduct my research, could hinder my ability to accurately depict the variation among blues clubs in other regions of the city. To supplement my ethnographic study of this venue, I conducted additional observations in thirty-six blues-oriented bars, nightclubs, restaurants, and cafés in an ethnically diverse range of neighborhoods and entertainment zones throughout the city. This expansion of the study brought me to places like the Checkerboard Lounge, a well-worn tavern in Bronzeville, one of the city's historic black districts, as well as a series of downtown tourist attractions such as Blue Chicago, Buddy Guy's Legends, and the House of Blues. By extending my research to these clubs, I intended to compare and contrast how audiences and participants experienced their different environments, and where they located these clubs within their own mental maps of the city's entertain-
I rely on the ethnographic research in this chapter to explore how cultural producers and consumers in different spatial contexts within Chicago generate myths of authenticity through appropriating and exploiting symbols of black culture and urban space. Specifically, I compare the reputations of blues clubs located in three entertainment zones: the downtown area surrounding the Loop, the affluent North Side neighborhood of Lincoln Park, and the black working-class neighborhood of Grand Boulevard on the city’s South Side. At clubs ranging from B.L.U.E.S. to the Checkerboard Lounge, observations and barroom conversations reveal how participants rely on stereotypical images of authenticity when comparing local clubs and their entertainment zones along a sliding scale of urban authenticity, and draw on such definitions of place when consuming blues music in these areas.

Downtown Blues

The bright lights of downtown Chicago draw tourists into a world of consumption, where theme-park restaurants and crowd-pleasing entertainment meccas like Planet Hollywood and the Hard Rock Cafe (see Sorkin 1992; Hannigan 1998) have transformed a once homegrown commercial zone into a playground of brand-name kitsch. This commodified milieu envelops the city’s downtown blues clubs, which, like their nearby counterparts, rely on themed images, logos, and catchy menu selections to attract tourists into their nonthreatening environments. As just one example, Joe’s Be-Bop Cafe and Jazz Emporium hosts vacationers who enjoy blues piano and jazz combo sets over Duke Ellington Baby Back Ribs with Joe’s Sideman Be-Bop BBQ Sauce, Blow Hard Garlic Bread, and Banana Lama Ding Dong Smoothies.

Elsewhere, local blues performers exploit their celebrity to market tourist-oriented clubs, ranging from the popular Buddy Guy’s Legends to the recently revived Koko Taylor’s Celebrity. Meanwhile, in the sleek atmosphere of Blue Chicago, affluent international tourists from Germany and Italy sip cocktails while listening to local characters like Eddy “the Chief” Clearwater sing the blues. Posters and framed photographs cover the walls, along with paintings that feature black caricatures of shouting blueswomen and carnivalesque scenes of southern juke joints. On the outside of the club, a large mural depicts a black blues guitarist who plays his instrument with a cigarette dangling from his mouth and a bottle at his side. In its efforts to market culture and place, the club sells T-shirts displaying images like these for eighteen dollars each, along with a special soundtrack collection of compact discs produced by the club.

As for the music itself, downtown clubs rotate the same blues bands for their nightly bookings, and so while the music often seems fresh to weekend visitors, it grows somewhat predictable for regular customers. The repertoires of these local Chicago bands typically include well-known blues standards, as well as rhythm-and-blues and pop hits; local favorites such as the aforementioned “Sweet Home Chicago,” Muddy Waters’s “I’m Your Hoochie Coochie Man” and “Got My Mojo Working,” B. B. King’s “The Thrill Is Gone” and “Every Day I Have the Blues,” Albert King’s “Crosscut Saw,” and the perennial favorite “Call It Stormy Monday” draw enthusiastic applause from audience members, who lip-synch and play air guitar to the music, bouncing on their barstools all the while.

Among these songs, the most popular are those that encourage audience involvement through singing along, dancing, or trading off lyrics with the band, such as Wilson Pickett’s “Mustang Sally” and Sam and Dave’s “Soul Man.” When performed at B.L.U.E.S., these songs energize nightclubbers, who rush the dance floor and growl aloud to their dates, “Ride, Sally, ride!” and “I’m a soul man!” Since many of these songs have been popularized by pop stars with broad crossover appeal, including, not coincidentally, the Blues Brothers, they tend to be much more familiar to a mass audience than lesser-known hits by more traditional blues recording artists like Junior Wells or Howlin’ Wolf. In fact, a rather wide range of pop songs, particularly those by black artists, finds its way into the set lists of local blues performers at the club, including Otis Redding’s “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay,” Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode,” Bob Marley’s “No Woman No Cry,” and James Brown’s “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a Sex Machine).”

Perhaps not surprisingly, blues players tire of performing these same songs week after week. According to Philip, a local guitarist:

We usually play the same songs. . . . You know, we add a new one every three or four months, and we don’t have a set order or anything. But yeah, we mostly play the same songs, and man, I get so tired of playing them, you know, like “Got My Mojo Working,” “Sweet Home Chicago,” and let’s see, um, “Crosscut Saw.” . . . But, you know, we have to play them, because they’re the songs that people know and they want to hear. I’m so sick of playing those songs.
Finally, it is significant to note that audiences not only demand to hear these standards performed early and often, but also expect that they will be played by black musicians, as authenticity in the Chicago blues scene is almost always evaluated in accordance with coarse racial stereotypes of black culture. Elliot, a white singer and guitarist who performs in several downtown clubs, explains:

It's because white audiences and owners are ignorant. The owners know that tourists will ask at the door, "Well, is the band playing tonight a black band, or is it a white band?" Because the tourists only want to hear black bands, because they want to see an authentic Chicago blues band, and they think a black band is more real, more authentic. When they come to Chicago, it's like they want to go to the Disneyland of the blues. You know, it's like this: People want German cars, French chefs, and, well, they want their bluesmen black. It's a designer label.

The consequences of this audience demand are startling, according to Shawn, a black bass player:

I've always been treated okay, but a lot of times the owners will try to break up your band if you have too many white guys. Like, if a band has three black guys, the owners sometimes let them have two white guys, but a lot of times they'll say there's too many white guys on the stage, because, well, you know, the blues is supposed to be the music of blacks, and they're doing it for the tourists, and it's all about business.

But if you can play the blues, it doesn't matter who you are—anyone can play the blues. It doesn't take a certain kind of person to play the blues. . . . Everybody gets the blues, right? So, either you can play the blues or you can't, and it doesn't matter if you're white or black or whatever. . . . But the owners, they'll try to break up your band if you've got too many whites.

Urban Authenticity and the Sliding Scale

But while many tourists in Chicago accept such racial stereotypes as given, one should not downplay the role which additional definitions of authenticity play in structuring their experiences of consumption in local blues bars. For example, many consumers patronize clubs outside the central commercial district because they imagine that such places provide a heightened sense of the authentic. In their quest to consume urban spaces that suggest the romanticized allure of the so-called underground city, rather than the more traditional renderings of metropolitan sophistication, many contemporary consumers fashion themselves as urban pioneers involved in a constant project of cultural colonization as they venture through entertainment zones as imagined frontiers of the city (Smith 1996). For these tourists, clubs in neighborhoods outside the city center seem attractive because they are thought to offer a more authentic Chicago experience than more theme-oriented entertainments indicative of the downtown area, such as the House of Blues.

For some cultural consumers, this turn to a postmodern brand of slumming involves a search for the prototypical urban community as a symbolic space of authenticity. Tourists often measure a club's authenticity according to its ability to project a sense of intimacy, imagined or otherwise. For example, global travelers evaluate clubs favorably by envisioning tourist attractions as unassuming and anticommercial nightspots where locals regularly fraternize, instead of tourists like themselves. By internalizing myths that celebrate these clubs as bastions of community and social solidarity in contrast to the asphalt jungle of the city at large, these "anti-tourists" (see MacCannell 1976) take pleasure in locating and experiencing what they imagine to be islands of authenticity in a sea of urban anomie and commodified culture.

B.L.U.E.S., a club located just outside the downtown area in the affluent North Side neighborhood of Lincoln Park, serves such a purpose for many of its patrons. On weekends, a well-heeled crowd of tourists, business travelers, and international exchange students crams inside the club's long, narrow interior under the glow of yellow lamps and a haze of cigarette smoke. The intimate and modest décor of the club, exemplified by its worn bar stools and cheap plaster walls, accentuates the kind of run-down environment that symbolizes authenticity to consumers of the Chicago blues scene. Suchi, a tourist from Iowa, explains her appreciation of B.L.U.E.S.: "It's smaller here, and it's cozy, you know, people seem to know each other, it's less touristy." Lisa, a seasoned visitor from California, favors peripheral clubs like B.L.U.E.S. over larger downtown clubs like Blue Chicago, and characterizes them as informal havens indicative of the iconic urban community in contradistinction to the sprawl of Los Angeles nightlife:

I go to clubs to hear music all the time in L.A., and especially in Hollywood, . . . but there's really nothing like this out there. . . . I mean,
out in L.A. all the clubs are so huge. . . . There’s just nothing like this, you know? This place is just smaller and has a real neighborhood feel to it, . . . and after going to Blue Chicago, this place seems much cooler, much more homely.

Likewise, Maria, a student from Barcelona on a ten-day tour of Chicago, explains her touring group’s decision to attend B.L.U.E.S.:

Maria: Well, today we saw Les Miserables . . . it was really wonderful, . . . and we wanted to go someplace typical for Chicago, so we wanted to hear blues and jazz, and somebody told us this would be a good place. First we went to the House of Blues. . . . you know the House of Blues? But we left, because it was too big and, you know, for tourists, so we came here, and it’s much better, it’s smaller and more personal. . . . Do people from Chicago come here a lot?
David: Yes.
Maria: Oh, good! The House of Blues was just so big, and we wanted a place that was small and more, um, typical, ah, more, um—
David: Real?
Maria: Ah, yes! Real! That’s it!

For an international tourist such as Maria, B.L.U.E.S. provides a means of experiencing the authenticity suggested by local neighborhood life, and thus she romanticizes the “personal” aura of B.L.U.E.S. by imagining that “real” Chicagoans take their pleasures there. Meanwhile, the House of Blues disappoints Maria because she finds that its self-conscious hubris in tourist-ridden downtown Chicago contradicts the subaltern, populist meanings she attributes to urban blues music. She envisions B.L.U.E.S. to be an authentic blues club and neighborhood bar, set miles away from the centrality of downtown. Likewise, Hiroshi, a blues fan from Japan, revels in the intimacy he attaches to B.L.U.E.S as he carefully remarks: “I like this club very much. . . . Some places, they are too big. But here, it is small, and the music and the people and the beer are all together.” He clasps his hands to express this intimacy and adds: “And when the musicians come off the stage, they are right here, and you can talk to them.”

In contradistinction to the enthusiasm of many tourists, local regulars and musicians often evaluate the club differently. For example, Darryl, a harmonica player, suggests how the club’s popularity among tourists has dampened his impression of its communal atmosphere in the 1970s:

Back in those days, B.L.U.E.S. just had more authentic bands, you know, guys who were really big in the ’50s would play there, like Sunnyland Slim, Smokey Smothers, Big Walter Horton, Floyd Jones, Big Leon, and I just remember the music was really great. . . . Of course, the audience was basically white, because it was a North Side club, but for some reason, the crowds never seemed as shallow or loudish as they do today. . . .

Then one day, I came to this realization that these audiences at these clubs had changed, they were really shallow now; . . . it had become a kind of culture for fraternity guys and tourists. . . . At B.L.U.E.S., they had become much more concerned with maintaining a glossy image. . . . Like one night, I remember we found Good Rockin’ Charles a few blocks away from the club, and he was really drunk and had hit his head and was just bleeding everywhere, and we realized that we had to get him inside and we wanted to call an ambulance, and so we thought we could bring him into B.L.U.E.S. and take him into the back room, and the bouncer knew us, and he gave us a really hard time and he almost didn’t let us in, and it was just terrible, because Charlie’s head was really bleeding badly, and the bouncer just stood there arguing with us, and after that he finally let us in.

While North Side bars like B.L.U.E.S. appeal to tourists and many locals, musicians like Darryl find even these clubs too commercialized and inauthentic for their taste. According to Jack, another musician:

Well, back then the audience was a lot older. I mean, there were hardly any kids at all; most of the crowd was in their mid-thirties and older, and there were some seniors here too, and a lot of old hippie types. They were people who were really acquainted with the music. . . . on any given night, you could imagine overhearing a thorough discussion in the back about the styles of Blind Lemon Jefferson or Sunnyland Slim, because these people knew all about the traditions of the music. Today, the audiences don’t know anything about blues; . . . if you mentioned Sunnyland Slim, they might think it was a drink or something.

Longtime regulars at clubs like B.L.U.E.S. frequently echo the same concerns. During a Tuesday night show at B.L.U.E.S., Sean, a former regular, suggests how the experience of attending the club has changed for him over the past decade:
I've been coming here for, well, twelve years now, yeah, since 1987. . . . Back then the crowd was really into it, and now the audience seems like, I don't know, it's more for "the masses." Like now, the blues is more "chic," and coming out to hear blues is more the "thing to do." For them, it's just about going out for "blues," instead of going to hear one particular artist, while back then the audience really knew about the music, and the names of people they wanted to see, and it was more authentic.

And so, even as tourists like Lisa, Maria, and Hiroshi enthusiastically praise B.L.U.E.S. for its intimate atmosphere, musicians and former regulars frequently denounce such clubs for their lack of authenticity.

**Selling the Urban Ghetto as a Tourist Attraction**

In the 1950s, Chicago's black residents and southern migrants patronized countless blues clubs spread throughout the South and West Sides of the city. But as the number of tourist-oriented clubs like B.L.U.E.S. and Blue Chicago proliferated in North Side areas of Chicago during the 1970s and 1980s, the city's black neighborhoods witnessed a steep decline in their ability to maintain operational and successful blues bars. During the past thirty years, several black community areas where blues clubs had once thrived, including Grand Boulevard, Englewood, and Washington Park, have suffered drastic increases in concentrated unemployment, poverty, depopulation, and community instability (Wilson 1987, 1996; Wacquant and Wilson 1989; Massey and Denton 1993; also see Chicago Fact Book Consortium 1995). As these neighborhoods fell into decline, and North Side and downtown clubs began competing for the attention of local talent and affluent audiences, it became increasingly difficult for their blues taverns to remain in operation; today, many of these clubs face severe difficulties attracting enough customers to support even the occasional booking of a band. For instance, while the Cuddle Inn remains open to serve whisky and cheap beer to a dwindling group of local residents, its deteriorating walls, lack of live entertainment, and large supply of empty barstools on weekend nights testify to the decline of a once prosperous blues culture.

However, in a strange twist of fate, this decline has increased the value that audiences place on the urban authenticity suggested by the few remaining blues clubs in the city's black ghetto neighborhoods, since such clubs are thought to represent a more genuine alternative for consumers who seek to avoid the intensified commercialism and popularity suggested by more upscale North Side establishments. As a result, Chicago's most racially segregated and impoverished areas have been transformed into commodified tourist attractions. For example, the Checkerboard Lounge attracts a sizable pool of white consumers, largely made up of business travelers and graduate students. In their search for the rugged authenticity which they associate with images of urban poverty, these patrons derive satisfaction from the grittiness of the Checkerboard's cheaply fashioned interior—its ripped orange booths, tables lined with contact paper, walls covered with tinsel strips and posters of gowned black women, and bathroom floors tiled with flattened cardboard boxes. In comparing the Checkerboard to a local jazz club known for its elegant interior, Rajiv, a conventioneer, explains, "The Green Mill was very polished; I like this place a lot more—especially the decor."

Like travelers in search of authenticity in other cultural contexts, many visiting patrons find the Checkerboard attractive because they imagine it to be an authentic space untainted by voyeuristic audiences such as themselves. They reveal this bias in their offhand remarks at the club. On a wintry Saturday night, I escorted a white professional couple from the suburbs to the Checkerboard. As our waitress wrote down our drink order on a napkin, the gentleman turned to me to ask: "So, would you call this club more authentic? Is the music more authentic?" Meanwhile, his partner peered across the bar with an unsatisfied expression on her face, disappointed by the number of whites at the club; they included a spirited pack of middle-aged men from New York and a gaggle of college-age drunks bounding across the length of dance floor.

As a result of its emergent popularity among affluent audiences, the Checkerboard does its best to pander to its mostly white customers by providing racially and sexually charged entertainment within its deteriorating walls. Local black acts playfully tease their female audience members with innuendo rife with hypermasculine bravado, explicit allusions to oral sex, and X-rated versions of otherwise innocuous songs such as "Hold On, I'm Comin' " and "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain When She Comes." Meanwhile, before his recent death, a popular local character dubbed the "Black Lone Ranger" strolled around the club selling home-recorded tapes that featured his renditions of blues standards such as "I'm a Man," and invited customers to pay to have their Polaroid photograph taken with him in his contemporary minstrel regalia, complete with white ten-gallon hat and black mask.
At the same time, since the 1960s, local journalists and other cultural critics in Chicago have drawn on the popularity of these South Side blues taverns by evoking traditional racial stereotypes to depict these clubs as decidedly more authentic than their downtown counterparts. Illustrating a long-standing stereotype, in Chicago: An Extraordinary Guide, author Jory Graham celebrates the history of the black migration to Chicago's ghettos, where the blues articulate "hard, driving sounds of inner-city pressures," by arguing that this tradition continues in surviving clubs on the contemporary South Side, where "soul—the raw emotion, the pain of being black—is not withheld." Graham continues by relying on an essentialist portrait of blackness to promote her vision of authenticity: "Since 'soul' is the one inalienable possession of the Negro, the one thing whites may comprehend but never possess, it's perfectly natural that the places to hear the blues nightly are in the Negro ghettos of the city" (1967, 85).

Like Graham, Living Blues magazine editor and local critic Jim O'Neal relies on folk-based characterizations of race to promote the relative authenticity of the city's black neighborhoods in his Chicago Reader review of the city's blues clubs:

Really, nothing can compare with a night of blues in a real blues club. The atmosphere, the crowd, the way the band sounds, everything is just—bluesier. At most South and West Side blues lounges, the door charge (if there is one) is $1.00; I.D.'s are checked irregularly. Beer is usually 75¢ a bottle. Big Duke's two clubs, Pepper's and others serve ribs, chicken, and other soul food from their own kitchens as well. The accommodations aren't deluxe, and the washrooms may be smelly, but it doesn't matter. ... The dancing, drinking, talking and laughing of the crowds may be loud in comparison to the polite attention and applause the artists receive on the North Side, but the music is loud too. And funky. (1973, 29)

O'Neal privileges the experience of visiting a "real" South Side or West Side blues club for its "soul food," cheap beer, "funky" music, and "bluesier" authenticity. Indeed, although he claims otherwise, that at such clubs the "accommodations aren't deluxe, and the washrooms may be smelly" does matter to North Siders who regard such things as true markers of authenticity. O'Neal's consequent reviews for the Reader rely on similar racially charged rhetoric, which describes the authenticity of black audiences as well as musicians: "There are more reasons for hearing blues in a black tavern than just the quality of the music. For one, the natural ambience of the crowds adds a dimension to the blues experience that's missing in more formal settings" (1975, 31).

Meanwhile, many local critics and promoters draw on the anxious fears and fantasies of white audiences by exoticizing the city's black regions as romantically dangerous places, thereby heightening the "thrill" of entering racially segregated neighborhoods and their "natural ambiance." For example, one guidebook wholeheartedly promotes evening trips to the South Side on the basis of its urban authenticity and perceived risks: "The neighborhood bars tend to be more modest, of course, and often more rough and tumble" (Banes 1974, 69). The book adds that "getting there, and staying in one piece once you've gotten there, is often half the fun," animating the fantasies and fears held by middle- and upper-class whites and blacks alike regarding the "risk" of entering the city's racially segregated neighborhoods. Rather than encouraging potential consumers to put such misgivings aside, these narratives feed on their anxieties about race and crime to depict an evening in a South Side blues bar as an authentic experience exactly because such an outing might seem intimidating to newcomers. In this manner, Chicago's black ghetto itself has emerged as an authenticated tourist attraction by offering the promise of urban danger as well as "bluesier" cultural experiences to responsive audiences.

Discussion

As in other popular music scenes, participants in the world of the Chicago blues consume culture as a kind of focused activity in which shared meanings are collectively imagined and diffused within a specific spatial context. But perhaps more important, they demonstrate how popular-music scenes attract participants of differing tastes and dispositions. While authenticity may represent a common goal among consumers in search of its cultural power, in reality different kinds of audiences approach the issue of authenticity with varying degrees of intensity and focus, and they sometimes rely on contradictory sets of criteria when evaluating a particular place or performance. The search for authenticity is an exercise in symbolic production in which participants frequently disagree on what specific kinds of symbols connote or suggest authenticity, and even those who agree on the symbols themselves may share different views on how they might manifest themselves in the world.

The case of the Chicago blues also suggests how global and local cul-
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...the desire to experience larger set of dynamics that operates in many other types of entertainment...the sounds of the city's black ghetto—help frame the expectations which "global" tourists and travelers maintain concerning the look and feel of the Chicago blues scene. But at the same time, club owners, musicians, and other cultural producers rely on those expectations as a guide for manufacturing authenticity within local clubs. Insofar as Chicago blues clubs represent a local response to a globally diffused set of criteria for the evaluation of authenticity, it is ironic that consumers identify the presence of those signifiers as evidence of local authenticity. Of course, this process of cultural transmission and exchange is not really unusual at all, given that the authenticity of tourist attractions, national monuments, and regional entertainments is often contrived, or "staged" (MacCannell 1976), to meet the expectations of outsiders.

In fact, it is telling that the interaction between local subcultures and the commodification of global culture in this context produces a symbolic economy of authenticity, because this process seems indicative of a larger set of dynamics that operates in many other types of entertainment landscapes and urban art worlds. For instance, the desire to experience authenticity in a postmodern world increases the popularity not only of the blues, but also of other forms of black music. As is true for the blues, the popularity of hip-hop music, fashion, and style encourages musicians and other cultural producers to cater to the expectations of an increasingly internationalized audience in local scenes, as well as in more virtual arenas of mass culture, such as MTV. Perhaps ironically, this heightened popularity drives consumers to search even more vigilantly for signs of authenticity untainted by the blemishes of commercialism. Indeed, the desire to "keep it real" in hip-hop (Kleinfield 2001; McLeod 1999) hardly seems very different from the hunt for authenticity in the Chicago blues scene; in both cases, it appears unlikely that such a quest could ever come to a satisfying resolution, insofar as the search for authenticity in the world of popular culture may always seem just over the next horizon but is never truly within reach. And so, in the end, it may make more sense to think about this search for authenticity in the Chicago blues as best represented not merely as a sliding scale, but as an onion whose paper-thin layers can be forever peeled away, always masking the hollow and empty core that resides at its center.

References


