Key West’s Conch Republic: Building sovereignties of connection

Philip E. Steinberg a, *, Thomas E. Chapman b

a Department of Geography, 113 Collegiate Loop, P.O. Box 3062190, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2190, USA
b Department of Political Science & Geography, 7000 Batten Arts & Letters, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529-0088, USA

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines the Conch Republic, a semi-farcical micro-state that was established in Key West, Florida in 1982. Although the Conch Republic has its origins in a direct challenge to state power, it is now a relatively depoliticized statement of the island’s eclecticism as well as a marketing tool for the island’s all-important tourism industry. Thus, the Conch Republic could easily be dismissed as an entity that has little in common with actual sovereign states.

In this article, however, three literatures that shed light on Key West’s culture and economy – the queer theory, tourism, and critical island studies literatures – are used to reframe sovereignty not as a stable category but as a strategic tool that is employed to improve the environment in which one engages in interactions. The story of the Conch Republic thus is used to demonstrate how sovereignty is sometimes less about the power to isolate and exclude than it is about the right to maintain some degree of control, or at least dignity, in a world of connections, inclusions, and fragmented, unstable identities.

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Sovereignty and interdependencies

A dominant theme – perhaps the dominant theme – in critical social theory over the past decades has been the continual questioning of a world in which fixed and stable entities interact with each other in social, political, economic, and cultural practice. Just within the discipline of geography, “new cultural geographers” question the ontological existence of discrete things called “cultures” (Mitchell, 2000), scholars of critical geopolitics question whether states exist as such prior to their discursive construction (Ó Tuathail, 1996), and nature-society scholars urge us to abandon fixed distinctions between society and nature (or between human and non-human) (Whatmore, 2001). Geopoliticians take this critique to the heart of geography by suggesting that we abandon the idea of space as a stabilizing dimension that exists independent of, and in opposition to, time and instead conceive of spaces as inseparable from the processes that continually occur in and produce space (Massey, 2005). These shifts in geography, in turn, draw on broader movements outside of geography that seek to replace ontologies of being, separation, and locatedness with those of becoming, connection, and betweenness.

In this article, we direct these trends in social thought toward the institution of state sovereignty which, it is traditionally asserted, occurs when a government maintains control over the people and territory within its boundaries, polices its borders, and is recognized by other sovereigns as having sole authority (Kreijen, 2004). Recent scholarship suggests that this classic definition of sovereignty is as much a normative prescription for the image of the state that underlies realist geopolitics as an objective description of the powers that the state actually has. This literature questions whether the traditional model of sovereignty is appropriate given complex dynamics behind the construction of citizen-subjects, the uneven control that states actually have over their territory, and the role of interaction and mobility in the construction of state identities and power (Agnew, 2005; Biersteker & Weber, 1996; Krasner, 1993; Ruggie, 1993).

Poststructuralists expand on this critique by asserting that sovereignty is not a fixed relationship between a government, its territory, and its people (the nation), but an ongoing process of “reterritorialization” through which the identities of nation and state, the idealized link between them, and their association with specific territories are continually reinscribed (Albert, 1999; Doty, 1999; Mandaville, 1999; Newman, Ó Tuathail, & Luke, 1994). This reterritorialization occurs not only through the renegotiation of the relationship between the state’s constitutive elements but also through the continual production and crossing of boundary lines between the state and its external “others” (Sparke, 2005). From this perspective, sovereignty is less about erecting and policing...
borders (and controlling the territory and people within those borders) than it is about exercising power when making connections across those borders, or when engaging in the relations that construct or destroy borders or the idealized spaces (or identities) within (Weber, 1994). Sovereignty thus is understood as relative and negotiated – a strategy and a process – rather than something that is fundamental and absolute: "Less a territorially defined barrier than a bargaining resource for a politics characterized by complex transnational networks" (Keohane, 2002: p. 74).

While we generally endorse this perspective, it too often leads to a focus on exceptional acts of border-crossing, whether by the diplomat negotiating a trade pact or the bureaucrat designating an offshore island as a semi-incorporated detention center for immigrants or asylum seekers. To place border-crossing (and its role in the production of identities, institutions, and, ultimately sovereign power) in context, we combine the poststructuralist perspective outlined above with one that stresses how sovereign power is constructed not so much by state flat as by the everyday actions of individuals who reproduce ideas of nationhood and citizenship (Billig, 1995; Foucault, 2007). For Billig (1995: p. 6), “Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizens. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition.” We agree with Billig, but question his identification of a singular, pre-existing state that is “flagged” (and whose sovereignty is thereby reproduced) through these acts of “banal nationalism.” Rather, we suggest that while ideals of sovereignty are produced (and challenged) through everyday practices these ideals themselves rest on continual negotiations and crossings as individuals seek to determine their identities and affiliations and “map” these identities to space. In other words, our aim in this article is to take the basic insight of Billig – that nationalism, and thus the ideological basis of state power, is reproduced through everyday acts – and fuse it with the insights of poststructural theorists who assert that the “state” that is reproduced through these acts is itself one of perpetual crossings.

To develop this reconceptualization of sovereignty, we draw upon the case of Key West, a small island off the southwest coast of Florida that, in 1982, unilaterally declared independence from the United States, calling itself the Conch Republic. The Republic’s assertion of independence always had a farcical element, which it maintains to this day. Indeed, one could easily claim that even though the Republic’s leaders have chosen to use signifiers of statehood the Conch Republic has little in common with “real” states.

Although we are under no illusion that the Conch Republic is functionally equivalent to more conventional states, we use its self-positioning on the margins of sovereignty to engage three literatures that, in turn, can help us interrogate underlying aspects of sovereignty as an institution: tourism studies, queer theory, and island studies. In part, we have chosen these literatures because tourists who were the lifeblood of the Keys economy. In addition to inconveniencing Keys residents, discouraged visits by tourists who were the lifeblood of the Keys economy. In response, Key West’s mayor, Dennis Wardlow, filed for a court injunction to have the roadblock removed. When the injunction was denied, Mayor Wardlow declared that if Keys residents were forced to pass through a “border-crossing” on the way to Miami – then they would assert their foreignness and secede. The next day, at a rally in Key West, now-Prime Minister Wardlow formally launched the rebellion by breaking a loaf of stale pan de agua (“Cuban bread”) over the head of a man dressed in a U.S. Navy uniform. The rebels, who “surrendered” one minute later, named their state in honor of the island chain’s first white settlers, descendants of British loyalists who had fled the American colonies
for The Bahamas during the United States’ Revolutionary War and, from there, came to the Keys in 1822. Today, although day-to-day leadership of the Conch Republic is largely in the hands of one person, self-proclaimed secretary-general Peter Anderson, the organization of Conch Republic events and stewardship of the Conch Republic “brand name” is undertaken in close coordination with the leaders of Key West’s political, tourism promotion, and business communities.

Since “Independence,” the Conch Republic has adopted many formal trappings of statehood. It issues passports to anyone who wishes to associate with the Republic, and, according to its website, the passport has been accepted by twenty states. The Republic’s website boasts of the warm reception that its leaders received from representatives of several Latin American states when they “crashed” the 1994 Summit of the Americas in Miami (Conch Republic, no date). Some twenty years after its founding, Secretary-General Anderson proudly recounted an unofficial visit that he received from a representative of the U.S. State Department’s Office of the Geographer. According to Anderson, the State Department official acknowledged that, due to the U.S.’ failure to formally protest the declaration of sovereignty, “You actually are a sovereign entity under [the adverse possession principle of] international public law….And you are guaranteed the right to exist by all of the covenants…guaranteeing people the right the world over to assemble” (Interview, December 2004).

Nonetheless, despite these claims to statehood, the Conch Republic also takes pains to construct itself within the United States. As Secretary-General Anderson noted:

> I do everything in my power on a daily basis to remind people what the Conch Republic is all about, the spirit in which it was founded, the utter “American-ness” of the experience that people aren’t afraid to stand up to government gone mad with power, and to do it with humor and aplomb, and to actually win the day…. [The Conch Republic independence proclamation] is one of the quintessentially American documents that’s been written (Interview, December 2004).

Likewise, the Conch Republic website, describing its plea to the U.S. government to attend the Summit of the Americas, notes, “[We explained that] we had no intention of interfering with the legitimate interests of the United States (as we were intensely loyal Americans)” (Anderson, no date). Elsewhere, the Conch Republic proclaims, “We are both Conchs and we are Americans and we are proud to be both” (Conch Republic, no date), a positioning that is illustrated in Key West’s Mallory Square, where the flags of the United States, the State of Florida, and the Conch Republic fly side-by-side on city-owned property (Fig. 2).

Regardless of the ways in which the Conch Republic positions itself vis-à-vis the United States and notwithstanding its origins in a dispute over U.S. policy, it appears that for most Keys residents and tourists the references to the Conch Republic that abound on the island are associated less with any claim to state power than with the island’s liminal identity, geopolitically within the borders of the United States but culturally outside mainland norms. From the earliest days of Conch settlement, the Keys’ identity and economy were more a result of their proximity to adjacent seaways than their relations with mainland Florida. Early Conchs supplemented their fishing activities with the salvaging of wrecked ships that failed to pass through the reef-laden Florida Straits. During the U.S. Civil War, Key West remained a Union Naval garrison while the rest of Florida joined the Confederacy (Cox, 1983; Maughn, no date; Ogle, 2003; Williams, 2003). The Keys’ links with the mainland were solidified only in 1912, when the Florida East Coast Railroad was extended from Miami to Key West. Even then, the intention was less to construct Key West as a U.S. destination than as a node between the U.S. and the world beyond. The railroad extension was built with the express purpose of realizing the potential to be opened up by the Panama Canal (which was completed two years later, in 1914). Key West was the
first point in the eastern United States at which trans-Canal ships could unload cargo, and Key West, which already in 1890 was the largest city in Florida and the wealthiest per capita in the U.S., went on to become the largest deep-water port on the Atlantic coast south of Norfolk, Virginia (Anonymous, no date; Standiford, 2002; Fig. 3). Through the construction of these links, the southernmost point in the continental United States became, like many islands, simultaneously peripheral and central (Connell & King, 1999), marginal to the culture of the adjacent mainland but essential for its economic livelihood.

Today, Key West’s geographic and cultural location on the edge of the United States is reproduced by museums, public history tours,
and promotional literature that invite tourists to bask in the island’s colorful history. Prominent and proudly marginal individuals are an integral part of the island’s mythos. These include nineteenth-century ship salvagers, smugglers, Cuban independence leader José Martí, and literary icon Ernest Hemingway. This history, in turn, complements Key West’s image as a laid-back Caribbean island ruled only by the laws of hedonism: the free-wheeling party capital of past and future pirates (or at least burnt-out bikers and beach bums) celebrated in Key West transplant Jimmy Buffet’s “Margaritaville” and reproduced daily by thousands of tourists who disembark from cruise ships to carouse in the bars of Duval Street or patronize the buskers in Mallory Square (Figs. 4 and 5).

In this context, most references to the Conch Republic have been stripped of any explicit mention of a struggle over state power and simply celebrate the Keys’ (and, specifically, Key West’s) cultural identity. For instance, although some events at the annual Conch Republic Independence Days Celebration specifically refer to the Republic’s founding, many simply rejoice in the island’s quirkiness, such as the Drag Queen Foam Wrestling Contest and the Duval Street Bed Race. Similarly, although the front door of the Official Conch Republic Store contains a brief narrative of the Republic’s history, most of the merchandise inside simply features the Conch Republic’s logo. Other island gift shops display Conch Republic-branded merchandise alongside generic Key West souvenirs, with no explanation at all of the Republic’s origins or significance (Fig. 6). Interviews with tourists revealed that, while most had heard the phrase “Conch Republic,” the majority understood it simply as a marketing slogan to publicize the island’s “different” lifestyle rather than a statement of self-determination that was originally made in the context of a grievance with the U.S. government.

Performing sovereignty

Thus if one were to hold to a literal interpretation of sovereignty, one might conclude that the original promoters of the Conch Republic have failed in their primary mission, as their proud declaration of self-determination apparently has devolved into a carnivalesque tourism marketing campaign. Such a critique, however, fails to appreciate the role of kitsch – “a specifically aesthetic form of lying...[that] centers around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception and self-deception” (Calinescu, 1987: p. 229) – in simultaneously reproducing and challenging the everyday practices of “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995).

Although Adorno (2001) derides kitsch as a vehicle for false consciousness that redirects reasoned, strategic struggle into the arena of commercialized culture, we view kitsch and, in particular, camp (which Calinescu (1987) defines as kitsch but with a heightened sense of irony) from a perspective closer to that ascribed by Bhabha to mimicry. For Bhabha (1994), mimicry, when practiced by the relatively disempowered, reflects a desire both to obtain power and to reject it. It is an expression of both reverence and mockery, and it frequently includes conscious efforts to distort as well as to imitate. Mimicry often combines resentment with an element of jest (or sarcasm), as was specifically referenced by Mayor/Prime Minister Wardlow when he noted in the declaration of independence, “We’re happy to secede with some humor. But there is some anger, too” (Wardlow, 1982).

From this perspective, the Conch Republic’s performance of sovereignty may be viewed as a speech-act that calls into question the purported distinction between dominant authorities and
subordinate populations even as it reproduces the social institutions and understandings through which the authorities justify and implement their power. Thus, when the Conch Republic surrendered one minute after declaring its independence, its leaders simultaneously were affirming the power of the United States (the U.S., after all, was the “victor” in the “struggle”), reaffirming the Republic’s own identity (it was enough of an entity that it could surrender), reproducing the institution of state sovereignty (the entire drama made reference to accepted performances of statehood and diplomatic relations), and mocking it (by scripting the U.S. government as an entity that could accept the surrender of such a patently false sovereign as the Conch Republic, the veracity of the U.S. government as a “real” sovereign and, indeed, the whole institution of sovereignty was opened to critical contestation).

While the case of Key West wrapping its identity in signifiers of statehood to emphasize difference is perhaps extreme, it is not that unusual. Throughout the United States, tourist destinations seeking to demarcate themselves as unique mobilize signifiers of statehood so that individuals can claim honorary citizenship in their affective homeland. White oval bumper stickers that mimic European nation-state identifiers have become almost ubiquitous in suburban American culture, serving as “status symbols touting the car owner’s preferred vacation or weekend haunt” (Barker, Wilson, & della Cava, 2004: p. 16B; Fig. 7). Through these stickers, individuals proclaim voluntary association with a tourism destination. The place of otherness is reclaimed as “home,” contributing to the blurring of the distinction between tourist and resident that so often occurs at tourism destinations (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2004; Kantsa, 2002). Indeed, the tourist displaying the sticker claims a certain “insider” status. When away from the tourist destination, she or he may be one of the few individuals who knows the meaning of the abbreviation, and this insider knowledge can then be used to build affinity with others who claim connections to the referenced destination. Thus, the manipulation of the Conch Republic signifier into a tourism marketing slogan is part of a broader trend, and this leads us to ponder what it means for the state-idea when its symbols, which typically are associated with involuntary membership based on residence in a stable geographic location, are used to connote just the opposite.

Queering the Conch Republic

Whether the origins of Key West as a queer-friendly island lay in its original settlers’ libertarian frontier mentality, its marginal location, or its existence as a Navy town with a highly imbalanced gender ratio, Key West has long been, in the words of the owner of an LGBT-oriented retail establishment, “one of the most gay-
friendly places on the planet” (Interview, December 2004). Already in the 1950s and 1960s:

It seemed each Conch family had a funny brother, a wild sister, a strange uncle who liked to get dressed up, a weird cousin, or a goofy friend, but no one seemed to care. There were always the few local boys who did not marry, the old maid all her life, and there was a morality that made something different, not evil and monstrous, but amusing and fun. Every family had their gay cousin, and everyone in town knew what the gay cousin was doing, and no-one gave a damn (Dode, 1998: pp. 33–34).

By 2004, according to the shopkeeper quoted above, sexual tolerance had become so prevalent on the island that, in the rare instances when a homophobic incident would occur, “everybody on the island, including the straight people who are in power here, just go ballistic and get to the bottom of it immediately” (Interview, December 2004).

Key West’s status as a queer-friendly island has been solidified through tourism. Over the course of the twentieth century, Key West became known not so much as a place where queers lived, but as a place to which queers traveled. In the mid-twentieth century this image was enhanced by repeated visits from gay literary and artistic icons like Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Leonard Bernstein (Dahms, no date). In the 1970s, after the bulk of the Navy presence left, gay male tourism became the central activity that kept the city’s economy afloat, and gay-oriented clubs and guest houses blossomed (Dode, 1998). More recently, queer tourism on Key West has followed the life-cycle of other such communities, as its public persona has evolved from that of a highly sexualized destination for young, gay men to what many have seen as a “touristification” that commodifies leisure, producing it for larger and larger audiences (and also creating outcomes of conformity) (Delaney, 1999; Wait & Markwell, 2006). Increasingly, younger queers are being priced out by the island’s real estate market. Additionally, changing demographics and liberalization of social mores elsewhere have led to vibrant club scenes emerging in less expensive, less remote cities. However, large numbers of older, wealthier queer men and, increasingly, women (often in couples and sometimes with children) continue to frequent the island.

With a few exceptions (Fig. 8), there has been little integration and connection (which is asserted across as well as within the border identities that are then reproduced through contradictory assertions of division (which is mandated by the identity’s borders) and connection (which is asserted across as well as within the identity’s borders) (Mosse, 1985; Valentine, 2003; Weeks, Holland, & Waites, 2003). This link between sexuality and nationalism was made explicit in the 1990s by the activist group Queen Nation, which sought not only to re-mold the nation as a space that tolerates non-conforming sexualities, but also to recast public demonstrations and celebrations of all sexualities as patriotic rituals:

Queer Nation has taken up the project of coordinating a new nationality...It has invented collective local rituals of resistance,
mass cultural spectacles, an organization, and even a lexicon to achieve these ends (Berlant, 2005: 148; see also, Munt, 1998).

We embrace this linking of nationalism and sexuality with some trepidation. Just as revolutionary nationalist movements frequently spawn new governments that are as socially conservative as those they have overthrown, attempts to create new spaces for gays and lesbians run the risk of fostering new “homonormative” counter-sites that abandon the performativist insights of queer theory to reassert hegemonic ideals of sexuality as a fixed identity category (Waitt, Markwell, & Gorman-Murray, 2008). Nonetheless, the links between sexuality and nationalism provide fruitful ground for interpreting the Conch Republic, particularly within the context of Key West being not simply a queerspace but a space for queer tourism.

Tourism and (desti)nations

Tourism, sexuality, and nationalism are further linked by their collective focus on destinations, idealized sites to which one travels to perform one’s identity. At the material level, queer identity is often reproduced through physical acts of travel. Ritual, repeated pilgrimages to identifiable queer places play an important role in reproducing individuals’ queer identities, and travel to queer places also fosters the identification of a community of individuals who have shared attributes despite their differences (Brown, 2000; Giorgi, 2002).

Hughes explicitly equates these “places” (whether geographical or metaphorical) to which one goes to perform one’s sexuality with tourism destinations:

It may be argued that the search for a gay identity is itself conceptually a form of tourism. A man may live and work in what is basically a heterosexual society and visit “the resort” of gay society in his leisure time….Much of the search for a homosexual identity necessarily involves travel and is analogous to tourism…even though not involving holiday-taking (quoted in Puar, 2002: p. 103).

Thus, for Hughes, the “location” of queerness is associated with a destination that one goes to for a positive experience and that exists through its connections with the rest of the world. Waitt and Markwell (2006) expand on this theme by suggesting that, for gay men, home is idealized as somewhere else, “over the rainbow.” In contrast, Brown (2000) turns to a much less enticing metaphor of place – the closet – to conceptualize queer sexuality.

In fact, the entire association of performances of sexuality with specific places is problematic, especially in the context of tourism. From the most egregious examples of sex tourism to the seemingly more innocent (but still exploitative) selling of “exotic” tropical islands as sexual paradises (e.g. Cohen, 1995), the attribution of sexualities to places can serve to naturalize sexuality and obscure the ways in which it is continually negotiated within contexts of social power (Brown & Knopp, 2008). Nonetheless, we endorse the broader point that Brown makes when he discusses the closet metaphor: that queerness involves the construction of queer places (as psychological and material destinations) as well as queer people.

Although this focus on queer places might seem to ground our understanding of the queer experience, in fact it does just the opposite because a place is less a fixed point in time (with a fixed meaning) than it is a process wherein histories, futures, and connections (as well as identities) are made (Massey, 2005). It follows that individuals do not go to a queer-identified resort town like Key West to go to a queer place so much as they go there to make a queer place and hence make themselves. It also follows that if one wants to understand a queer tourism destination like Key West one would do well to focus less on the perceived static characteristics of the place and more on the complex processes by which tourists and residents engage in place-making. In other words, just as states are constructed through continual processes of territorialization (and reterritorialization), queer tourism destinations like Key West are constructed through continual processes of place-making. And yet, in both cases, these processes are enabled by making recourse to myths of stable entities (e.g. territories, places, sexualities, identities, etc.), a process that is particularly evident in the reproduction of the Conch Republic where the manufactured nature of the constructed entity and the ways in which it is reproduced through continual crossings is so apparent.

Queer tourists and promoters of queer tourism use a number of devices as they engage in these processes of place-making (and identity-formation). For many Key West-bound tourists, the first instance of “placing” one’s sexuality occurs when one chooses a guest house. While the bulk of housing options on the island are marketed without explicit reference to sexuality, several guest houses are targeted specifically at a gay male clientele. Within the gay male category one can choose to stay at a guest house with little public space, in which case explicit performances of sexuality are restricted to private domains, or at a full-service, clothing-optional resort where freedom of sexual contact (and gazes) is part of the attraction. There are also a number of queer-oriented guest houses that are open to both gay men and lesbians, and these in turn vary in their policies toward children. Additionally, there is one guest house for women only, which is frequented primarily, but not exclusively, by lesbians.

Among the queer-identified guest houses, some market themselves, rather than Key West, as queer places that tourists should go to in search of queer experiences. Island House promotes itself as a “locked compound, protected from the outside world…a completely private compound [where you’re] surrounded by gay men like yourself, so that you can really be yourself in a totally relaxed and spontaneous way” (Island House, no date). Thus, Island House constructs Key West as part of the heteronormative world from which its guests seek to escape. Island House markets itself less as being located on a (queer-friendly) island than as being a (queer-friendly) island. The Island House website, however, is atypical. As the queer geography literature stresses, queerspace is formed by a continual negotiation between ideals of the public and the private (Ingram, Bouthillette, & Retter, 1997). This fluid movement between public and private survives through negotiation between strategies of invisibility (the queer resort as private, protected, and safe) and visibility (as a space of shared community that has links with the local political economy). This negotiation is exemplified by the rainbow flag. On the one hand, when the flag hangs from the outside of a building it marks the space inside as a designated queer place. On the other hand, that same flag protrudes from the building onto the viewscape of a public street and thereby contributes to the construction of a queer-friendly public environment. Even Island House, which lies at the private end of the private-public queerspace continuum, has two rainbow flags (as well as a U.S. flag) that announce its presence to (and help to reproduce) the queer-friendly world outside (Fig. 9). Thus, much as the identity of the Conch Republic as a distinct space is constructed not by erecting barriers but by negotiating a series of crossings between the identities of “Conch” and “American,” the reproduction of Key West as queerspace is inscribed though continual acts of crossing between the zones of public and private, “straight” and “gay.”

Our interviews revealed that, for many queer tourists, the essence of the Key West experience is not that one is going to any private, particular queer place but rather that one is going to
a queer-friendly public environment where one can be oneself and thereby create one’s place. As one gay man living in Key West remarked, the city provides a formativ e “gay experience” for “those people from Ohio or Kansas who never get a chance to just be themselves, and have to self-regulate who they are because they’re gay. Down here that’s laughable….You can experience who you really are. Or, if you’re in the closet, who you really want to be” (Interview, December 2004).

This sentiment was echoed by the owner of a queer-oriented guest house, who noted that the island lacks a distinct gay and lesbian district:

Gays and lesbians come down and say, “OK, so, where’s the gay part of town?” And we’re like, “Well, there isn’t one. We’re everywhere, and it’s o.k. with everyone that we’re everywhere.” … [W]e work for the city, in utilities, in the post office, and guest houses and restaurants, and everything. So, there really isn’t a distinction made between a gay part of town and a straight part of town (Interview, December 2004).

Some queer tourists seem to appreciate this aspect of Key West. As one gay man who chose to stay with his partner at a guest house with minimal amenities that was open to all sexual orientations noted, “I wouldn’t want to fly all the way to Key West [from London] and just stay in a little compound” (Interview, December 2004).

Notwithstanding the dominant view that Key West is an environment wherein one can perform queerness (and thereby produce queerspace) rather than it being a set of distinct, ontologically pre-existing queer places, some persist in attempting to map a universe of stable, homonormative queer places wherein individuals act out stable sexual identities. Brown and Knopp (2008) note that mapping has a particularly pernicious relationship with queer theory, as a map necessarily (mis)represents fleeting and flexible identities as static and permanently located. This tendency of maps to ascribe simplified stability to identities based on hybridities and crossings is evidenced in an article in the Toronto entertainment magazine NOW, in which the author, Sherry Telenko, attempts to fix the island’s straight-queer divide in time and space by mapping it to a North–South axis (Fig. 10):

At [the southern] end of Duval [Street] is the predominantly gay [part] of the island, home to a high concentration of gay and lesbian guest houses and resorts. Nearby is the Atlantic Shores resort, notorious for its Sunday-night gay mixers and clothing optional beach. …

Two miles away, the northern end of Duval offers pubs, restaurants and cheap souvenirs shops catering to beer-loving middle Americans and cruise ships. This is where you’ll find Sloppy Joe’s watering hole, a favorite haunt of Ernest Hemingway’s and a draw for hundreds of less literally inclined tourists (Telenko, 2005).

Even though Telenko complicates her geography by focusing on the drag clubs that are located half way down Duval Street, in a border zone where members of the “straight” and “queer” communities gaze at each other, her mapping of sexuality to space remains problematic. At the most basic level, one might note that the south end of Duval Street contains the Southernmost Point monument, a popular location where tourists (including many apparently heterosexual “beer-loving middle Americans”) photograph each other at the southernmost point in the continental United States. In addition, even if one insists on assigning fixed sexualities to distinct regions of the city, it is not clear that the southern part of the island is the queer district. The Island House website identifies the heart of queer Key West not on South Duval but rather on Fleming Street on the northeast side of town, where Island House is located on what the website calls “Gay Guesthouse Row.”

The problem with the representation in the NOW article, however, is not simply that it oversimplifies the geography of Key West. It also oversimplifies the identities and practices of tourists. For instance, at the north end of Duval Street, adjacent to the cruise ship dock, is the Pier House Resort, geared toward higher income, although still predominantly heterosexual, tourists who are more likely to sip chardonnay than chug beer. Furthermore, cruise-shippers themselves are a diverse lot. The head of the Key West Business Guild, the island’s LGBT chamber of commerce, noted:

I cannot tell you how many gay people over the years in traveling and doing consumer shows tell me that the first time they came to Key West was on a cruise ship…fell in love with it, wished they had more than 5 or 6 or 7 hours, and immediately within 6 months booked another trip down here (Interview, December 2004).

Our point here is that while the performance of queerness is profoundly geographic, it is at the same time contested and negotiated. Even a focus on a “border zone” fails to capture the ways in which sexualities are negotiated, because the recognition of a border zone wherein crossings occur still reproduces the idea that there are distinct (and seemingly stable) entities on either side of the border (Price, 2004). Rather, we suggest that if a space is a space for queer tourism, it is less a space of separation or refuge (as is implied by both the closet and resort metaphors) as it is a space of self-determination. And here we see strong parallels between the construction of Key West as a destination for queer tourism and the sovereignty claims of the Conch Republic. In both cases, a (partially) oppositional identity is achieved not through the designation of
a place with static and impregnable borders, whose meaning is fixed in time and space, but rather through a series of crossings through which places and peoples are constructed. In other words, queer Key West, like all tourism destinations, is a space of building bridges, a point that we consider further in the next section of this article, as we examine the bridges – both material and metaphorical – that connect Key West with the world beyond.

A bridged island

The third body of literature that we find particularly helpful for understanding the ways in which claims to territory, identity, connectedness, and separateness coalesce in the Conch Republic’s declaration of independence is what we term the critical island studies literature (Baldacchino, 2006). Historically, island scholars have been divided between those who study islands as microcosms of mainland environments and those who see islands as exceptional spaces that have little in common with the mainland. However, critical island scholars charge that both groups fail to appreciate the interactions that occur across an island’s shoreline (Patton, 1996). Rather, according to these scholars, island dwellers, much like queer tourists or the rebels of the Conch Republic, construct their homes and identities as much through establishing connections across space as through erecting barriers that bound territories (Hau’ofa, 2008; Jolly, 2001; McCall, 1996).

The experience of visiting the island cannot be separated from the experience of the journey, a theme that is expanded on in the literature that fuses mobility and tourism studies (Minca & Oakes, 2006). For the 83.8 percent of tourists who arrive at Key West via the Overseas Highway (Monroe County Tourist Development Council, 2004), the drive is an experience that demarcates difference. Consider the comments of this tourist couple:

Interviewer: Would Key West be more desirable if there were no bridge and you had to get there by boat or plane?

Tourist #1: I don’t think it makes it more desirable, because you can always go to islands. I think the thing about Key West is the bridge, the kind of tentative connection…I love the feeling of just hopping from island to island in a car. It’s just there’s nothing like that. I’ve never been anywhere else like that.

Tourist #2: You have this feeling that you’re getting to the end of something, a beautiful end.
Interviewer: The end of what?

Tourist #2: The end of a world, because it’s like Key West is the last little bit of land that is America, the United States, and then across the water you’ve got Cuba, which is so amazingly different (Interview, December 2004).

It is unlikely that these tourists would have been able to construct Key West as such a specifically marginal location – “the end of a world” – if their arrival were not the culmination of a long journey over a series of bridges. As another tourist stated, “[Driving the Overseas Highway] gives that sense of anticipation....It’s exciting, the anticipation. It’s all about the arriving” (Interview, December 2004; see also Steinberg, 2007).

At the same time, the fact that one can make this journey in one’s own automobile makes the destination at the end of the bridge remote, but not that remote: exotic, but not that exotic. Driving on the Overseas Highway, one simultaneously inhabits a stable private space (one’s car) and a dynamic, even sublime external or public space (a turquoise seascape dotted with uninhabited mangrove islands that fuse repetition with the anticipation of adventure). Key West thus is experienced as a different, but safe, space, beyond the normal but at the same time permanently connected.

It may not be a coincidence that the United States’ other premiere queer tourism resort community, Provincetown, Massachusetts, similarly requires a long drive through perceived nothingness (the dunes of Cape Cod) to reach one’s destination. For the queer tourist, Key West and Provincetown are both safely remote while being safely connected, yet another articulation of public and private in constructing the “resort” of queer identity. Such journeys help to set the scene for a queer tourism experience, as is encapsulated in the description of the journey that appears on the website of Key West’s LGBT chamber of commerce:

Bridges stretch between small islands of vastly diverse character along the breathtakingly beautiful Overseas Highway....Yet even after travelers navigate the final span, there’s one more bridge to cross. It’s a bridge from one culture to another (Key West Business Guild, no date).

While the experience of Key West involves the construction of bridges (both metaphorical and material), these bridges are contested. We have already seen, in the 1982 Conch Republic rebellion, social conflict over how much connectivity should be provided by the bridges to mainland Florida. There is similar conflict around the nature of the (metaphorical) bridge to Cuba. On the one hand, one can barely set foot in Key West without hearing about the island’s Cuban heritage. Indeed, a Cuban element has been integrated into the myth of Conch indigeneity, as in the decision to use a loaf of pan de agua (known throughout Florida as “Cuban bread”) as the “weapon” that launched the “War of Independence.” On the other hand, the bridge southward is portrayed as a connection that is historic and natural but that is not presently realized. Although substantial links with Cuba persist (immigrants from Cuba continue to settle on Key West, and Keys residents continue to travel to Cuba despite government restrictions), these connections are presented to tourists as essentially dead, “submerged by a tourist myth, with its popularized version of Key West culture as a wild, romantic Anglo paradise, tinged with Cuban cigar smoke” (Meltzoff, 1997; see also Behar, 1995). Indeed, the ubiquitous appearance of the “0-mile marker” icon on Key West souvenirs (Fig. 6) implies that there is nothing, and certainly nothing bridgeable, beyond the island’s southern shores.

The ephemeral nature of Key West’s present ties with Cuba is perhaps most apparent at the Southernmost Point monument. Tourists at Southernmost Point almost never gaze northward to consider just what this monument marks the southernmost point of. Instead, they gaze southward to Cuba. Tourists cannot actually see Cuba, but they can consider the forces of geography and politics that might one day restore historic connections. To aid this exercise, one can peek around the corner and see radio dishes beaming U.S.-government-sponsored Radio Martí broadcasts, building a bridge that persists despite Cuba’s objections.

When asked about the likely impact on Key West if U.S. relations with Cuba were normalized and a new bridge (metaphorical or material) were built, opinions ranged, but there generally was enthusiasm for a bridge going in one direction (from Key West to Cuba) and apprehension about it going in the other direction (from Cuba to Key West). Many tourists looked forward to combining a visit to Key West with one to Cuba, while several queer tourists and Key West residents specifically mentioned their hope that this would lead to a southward diffusion of Key West’s sexual tolerance. Many respondents, however, expressed reservations about the impact that a new wave of Cuban immigration might have on Key West. Tourists from the U.S., in particular, worried that increased ties with Cuba would lead to the island that is promoted as the “American Caribbean” becoming less “American” and more “Caribbean” (Steinberg, 2007).

At the root of respondents’ apprehensions was the fear that Key West would lose control over its interactions. Indeed, the one group of respondents who were as enthusiastic about Cubans coming to Key West as they were about tourists from the U.S. traveling to Cuba were members of the local business community, who were looking forward to the day when Cuban workers could fill Key West’s shortage of manual laborers (who have been pushed off of the island by escalating housing prices). Even businesspeople, however, feared the impacts that Cuban immigration could have on the image of an “Anglo paradise” that has been Key West’s allure. As one business owner remarked:

Somebody said the other day, “Well, we’ll get a cruise ship tied in the harbor and we’ll use it as dorms. Or we’ll import people from Cuba when that opens up, and bring them in every morning on a high-speed ferry.” OK, but what does that make your community? That’s how you replace employees – we’ll build barracks, you know – but that’s not what I’m concerned with....That’s one subject; the other subject, though, is what kind of community are you going to have (Interview, December 2004).

Much like the U.S. officials who established the roadblock that spurred the Conch Republic rebellion, residents and tourists in the Conch Republic, when pressed on the issue, expressed a desire to control which Cubans could come to Key West and what their impact would be. The debate was less over whether there should be connections but rather over how connections could be manipulated so that individuals on Key West could maintain control and independence in what was already an environment of connection and interaction.

Reconsidering sovereignty

This article has illustrated how identity and senses of belonging arise not just from raising barriers but also from building connections, and this points to the need to complicate Billig’s discussion of how state sovereignty is “flagged” through practices and symbols (including, literally, flags) that insinuate belonging into everyday life. As we noted above with reference to the rainbow flags flying outside Island House, while a flag designates the borders of a territory it also communicates to the outside world that the territory exists. A flag may be used to invite outsiders into the territory as well as to exclude them. Furthermore, as Figs. 2 and 9 illustrate, membership in neither the Conch...
Republic nor the Queer Nation is uni-dimensional. Membership in these nations is achieved as much through building connections to other entities as it is through erecting barriers that define one’s citizenship. Therefore, throughout this article, as we have sought to understand the Conch Republic, we have turned to the metaphors of the tourist, the island dweller, and the performative sexual citizen instead of the singularly-identified, patriotic citizen-subject. Likewise, we have turned to the metaphor of the bridge instead of the boundary.

As the story of the Conch Republic demonstrates, sovereignty can be about building connections, not destroying them. This was evidenced in the initial Conch Republic rebellion which was, quite literally, dedicated to reopening a bridge, and it continues today as the signifier of the Conch Republic – reconfigured as a tourism marketing slogan – has been mobilized to build further bridges with lands beyond the Republic’s borders. Statements of difference and apartness in these instances are being mobilized not to shut off the world but to welcome it in, but on terms that Key West residents would like at least some role in dictating. Thus, our analysis of the Conch Republic leaves us with an understanding that combines insights from Bilić with those from post-structuralist theory: the power of the sovereign state is achieved through everyday practices that reproduce a sense of belonging, but these everyday practices are continually reterritorializing spaces and identities, through an array of inclusions as well as exclusions, along numerous axes.

Of course, one might claim that whatever the Conch Republic is, it is not an example of sovereignty and therefore it should not be used to interpret the means by which more conventional sovereign states obtain (or use) their status. Indeed, we are not claiming that the Conch Republic actually has (or ever will have) the capacity for self-government that is normally associated with a sovereign state. However, the same qualifications could be made for a host of other nominally sovereign states that, although never achieving anything approaching complete autonomy, successfully use their status to broker power in Keohane’s (2002) world of “complex transnational networks.” Examples here range from Native American nations in the United States (Biolsi, 2005) to relatively weak, nominally independent states that compromise aspects of their right to self-governance in order to develop resources that, over the long run, can be used to support further assertions of sovereignty (DeSombre, 2006; Dreznier, 2001; Palan, 2006; Steinberg & McDowell, 2003). As the critical literature on sovereignty asserts, sovereignty is a practice (or a strategy), not an ontological status, and it follows that claims to sovereignty can be asserted in a variety of contexts, with varying degrees of autonomous power, for a variety of ends, including, as is asserted here, the end of gaining some level of control over relations of connection.

This use of sovereignty as a strategy to obtain a level of respect when interacting with more powerful outsiders resonates with Fog Olwig’s findings from her research with former residents of the small Caribbean island of Nevis. Fog Olwig was initially puzzled by the enthusiasm of Nevisian emigrants for the island’s formal independence, given that it was clear that the island would remain economically dependent on much larger and wealthier states. Eventually, however, she realized:

The nation-state was important, not because it was believed to confer the sort of “internal homogeneity and external autonomy” associated with the development of modern nations in the Western world. It was important as a Western institution which offered a new framework of recognition and respect within which the islanders could communicate with the Western world, not as localized citizens in the nation-state, but as members of the transnational communities (Fog Olwig, 1993: p. 4).

Or as New Caledonian independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou stated:

It’s sovereignty that gives us the right and the power to negotiate interdependencies. For a small country like ours, independence means reckoning interdependencies well (cited in Clifford, 2001: p. 474).

Like the emigrant from Nevis who seeks Nevisian independence so that she can maintain her pride while interacting with the world around her, or the gay man who seeks out a “resort” not to retreat into a private performance of his sexuality but rather to draw his own connections between the private and the public, or between the marginal and the normative, Key West residents utilize the trope of sovereignty to work toward what all tourist destinations – and arguably all individuals and nation-states – try to achieve: connections with respect.

This point was made explicitly by Conch Republic Secretary-General Anderson:

The statement of independence was based on the idea that if you’re going to treat us like a foreign country, we’re going to be one. We’ll take the bull by the horns. You’re gonna treat us like that, o.k. fine. Then let’s take this to the next step. We secede! Fuck You! … Of course, it’s very much about respect (Interview, December 2004).

A similar point is made by Wilkinson in his study of sovereignty among Native American nations:

The concept of sovereignty carries with it an aura that transcends technical considerations of political science and law. Designation as a sovereign, however imprecise that term may be, implies a kind of dignity and respectability beyond its literal meaning (Wilkinson, 1987: p. 55).

In summary, the story of the Conch Republic brings to the forefront how places and identities are constructed not solely through the erection of barriers and the policing of boundaries but also through the management of connections and crossings. The brilliance of the Conch Republic’s leadership lay in its realization that claims to distinctiveness and connection, although seemingly in contradiction with each other, could be fused together through semi-farcal references to the institution of statehood, and that this fusion could then be used to build bridges that would lead to the diffusion of Key West’s quirky and rebellious image and a subsequent increase in tourism revenues. Like Key West’s queer tourists (or, for that matter, Wilkinson’s Native American nations or Fog Olwig’s Nevisian immigrants), the Conch Republic’s leaders assert that Key West is less a distinct place with a distinct people who are entitled to an autonomous government (the classic nation-state model) than it is an environment in which identities are forged through connections and crossings, all within an atmosphere of respect. For Conchs, and arguably for all people, this is the essence of sovereignty.

Endnotes

1 The use of the term “queer” is problematic, both because it is rarely used in the LGBT tourism industry (or by LGBT tourists) and because LGBT tourism in Key West is dominated by middle-class, white gay men (and increasingly their lesbian counterparts). Nevertheless, because our discussion of LGBT tourism in Key West is heavily informed by queer theory we use the term “queer tourism.”

2 Much of our data comes from interviews with 26 Key West residents and 23 tourists, conducted in December 2004 by the authors and Donna Jo Hall and funded by Florida State University’s DeVoe L. Moore Center.

3 Although the Conch Republic claims the entire Keys, it is largely a Key West phenomenon. The other islands typically feature scuba diving, sport fishing, and sun bathing rather than the mix of Cuban, West Indian, literary, artistic, gay, and historical cultural resonances that, together with its reputation as a hard-drinking party venue, attracts tourists to Key West.