How do pilgrimages influence our understanding of place, identity and authenticity? What is the relationship between ritual, repetition and a search for belonging? Cymene Howe’s “Queer Pilgrimage: The San Francisco Homeland and Identity Tourism” begins with the iconic lyrics to “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” setting the stage for an examination of San Francisco as a “queer homeland” constructed through the practice of tourism-as-pilgrimage.

Howe traces the history of San Francisco from its origins as a frontier outpost with a majority male population with a taste for decadence, to its emergence in the 20th century as the “world’s gay and lesbian capital.” Why do lesbian, gay and queer tourists travel from around the world to visit the City and what effects does this pilgrimage have upon those who make the journey? To address these questions, Howe examines gay and lesbian tour guidebooks, tourist ephemera, and her own ethnographic experiences. She finds that the “queer nation” that makes San Francisco its homeland is, like other nations, constructed in relation to its exterior, where queerness is frequently unwelcome. The queer homeland is envisioned as a sanctuary from ostracism and oppression found elsewhere. But unlike other nations, this “queer nation” is founded not upon imaginary ties of blood, but rather upon self-conscious forms of marking, political positioning and sexual identity. By symbolically inverting negative mainstream views about homosexuality “out there,” a near sacred reverence is created around stigmatized forms of sexuality and political activism within the queer homeland.

Tourists from other areas of the United States and the world travel to San Francisco, in part, because it is renowned as a welcoming homeland for queer people and a refuge from discrimination. But they also journey to the city to affirm
a sense of an authentic sexual identity. Howe highlights key events, such as the Pride Parade, and iconic sites, such as the Castro District, that intensify the homeland's capacity for symbolic inversion and aid in creating a sense of liminality and communitas. Within this context, pilgrims undergo a self-transformation that affirms their once excluded identity. Queer pilgrims leave their homes in a quest to discover their true selves in what is imagined as a pure and authentically queer place, "returning" to a place that they have never been.

Although the “queer homeland” is partly founded upon marginalization elsewhere, Howe’s analyses highlight how the San Francisco homeland rejects such exclusionary logics by rejecting a singular definition of queer identity. Differences exist within this queer nation—particularly along lines of gender, race, class, and age—but the City appears to value polymorphous inclusivity and a tolerance for sexual fluidity. The San Francisco homeland provides a capacious site and sign for pilgrim tourists to find themselves under the rubric of “queer.”

About the Author

Cymene Howe is a cultural anthropologist whose work focuses on advocacy, media, subjectivity and the politics of knowledge and action. Her research in Nicaragua explores how sexual rights activists have crafted political practices and discourses of social transformation from the intimate pedagogies of discussion groups to street protests to social justice soap operas. As activists, NGO professionals and media producers negotiate the fraught and shifting meanings associated with homosexuality, justice and human rights, they attempt to reconcile Nicaragua’s revolutionary history with its neoliberal present and in the process, form innovative ways of imagining and enacting a “sexuality free from prejudice.” The book based on this research, Mediating Sexuality, traces the work of Nicaraguan activists who, after many of struggle, were ultimately successful in helping to overturn the country’s anti-sodomy law, one that was considered to be the most repressive in Latin America. Cymene Howe’s current project, in collaboration with Dominic Boyer, is a study of the political culture of wind power development in Oaxaca, Mexico and in particular how state officials, transnational renewable energy companies and local communities negotiate the development of renewable energy. While climate change has received substantial attention at the level of international policy agreements and protocols, very little anthropological research as of yet has addressed how these global, moral and ecological imperatives are being implemented at the local level. This project, supported by a two-year grant from the National Science Foundation, aims to focus ethnographic attention on the politics of energy transition as well as the stakes, and stakeholders, that will be fundamental to a sustainable future.

Additional Works by the Author

Mediating Sexuality: Activism and the Politics of Sexual Rights in Nicaragua


“Gender, Sexuality and Revolution: Making Histories and Cultural Politics in...
Interview with the Author

Kevin Carrico: What has inspired your work in the field of ritual, and in what ways does your work contribute to the study of these issues?

Cymene Howe: My interest in ritual, particularly for my research on queer pilgrimage, was motivated by questions about the possibility of a queer homeland, a territorialized and yet semiotically rich companion to what Kath Weston (1998) has called the “gay imaginary.” In the case of San Francisco, tourism—as a modern quest for experience and a way of seeking authenticity—coincided with the practice of pilgrimage. Journeying to a site of significance and reaching a destination of meaningful arrival were combined in the twin projects of tourism and pilgrimage. Using the classic formulation of a rite of passage developed by van Gennep and the Turners, I found that queer-identified persons were in a unique position vis-à-vis the practice of pilgrimage. On the one hand, the epic journey to San Francisco was a separation from the social world “back home,” a liminal space to enjoy communitas with other gay folk, followed by a return and reincorporation that left one transformed. While this rendering of pilgrimage as a rite of passage is a very familiar one, I was also interested in how queer pilgrimage was distinct. Many lesbian and gay identified people, for example, are not accepted as a legitimate normative part of the social “body” from which separation traditionally occurs in a rite of passage. Rather, queer folk may be viewed as outside of the norm because of their sexuality, and this is where the touristic trope of “escape,” as opposed to pilgrimage, was equally important. The ways in which my interlocutors in San Francisco brought together elements of tourism and pilgrimage offered me insights into each set of practices, particularly in how one could “return” to a place where one had never been. In this sense, there was a kind of intentional inversion at work, where people sought a real sense of authenticity in the touristic encounter, not with the “other” but with “others like me.” (Miller- sense that one has find others like self implicit in the form of the “expatriate”) However, like places such as Mecca, Lourdes or Varanasi, a site for queer pilgrimage must be ample, inclusive, and welcoming to many seekers in search of codifying, legitimating and ensuring a particular status or identity. These sites of ritualized journey must necessarily be capacious—not unlike, incidentally, the term “queer” itself which has been intended as an inclusive, polymorphous response to heteronormativity.

Kevin Carrico: How do you see the topic of ritual to be relevant at this moment in time?

Cymene Howe: Ritual has an enduring life because it demands a time outside of time, where one’s focus, often a collective focus, is magnified. It is an opportunity to qualify some of the ineffable qualities of human existence in more material, observable and practicable ways. And in this sense, it is hard to imagine humanity without ritual. In my more recent research I have been less focused on the canonical forms of ritual and more interested in the ritualized aspects of political performance and how these may intersect with different forms of spectacle.

Working with sexual rights activists in Nicaragua I have been able to observe the very nuanced ways that activists are attempting to reconcile identity politics with the country’s Marxist political history in a time of neoliberal inequalities. Although
perhaps not ritual in the classic anthropological sense, the activist practices I have documented frequently mobilize one of the hallmarks of ritual: repetition. Human rights discourses, for example, have saturated so many activist projects that they seem to have taken on the status of doctrinal truth for many sexual rights advocates. Producing a social justice telenovela (soap opera), and thereby serializing their messages of tolerance for lesbian and gay Nicaraguans, is another way that sexual rights advocates have employed both spectacle and a reiterative strategy in their efforts, as they put it, “to transform culture.” There are also less obvious and public instances of ritualized performances of spectacle. For instance, an enduring event in Nicaraguan sexual rights activism has been the “travesti concurso” (a beauty contest-like competition where biological men attempt to replicate “true womanhood”). The concurso involves a lot of pageantry, a lot of glamour and often a dose of affectation. After every concurso I have attended contestants have always asked me to take their photograph. They strike a pose bedecked in their costumed finery and I do my best to take on the persona of a good paparazzo. One thing that is remarkable to me is that travesti contestants never ask for a copy of the photo. The ritualized performance is, it seems, the purpose. Being a photo-worthy subject, and being seen as such, provides more satisfaction than the acquisition, preservation or documentation of the event. In thinking more about spectacle in this ethnographic moment and others, I have found it useful to return to Guy Debord’s proposition that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 1995: 12). In a world that is increasingly lived in mediated encounters, whether through social networks or the productions of the news and entertainment industries, it seems to me that a deeper anthropological understanding of how human relationships are conditioned and transacted by spectacle and a ritualization of political life continues to be an important project.

**Related Links**

**LGBT travel to San Francisco, the “gay capital of the world”**

"Welcome to the gay capital of the world!"

**Official Queer Culture Tour**

"In a city chock full of historic lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) commemorative memorials, political precedents and historic events, visitors who crave a crash course in queer culture are invited to uncover an unrivaled education in the streets, cafes, parks and museums of San Francisco."

**Queer San Francisco history and neighborhoods**

“Yes, it’s true: Statisticians estimate that anywhere from 25 to 30 percent of the city’s population are “you know.” In cold hard numbers, San Francisco’s annual Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Pride Parade and Celebration is one of the biggest, and clearly the hottest, tourist draw to California. Never fear, it’s clear: San Francisco is an unending paradise for the queer.

Of course, paradise can be hard to navigate, let alone understand. Thus, this guide offers both an overview of queer San Francisco from the beginning of the century to the present and a select neighborhood guide that lets you in on local bon mots not to be missed. Homo heaven has a range of ‘hoods each with its own special character, style and history. Some may prefer the Tenderloin and some Bernal Heights and some may want to hit all the sights. Read through for the locale that fits your needs, provokes your curiosity or offers you a night of not-so-straight-up fun.”
"The San Francisco Dyke March is for dykes. Dykes gather at the Dyke March to celebrate our love and passion for women and for ALL dykes. We celebrate our queerness in all its manifestations. We understand dyke identity to include those of us who are questioning and challenging gender constructs and the social definitions of women: transdyke, MTF, transfeminine, transmasculine, genderqueer, and gender fluid dykes. We also welcome all women who want to support dykes to march with us. Celebrate dyke diversity!"

Gay & Lesbian Convention & Visitors’ Bureau Page on San Francisco

"Only in San Francisco. Equality for all. Pride and freedom. Respect and tolerance. Those words say a lot about a place called San Francisco.

Historically and culturally, San Francisco has been waving the flag (albeit not the rainbow version created here in 1978) for more than 150 years. Historians note the emergence of a gay population during the Gold Rush and the days of the Barbary Coast. Today San Francisco has one of the highest per capita gay populations in the world."

“San Francisco Tops Gay Tourism List”- National Geographic

“San Francisco, which developed in the 1970s into the epicentre of the gay rights movement, remains the top gay-friendly destination in the US.

More than three-quarters of respondents to a poll by the Travel Industry Association agreed that San Francisco was gay-friendly, putting it streets ahead of Key West and New York, which were deemed gay-friendly by 57 per cent and 51 per cent respectively."

Multimedia
San Francisco is oh-so-queer

San Francisco Raises LGBT Flag at City Hall
San Francisco GLBT Museum

San Francisco Dyke March

Dykes on Bikes
Questions for Classroom Discussion

1. Howe's article reconsiders a case of tourism as pilgrimage. What are the general similarities and differences between tourism and pilgrimage? How are their effects similar or different? What is the relationship between pilgrimage and identity? And how might tourism, by comparison, affect identity?

2. Howe's article traces the history of San Francisco, from its origin myth to its emergence as the "queer capital of the world." How do images and narratives of places shape their reality? Are such narratives of place inherently self-reproducing?

3. Howe sees the San Francisco "homeland" as contributing to the production of "a flexible set of identities, rather than a singular emphasis on a one-dimensional queer subject" (53). Is maintenance of such a flexible and non-totalizing identity possible? What other examples relate to or differ from the San Francisco case?

Related Readings

Anderson, Benedict

Bruner, Edward

Collins, Andrew, ed.

Graburn, Nelson H.

Hobica, George

Kaplan, Caren
