Representing Place: “Deserted Isles” and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll

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Bikini Atoll has been reshaped through time according to Western mythologies regarding “deserted” islands. Geographers have increasingly recognized that landscapes are shaped by the ways human agents conceptualize places. Ideals that shape places are not only based on interpretations of a given place, however, but are also formed by the semiotic linking of representations of similar landscapes. Conceptualizations of Bikini Atoll enabled the drastic alteration of the landscape by nuclear testing in the 1940s and 1950s as well as subsequent development projects such as the current tourism operation on the atoll. The information presented in this article stems from interview research conducted in the Marshall Islands in 2001 and 2002 as well as from a review of historical accounts of the atoll from 1945 to the present. The conceptualizations of Bikini Atoll held by members of the Bikinian community, U.S. military and government officials, other people living in the Marshall Islands, and visitors to the atoll explain the transformations of the atoll landscape. Going beyond the notion of landscapes as readable texts, places can be understood as discursive-material formations where the semiotic meanings of places are intrinsically entwined with their reproduction. Key Words: place, landscape, nuclear testing, semiotics, tourism.

As for Juda of Bikini and his people, now living on Rongerik Atoll, they probably will be repatriated if they insist on it, though United States military authorities say they can't see why they should want to: Bikini and Rongerik look as alike as two Idaho potatoes.
—(E. Rooney 1946)

Bikini Atoll is a tropical paradise, unspoiled by development, with excellent scuba diving.
—(Timothy Ferris, MSNBC-TV, 30 June 1997)

There are not many places that could look more like the Garden of Eden.
—(A description of Bikini Atoll in Conde Nast Traveler Magazine, July 2000)

It is a paradise, a place where you have everything you need. It is a place God puts you where all is within your reach.
—(A description of Bikini Atoll by a Bikini Islander, June 2000)

In 1946, the U.S. military removed the people living on Bikini Atoll in order to use it as a test site for nuclear weapons (Figure 1). From 1946 to 1958, twenty-three nuclear weapons were tested at Bikini Atoll. The largest bomb, code-named “Bravo,” was a fifteen-megaton blast, detonated on 1 March 1954, that vaporized three of the atoll’s islands and spread highly radioactive fallout across most of the northern Marshall Islands. To many people around the world, the name Bikini Atoll has become synonymous with nuclear destruction, military colonialism, and radioactive contamination.

As the quotes at the beginning of this paper show, however, radically different views represent Bikini Atoll as an object of the tourist gaze focused on a small, but successful, tourism operation (Urry 1990). Today, in many tourist publications and on the promotional Web site, www.bikiniatoll.com, the atoll is depicted as the quintessential tourist place: an unpopulated tropical island. Although the change in Bikini’s status over the years from nuclear test site and radioactive wasteland to a tourists’ paradise may appear surreal, all these conceptualizations of the atoll present Bikini as a “deserted isle.” While this representation has been dominant for the last sixty years, native Bikinians’ descriptions of the atoll connect to a very different vision of Bikini as a homeland with plentiful resources and intense cultural significance. While the 3,100 Bikinians remain scattered throughout the Marshall Islands and their atoll remains uninhabitable due to radioactive contamination, many hope to repatriate soon. As in 1946, there is still a stark contrast between Bikinian visions of the atoll as a homeland and the deserted isle mythology that underlies widely circulated representations of the atoll espoused by others.

For the past sixty years, agents have produced and consumed representations of Bikini Atoll, enabling the reproduction of a particular landscape. The basis for such representations is rarely the landscape itself, as much as
“traveling representations” of other places deemed to be similar to Bikini. Such traveling representations of Bikini legitimize some uses of the place while repressing others.

This process of place reproduction is not unique to Bikini Atoll. It is used here as a case study not because it is exotic or exceptional, but because it depicts a particularly fluid and well-documented case of how place meanings are contested, shift through time, and affect the reproduction of the landscape. On Bikini, dramatic differences between conceptualizations of place (nuclear wasteland, tourist paradise, and homeland) can be used to highlight mechanisms of place reproduction occurring around the world. To demonstrate this process, I weave the case study of Bikini Atoll into contemporary theoretical discussions about place.

Recent discussions of place emphasize four major points. First, scholars have increasingly concentrated on the importance of nonlocal processes and events affecting places (Massey 1994). Second, there has been an emphasis on the ways in which different actors interpret places, create discourses about them, and thereby affect place reproduction (Jackson 1989; Duncan and Ley 1993; Casey 2001). Third, meanings of places change through time, sometimes dramatically (Hall 1997; McGuirk and Rowe 2001). And lastly, the dialectical interaction between spatial and social processes has been recognized (Harvey 1996; Soja 1996; Cresswell 2004). On the last point there has been debate as to whether places are wholly constructed by social processes or whether the spatial and social are “mutually constitutive” (Cresswell 2004, 29–33).

I refer to places as discursive-material formations. This approach merges these four emphases of current discussions of place production and applies them to the study of a particular place. Bikini Atoll is a place that has been heavily impacted by external actors and discourses, different interpretations of place, transformations of those interpretations through time, and interactions between landscape and social processes. Various conceptualizations of the atoll during three different time periods have enabled the production of certain landscapes on Bikini at the expense of others. This article examines representations of the atoll produced just prior to the beginning of nuclear testing in 1946, conceptu-
alizations of the atoll in the 1960s and 1970s during a failed repatriation attempt, and contemporary views of Bikini as a lost homeland and financially successful tourist destination.

The information presented in this article stems from research I conducted in the Marshall Islands in 2001 and 2002, as well as from a review of previous social science research and popular magazine accounts dealing with Bikini Atoll. I studied historical conceptualizations of Bikini Atoll over the past six decades and ascertained the current attitudes of various groups of people toward the atoll. During stays on Bikini Atoll, Majuro Atoll, and Kili Island, I conducted semistructured interviews with tourists, resort management and workers, Department of Energy personnel, Republic of the Marshall Islands government officials, and members of the Bikinian community and government to analyze their interactions with, and conceptualizations of, Bikini. I supplemented this information with a review of recent tourist-oriented periodical articles and newspaper stories from the United States about current development activities on Bikini Atoll. I also studied local representations of Bikini from two years (2001 and 2002) of the Marshall Islands Journal (a newspaper based in Majuro, Marshall Islands) as well as information provided on the Web page maintained by Jack Niedenthal, Trust Liaison to the People of Bikini. I pieced together past conceptualizations of the atoll by consulting written academic accounts and articles about Bikini Atoll in American periodicals published from 1946 to the present.

Conceptualizing Place

Representations of place come in many forms: postcards (Dunn 1996; Watt and Head 2002), monuments (T. Hall 1997), images (Rose 2001; Echtner and Prasad 2003), written accounts (M. L. Pratt 1992; Hutt 1996), and verbal statements (C. Cohen 1995). What all representations share, however, is that they are means of transmitting certain conceptualizations of a place to other people. Since these representations emphasize some characteristics of a place at the expense of others, they are always incomplete “pictures” of place. These representations of place are also political. They “do work” by reinforcing conceptualizations of a place that legitimize certain uses and prohibit others. In turn, the new form of the landscape informs new conceptualizations. This is the essence of Henri Lefebvre’s work on the relationship between conceptualizations of places and landscape. He writes, “In actuality each of these two kinds of space [the physical and the imagined] involves, underpins and presupposes the other” (Lefebvre 1991, 14). The fact that the reproduction of the landscape is entwined with imagined conceptualizations of the place leads to multiple, often contradictory, imaginations for a single physical landscape that cause conflict and contests over places. Each individual has a different conceptualization of what a given place is (or ought to be) and the reproduction of the place is a social process. Places, therefore, are more than just the amalgam of the local inhabitants’ imaginations; they are the result of spatially wide-ranging regimes of power and the ability of some to legitimize one imagining of a place over others.

How, then, do people interpret a given landscape in different ways? There has been a lot of effort on the part of theorists to demonstrate that different imaginations of place fall into distinct categories. In general, geographers have tended to divide the field of human experience of places into “abstract” and “lived” realms. Enrikin (1991) discusses this dichotomy, using the terminology of “subjective” and “objective” approaches to understanding places. Some writers carry this division between abstract and lived conceptualizations to their definitions of space and place, with “space” as the realm of the abstract and “place” the realm of lived experience and sense of place (Taylor 1999; Casey 2001). For Lefebvre, rather than using an abstract/lived dichotomy, the spatial world can be broken into three categories: “spatial practice,” “representations of place,” and “representational spaces.” He and Edward Soja also refer to these with the more accessible terms of “perceived space,” “conceptualized space,” and “lived space” (Soja 1996). According to Soja, “perceived space” is the “real” concrete world that exists at a given site, while “conceptualized space” is “entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceptualized or imagined geographies . . . [It is a] symbolic space . . . a world of rationally interpretable significa[ion]” (Soja 1996, 79). “Lived space” is the domain of people using spaces or describing them without trying to “decipher and actively transform” the space (Soja 1996, 67). To Soja, these are different ways of seeing the same site. As Soja notes, however, these are epistemological spaces. He correlates “perceived space” with the spatial science tradition in geography, “conceptualized space” with humanist geographers, and “lived space” as a possible new liberating direction for geographical study.

While these popular frameworks fracture and categorize the different ways that places are experienced, I question whether this framework is really useful for understanding how places are reproduced. At the very least, these categories should not be seen as reifying a given space as either lived or perceived or conceptualized. Not only are places considered by different people
to fall into different categories but the people considering a place may be experiencing it in ways that draw upon combinations of experiences that cross-cut or hybridize notions of "perceiving," "conceptualizing," and "living within" a given space. Furthermore, people's conceptualizations change over time as they interact with places and recreate their identities through contacts with places.

Rather than following Lefebvre's (modified by Soja) tripartite formula for categorizing space, I argue that the process that creates all of these forms of space is the same, while the resulting types of space are infinite. Although Soja applies his label of "conceptualized space" to only one subset of the ways of seeing a site, all of these spaces are conceptualized. What Soja calls "perceived space" is a conceptualization of a site based on the assumptions of the "mirror-model" of science. The idea that an observer is relaying the "real" perceived site, unfiltered by human bias, is merely a conceptualization of a site informed by positivist epistemologies. The "lived space" is the conceptualization of the site made by those who have a direct contact with the space. The underlying process for all of these spaces, however, is the same. Sites are not conceptualized in one type of refined category; the fact that some of these conceptualizations are labeled as "more abstract" than others is really only a matter of categorizing preference.4

Conceptualizations of Place and Place Reproduction

Analyzing places as "discursive-material formations" draws together the previously discussed trends in place research that recognize places as fluid, permeable, and affected by the ways in which they are imagined. While Lakshman Yapa has used the concept of discursive-material objects in his discussions of poverty and scientifically engineered seeds, I believe the concept can be extended to studies of place reproduction (Yapa 1996a, b). Talking about places as discursive-material formations highlights the role of conceptualizations and representations of place in enabling and legitimizing certain versions of place over others. In terms of place reproduction, this perspective emphasizes that places are known, discussed, and represented through language legitimizes the performance of certain activities in those places as well as directs the social practices that actively shape the landscape.

The concept of the discursive-material formation is similar to Jean Baudrillard's (1981) concept of the "sign-object." Baudrillard draws upon the work of semiotic theoreticians Saussure and Barthes to demonstrate that there is a connection between any material object (referent), the concept people have of it (signified), and the word or symbol used to describe it (signifier). Baudrillard stresses that for any referent that exists in the world there are multiple "signifieds" that are available for linkage to the signer. In other words, there are multiple meanings available that link a word with the object it is aiming to represent.

Barthes's discussion of denotations and connotations makes this process more clear. The idea of denotation is that there is one true "real" meaning and that the word used to describe an object is a direct connection to that "real" meaning. The idea of connotation, however, suggests that there are multiple meanings available to link a word and an object. Barthes then argues that there are always multiple meanings and that "denotation" is merely an ideological construct that aims to convince people there is only one true meaning. He states that "[d]enotation is never anything more than the most attractive and subtle of connotations" (quoted in Baudrillard 1981, 158). The theory of the discursive-material formation hinges on this idea that there are multiple connotations available for an object.

This concept of multiple connotations relates back to how places are experienced. There is no one "true" meaning of a place (denotation) that a person perceives. Rather, a person constructs a conceptualization of a place by noticing some attributes of a place and attaching to it some of the meanings available (connotations) and disregarding other potential meanings. In other words, the place is not experienced wholly, but rather through subsets of its attributes. It is not the "whole brute presence of place" that inscribes itself on people but only the conceptualizations of it that last (Casey 2001, 688). When a person interacts with a place, through either direct experience or a representation, only a few of its qualities are noticed; some of the attributes unnoticed by one person may make a strong impression on another. People find meaning in a place not by accessing a "true" denotation but by finding a connotation based on what they are predisposed to look for.

This is not to say that subjects freely choose whichever connotations they desire or that they are programmed to select connotations of place based on a packaged identity. To use examples from this case study, Bikinians do not universally think of Bikini as a homeland, and tourists do not all see Bikini as a paradise. I do not mean to imply that conceptualization of places is that mechanistic; there is not a universal impression made by places on people. Instead, there are multiple
experiences of place, and observers are driven and focused toward certain aspects of place in relation to prior experiences and differences in the observer’s position and positionality. Edward Casey’s (2001) discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is informative in describing how past social trajectories produce a habitus that informs an individual’s conceptualization of the places they encounter. The ways that previous life experiences and exposure to representations affects the production of meaning in tourism places have also been examined by Chris Rojek (1997).

Furthermore, it is not just that subjects passively observe places and absorb meaning. Instead, there is an active and reciprocal process between place reproduction and identity formation. Some of the literature on tourism is particularly useful for examining the ways in which people do not just “read” landscapes but actively seek places that can be arenas for the reproduction and transformation of their identities. The tourist, for instance, needs a place conceptualized as a tourist place to perform certain activities that reaffirm their identities not as “a tourist,” but as “a successful (modern) person,” for whom one of the markers of success is to be the kind of person who travels and vacations (E. Cohen 1979; Urry 1990; Rojek 1997; Burns 1999). In this respect, subjects do not just passively “read” places, but, rather, the fluid subjectivity of tourists is reproduced and altered along with the place in which they are performing. Through this process, people develop simplified readings of what a place means. Rob Shields (1991, 47, emphasis in original) describes this as the construction of “place-images”:

Such place-images come about through over-simplification (i.e., reduction to one trait), stereotyping (amplification of one or more traits) and labeling (where a place is deemed to be of a certain nature). Places and spaces are hypostatized from the world of real space relations to a symbolic realm of cultural significations. . . . These images connected with a place may even come to be held as signifiers of its essential character.

Shields goes on to argue that sets of place-images that have particular coherence and longevity coalesce into what he refers to as place-myths. The use of the term myth here is not meant to imply that the conceptualization of place is somehow opposed to the “real facts” about a place, but rather that there is a coherence to the imaginings along a certain culturally significant theme. Place-myths, while shifting with changes in the landscape of a place, have a permanence and inertia that are often slow to change. What is more important for my purposes in this article is that multiple and contradictory place-myths can exist for the same place at the same time and that these myths can shift through time. Shields (1991, 61) writes, “Opposed groups may succeed in generating antithetical place-myths (as opposed to just variations in place-images) reflecting different class experiences or the cultural remembrance of a defeat where conquerors see only glory.” The place of Bikini Atoll has been shaped by actors who have conceptualized the place based on very different attributes than those emphasized by many of the Bikinan people. As a result, conflicts occur over which physical attributes and social practices on Bikini are to be celebrated and enhanced and which are to be vilified and erased.

This discussion of place conceptualization still leaves open the question of how these varied imaginings entwine with social practices to reproduce the material landscape. It is important not to see the discursive-material concept as suggesting that words build houses or discourses drop bombs. Using the language of discursive-material formations does not imply that discourses telekinetically transform reality or that the landscape does not exist prior to our views of it. What it does demonstrate is that the concepts enabling and legitimizing the material reproduction of place originate not from a perception (denotation) of a material landscape, but from the various conceptualizations (connotations) of that landscape, mediated by discourses that are often quite independent from the materiality of that place.

Figure 2 expands upon Lefebvre’s contentions about real and imagined spaces to depict the dialectical relationship between the real and the imagined. Place-images are preestablished in that the imagined landscape of a place comes not just from the sensory experience of that particular environment, but from the semiotic linking of that experience to previously known words, cultural narratives, and meanings. So, the imagined

![Figure 2. Place reproduction.](image-url)
landscape is not only a product of the material landscape, it is a melding of the material landscape with images of other places. The sensory experience in the landscape is not the source for the meaning of a place, but only one of the sources. The “preestablished place-images” mesh with sensory experiences of place to create floating signifiers: culturally available traveling conceptualizations of places that do not arise from a particular place as much as they are applied to it.

In other words, discourses and place-images that emanate from far outside the physical place affect how a place is conceptualized. The place-myth generated for a given site may have much more to do with stories and images of other places deemed to be “like” it than with the landscape of the place itself. The Island Pacific is certainly one region where Western place-myths have been consistently constructed throughout history based on the islands’ antipodal position to Europe, biblical searches for Eden, and Rousseau’s romanticism (Jolly 1997; Howe 2000).6 Such traveling place-myths then land on specific islands and are applied with little concern for the specific materiality or social conditions of that place. The place-myth of the deserted atoll has been applied despite the fact that the Bikinian people have lived there (and still desire to live there). Bikini Atoll has “become” a “deserted isle” by linking Bikini’s material environment with narratives that have been constructed in Western culture over thousands of years in a wide variety of geographic contexts.

In turn, place-myths enable and legitimize social practices that alter the material landscape and attempt to bring it more into line with a conceptualization that was never based on the material landscape in the first place. Links between the material and the discursive occur immediately, at the level of the semiotic, when a place is encountered. Division of the world into separate realms of the purely material or discursive is thus essentially problematic, because places are hybrids or “quasi-objects,” a mesh of natural and social processes (Latour 1993; Haraway 1997). Erik Swyngedouw (2003, 96) notes that, “‘Things’ are hybrids or quasi-objects (subjects and objects, material and discursive, natural and social) from the very beginning. . . . Every body and every thing is a mediator, a ‘hybrid,’ part social, part natural (but without discrete boundaries), which internalizes the multiple contradictory relations that redefine every body and every thing.” Landscapes, like all things, are also “hybrids.”

Different groups of people, who have very different conceptualizations of what kind of place Bikini Atoll should be, have all produced representations of the place that are used in political ways. They do work in the world by attempting to fix a meaning of a place and legitimizing the production of a certain kind of place. The practical consequences affect both the agents striving to change the places with which they interact as well as researchers considering place reproduction. Groups working to make changes to places need to recognize that the social practices affecting place reproduction can be redirected by changing the discursive construction of what a place is and what can legitimately be done to it. In other words, changing the accepted place-myth can lead to tangible changes in the landscape of places. Researchers have noted this effect not only in the “paradise” of the Island Pacific, but also in places such as the “timeless” Kimberley Mountains in Australia, and the “post-industrial” landscapes of Newcastle, Australia, and Birmingham, England (Hall 1997; McGuirk and Rowe 2001; Watt and Head 2002). For researchers looking at the way places are produced and reproduced, this perspective highlights the need to seriously engage with the way places are conceptualized by the people interacting with them.

How, though, do place-myths affect the reproduction of the physical landscape? Given that a particular material landscape gives rise to multiple conceptualizations, there are almost inevitably different opinions about how the material landscape should be maintained, changed, and governed. On the bottom of the diagram in Figure 2, between the imagined landscape and the material landscape, is power. While everyone may have a unique version of what a place ought to be, there is only one site. Power then dictates which version of place gets to be produced. In the diagram, I have subdivided power into capital, institutions, and legitimacy to represent the power inherent in economic processes, political sovereignty, and discourses. In the rest of this article, I demonstrate how powerful agents have attempted to remake Bikini Atoll through social practices enabled and legitimized by the place-myth of the deserted isle. The atoll has been reproduced in the ways it has, not necessarily because of its location, its endogenous attributes, or its position in a global political economic system, but according to the way it has been conceptualized. Conceptualizations of Bikini Atoll are rooted not only in the landscape itself, but in a semiotic system of codes that relates what people see on Bikini with signs they have previously encountered in other places. People then act to reproduce the atoll according to these conceptualizations of place. Have political economy, military power, and nuclear radiation affected Bikini? Absolutely, but all of these things are also entwined with the discourses and practices that legitimate the ways that capitalism, militarism, and nuclear testing have been applied there.
Bikini as Home and Ideal Test Site

The “hole in the map” was a pre-condition for a nuclear hole in the ground; it alone created the necessary marginality for experimentation to be deemed acceptable.

—(Cosgrove 1998, 264)

Bikini had been, after all, a place of human habitation, a homeland. When the atoll was acquired by the U.S. Navy, it had about 150 inhabitants. It had, however, something even more important: geography. The trifling life of the little island could not reasonably share in a transcendental experience that was, when all was said and done, dedicated to death. The whole function of Bikini was to be remote, far away, as inaccessible as possible from anything valued by man, because it was to be destroyed. . . . A place had to be found where the principle of overkill could be examined, where nuclear bombs could be tested in the atmosphere without inconveniencing anyone, at least anyone much. The Micronesian people of the central Pacific are by definition nobody much.

—(Cameron 1970, 24)

Several scholars have examined how the experimental spaces of Project Plowshare, a 1960s program that was to use nuclear weapons for “peaceful” excavation projects, constructed the test areas as geographically and socially marginal (Frenkel 1998; Kirsch 1998; Krygier 1998; Millar and Mitchell 1998). Similarly, Bikini Atoll was not “found” as an ideal test site in 1946; it was made. In 1946, Bikini was considered a healthy homeland by its inhabitants, who had lived on the atoll for generations (Niedenthal 2002). It was a place with ample land and adequate fishing resources. It was the location of the graves of the Bikinians’ ancestors. The U.S. military, however, emphasized a very different subset of attributes.

The first atomic tests at Bikini in 1946 served several purposes for the U.S. military. On a geopolitical level, the testing acted as a theater in which the United States could openly demonstrate the power of its atomic arsenal. In contrast to the secrecy surrounding atomic experimentation during World War II, the tests at Bikini were highly publicized; representatives from many countries were invited to witness the tests as a demonstration of American military power. The military’s primary stated purpose for the first set of atomic bomb tests at Bikini in 1946, however, was more practical. The tests were designed to determine whether naval vessels could withstand atomic attack and were conducted jointly by the Army and Navy amid debate in the American military over whether atomic weapons had made the Navy obsolete (Weisgall 1994). This rivalry between the two branches of the armed services figured prominently in the underlying rationale for the tests, code-named Operation Crossroads because, as the admiral in charge of the tests noted, “seapower, airpower, and perhaps humanity itself are at the crossroads” (quoted in Weisgall 1994, 32).

The plan was to anchor an armada of captured German and Japanese naval vessels, as well as older American ships, in a lagoon and then explode atomic bombs near them. The first test was to be an air-dropped bomb, the second bomb was to be exploded underwater, and a third test was to involve an even deeper underwater detonation. The first two tests were carried out in the summer of 1946, but the deep underwater detonation was cancelled. In the end, the “contest” between the Navy and Army was seen as a draw. Most of the ships used in the tests were sunk or unusable after the tests.8 The Navy-delivered underwater bomb blast, however, was credited with doing much more damage to the fleet than the Army’s air-dropped bomb.

So how was it that Bikini, an inhabited island, became the site for these tests? Since the tests required a site that accommodated the anchorage of large ships, continental sites imagined as remote by the U.S. government, such as New Mexico and Nevada, could not be considered. While the first atomic bomb test had occurred in New Mexico in 1945, the discovery of serious radioactive contamination following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused the U.S. government to be cautious about conducting further atomic tests in, or near, the continental United States. The Atomic Energy Commission therefore suggested that the Operation Crossroads tests be performed “overseas” (Weisgall 1994, 31). In October 1945, two officers in the Navy’s OP-06 office of special weapons, Frederick Ashworth and Horacio Rivero stated, “We just took out dozens of maps and started looking for remote sites. After checking the Atlantic, we moved to the west coast and just kept looking” (Weisgall 1994, 32). In December 1945, Ashworth said, referring to the search for the site, “We haven’t come to any particular conclusion. It looks like pretty far away is going to be the answer” (Weisgall 1994, 32, emphasis added). It was soon deemed that the only places “pretty far away” were located in the Pacific. Bikini was selected over other islands in the Marshall Islands, Caroline Islands, and even the Galapagos Islands. William Pratt, a retired U.S. navy officer, summed up the requirements in his short article “How Bikini Became the Bomb-Testing Ground” (1946). He characterizes Bikini as “the ideal place” because of its location in a part of the world controlled by the United States, its relative freedom from tropical storms, its sheltered lagoon sizable enough to hold a naval fleet, and because of...
the small population on Bikini and its neighboring atolls (W. Pratt 1946, 60). In addition, the atoll itself could be used as a staging area for the tests, as could the nearby American base at Kwajalein Atoll 240 kilometers to the south.

Bikini became the ideal location for a test site due to its remoteness from parts of the world deemed important to the U.S. military. Once selected, however, the atoll needed to be characterized as marginal in other ways so that it could be conceptualized as an ideal locale for atomic explosions. The dominant place-myth that guided representations of the atoll was that of the deserted isle. Two similar, but distinct, kinds of representations were used to portray Bikini Atoll as a place worthy of nuclear destruction. In one sense, it was represented as a nonplace. In other instances, Bikini was portrayed as a place that represented backwardness, the antithesis of the Americans’ technological modernity. No doubt, both of these representations draw heavily on the mythology of the deserted isle and both served to legitimize the use of Bikini as a test site. I think, however, it would be a mistake analytically to completely fuse the two.

In regard to empty nonplaces, Lefebvre (1991, 190) writes,

> The notion of a space which is at first empty, but is later filled by a social life and modified by it, also depends on this hypothetical initial “purity,” identified as “nature” and as a sort of ground zero of human reality. Empty space in the sense of a mental and social void which facilitates the socialization of a not-yet-social realm is actually merely a representation of space.

This mental conceptualization of Bikini as an empty nonplace is rooted in prior U.S. conceptualizations of the Micronesian region as a nonplace (Steinberg 2001). The atoll was assumed to be but a minor blemish on an ocean surface regarded by Americans in World War II as a nonplace. This portrayal of atolls is demonstrated by reference to the islands as mere “anchored aircraft carriers.”9 One U.S. official described the atolls of the Marshalls this way: “Living on an atoll is like living on a ship, except that the ship will get to port, but the atoll will never go anywhere” (quoted in Weisgall 1994, 35). This portrayal of Bikini as an terra nullius pressured the selection of future places considered for nuclear testing sites from Maralinga, Australia, to Central Pennsylvania (Pilger 1989; Krygier 1998).

Of course, one difficulty with portraying Bikini as a deserted isle was that the Bikinians lived there. This fact, however, only necessitated a different strategy of representation. To show that the inhabited atoll was actually a nonplace, the atoll had to be portrayed as unhealthy and the people that inhabited the atoll had to be seen as removable. A U.S. Navy admiral proclaimed that “the atoll itself is unhealthy” because it “produces little food besides coconuts and fish” (W. Pratt 1946, 60). This comment served to delegitimize the existence of the Bikinians on the atoll and to suggest that the Bikinians would be better off somewhere else.

Early in 1946, the Bikinians were moved to nearby Rongerik Atoll (Figure 1). While the decision to use Bikini as a test site had already been made by the United States months earlier, representatives of the Navy, in front of newsreel cameras, made a ceremony of asking the Bikinians to leave their atoll. The Navy knew that the Bikinians had been Christianized in the early 1900s, and the military governor of the Marshalls persuaded the Bikinians to leave by comparing the Bikinians to the children of Israel (Kiste 1974, 27). According to anthropologist Leonard Mason (quoted in Niedenthal 1997, 30),

> In February of 1946, Commodore Ben H. Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshalls, traveled to Bikini and, in a Sunday after church, assembled the Bikinians to ask if they would be willing to leave their atoll temporarily so that the United States could begin testing atomic bombs for “the good of mankind and to end all world wars.” King Juda, then the leader of the Bikinian people, stood up after much confused and sorrowful deliberation among his people, and announced, “If the United States government and the scientists of the world want to use our island and atoll for furthering development, which with God’s blessing will result in kindness and benefit to all mankind, my people will be pleased to go elsewhere.”

The word that best describes the time between this decision and the actual relocation of the Bikinians is “spectacle.” A National Geographic article published in 1946 describes how the last month of the people on Bikini was one long staged photo opportunity for reporters and film makers.10 The final Bikinian church service was performed three times so cameras could get different angles, and the Bikinians were often repositioned for effect or to cover microphones. The articles and newsreels created from this period helped cement the idea in the imagination of the world that the Bikini Islanders were primitive, Christianized, loyal subjects, sacrificing themselves to the greater good of the United States.

The imagined cultural inferiority of the Bikinians and their supposed weak attachment to Bikini were used by the U.S. military as legitimization for their removal from their atoll. It is here that we see another place-myth
emerge regarding Bikini. Here, rather than a focus on its nonplace attributes, Bikini was represented as a marginalized place. Marginalization, as the word implies, suggests that Bikini was a place of some sort, but an antithetical one in comparison to what exists in the imagined center. Shields (1991, 276) contends,

To be “on the margin” has implied exclusion from “the center.” But social, political, and economic relations which bind peripheries to centers, keep them together in a series of binary relationships, rather than allowing disconnection. In this way, “margins” become signifiers of everything centers deny or repress; margins as “the other,” become the condition of possibility of all social and cultural entities.

The portrayal of Bikini and the Bikinians as the backward opposite of the progressive Americans is illustrated by the title of an article in the New York Times Magazine in 1946: “The Strange People from Bikini: Primitive they are, but they love one another and the American visitors who took their home” (Rooney 1946). The view of the Bikinians as “simple primitives” is echoed in a National Geographic article that opens, “About the middle of February, 1946, modern civilization suddenly overtook the natives of Bikini Atoll,” and closes with the thought, “Civilization and the Atomic Age had come to Bikini, and they [the Bikinians] had been in the way” (Markwith 1946, 97, 116). A newsreel informed American viewers about the Bikinians’ removal from their island by claiming, “The islanders are a nomadic group, and are well pleased that the Yanks are going to add a little variety to their lives” (quoted in Weisgall 1994, 162). Furthermore, many Americans involved with the tests viewed the removal of the Bikinians to nearby Rongerik Atoll as an even trade, if not an improvement in the condition of the Bikinians. In their imagination, the periphery was the periphery and an atoll was an atoll; E. J. Rooney, quoted at the beginning of this article, wrote, “Bikini and Rongerik look as alike as two Idaho potatoes” (Rooney 1946, 25).11

On Bikini, as in most places, one group’s imagined periphery is another group’s imagined center. As would be expected from a group of people with generations of experience in a place, most Bikinians held very different place-myths than the American military regarding both their home atoll and Rongerik Atoll where they were forced to relocate. Many Bikinians regarded Bikini Atoll as a homeland rich in resources, the site of their lived experiences, and a cultural landscape saturated with meanings, deities, and the graves of their ancestors (Niedenthal 2002). The traditional Bikininian stories regarding Rongerik, which is one-sixth the size of Bikini, portray it as a form of hell where a demon named Litobora left the fish, coconuts, and pandanus poisoned.

Two months after the Bikinians’ arrival on Rongerik, water and food supplies were found to be inadequate, and the people began requesting repatriation to Bikini (Time 1946). Their requests were largely ignored by the U.S. Navy. The navy was apparently unaware that the Bikinians were suffering from starvation and symptoms matching Ciguatera poisoning until anthropologist Leonard Mason visited the atoll in 1948 (Kiste 1985; Niedenthal 1997). At the urging of Mason, the U.S. government moved the Bikinians from Rongerik to a camp next to an airstrip on Kwajalein. A year later, they were moved to Kili Island (see Figure 1) in the southern Marshalls Islands (Kiste 1974). Kili is a single, isolated island, approximately 200 acres in size with no lagoon. It is approximately one-ninth of the land area of Bikini Atoll and over 1,000 Bikinians live there today. One Bikinian described Kili Island this way:

At Bikini, one could always go to another island, but here it’s always the same. Sleep, wake up, Kili. Sleep, wake up, Kili. Again, sleep, wake up, Kili. Kili is a prison.
—(quoted in Weisgall 1980, 83)

In 1946, Bikini Atoll was conceptualized in many different ways. While it is reasonably obvious that there is a clear divide between American and Bikinian conceptualizations of Bikini, setting up a dichotomy between the two is too simplistic. It should not be forgotten that there were differences in the way the atoll was conceptualized within each of these groups. Most notably, there was widespread disapproval in the United States over using Bikini as an atomic test site as well as lamentation on the part of Americans on Bikini that the atoll was going to be damaged by testing (Weisgall 1994). In the end, however, the conceptualization of Bikini as a marginal deserted isle enabled the U.S. military to legitimize the explosion not only of the initial two atomic bombs on Bikini in 1946, but of another twenty-one much larger hydrogen bomb blasts over the next twelve years.12

Radioactive Wasteland or Safe Home?

After the initial tests at Bikini, the island faded from the world’s consciousness, while the bathing suit that bears its name became the most popular connotation of the word. Introduced in 1946 by French designer, Louis Reard, the bikini bathing suit was named after the atoll due to the intense media attention that Bikini received during Operation Crossroads. Allegedly, the “effects
wrought by the scantily clad woman” in a bikini swimsuit were compared to the impact of the atomic bomb (Cameron 1970, 26) While the popularity of the swimsuit caused worldwide identification of the word “bikini” with the swimsuit and not the atoll, the atoll itself once again made news in the mid 1950s when the testing of hydrogen bombs expanded from nearby Enewetak Atoll to Bikini.

Of the twenty-one hydrogen bomb tests performed on Bikini from 1954 to 1958, test shot Bravo, on 1 March 1954, was the most destructive. A hydrogen bomb test over 750 times as explosive as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Bravo vaporized some of the islands on the northern rim of the atoll and left a large crater through the atoll reef. The pulverized bits of coral landed as fallout over the Pacific and on nearby Rongelap Atoll, and a radioactive wave washed over Bikini, “killing off all animal life except one hardy variety of rats” (Trumball 1982, 49). The damage from Bravo was so great that there are reports that the top American official in the Marshalls, Maynard Neas, warned Marshallese leaders, “If anyone breathes a word of this, they’ll be shot before sunrise” (Johnson 1980, 58).

There was also a human cost to the Bravo detonation. Many residents of Rongelap received massive doses of radiation from Bravo and have continued to have health problems, particularly thyroid abnormalities, to the present day (Simon 1997). The Rongelapese claim they were intentionally contaminated as part of a U.S. experiment. The Japanese fishing boat Fuku

Figure 3. Replanted palm trees on Bikini.

uryu Maru, which sailed into the area during the test, was also affected by fallout from Bravo. One person on board died from radiation poisoning, and the tuna the crew caught entered the market in Japan, creating a panic over “Bikini tuna” (Weideman 1954). The effects of the test were so significant that 1 March is now a national holiday in the Marshall Islands (Nuclear Victims’ Day).

In 1958, the last nuclear test occurred at Bikini, and in the 1960s, discourses about Bikini shifted from discussions of it as an ideal test site to discussions over how dangerous the atoll had become. Not only was the atoll radioactive, but it was littered with equipment and damaged facilities, and most of the coconut palms were gone (Diggs 1969). The U.S. government promised the Bikinians that after the atoll was declared safe, people could move back. The United States tried to make the atoll habitable by clearing off debris and planting close to 100,000 new palm trees in the high modernist style of eerily perfect rows across the island (Figure 3).

By the late 1960s, the U.S. government decided that the atoll was safe and repatriation could indeed begin. The scientific representations of Bikini had changed; one article referred to Bikini as a “renovated paradise” (MacDougall 1974). The Bikinian Council, the local government for the Bikinians, voted not to return due to distrust of the reports that the atoll was safe. They also said, though, that they would not prevent individuals from going on their own if they decided to go (Nedenthal 2002). In the early 1970s, some Bikinians went back to the atoll. Tommy McCraw, a scientist with the American government, went with the Bikinians and tried to convince the Bikinians the atoll was not radioactively hazardous. Life magazine reported on the Bikinians’ return, as well as their distrust:

Farther down the beach we came upon a single, stunted coconut palm bearing stunted fruit. Two Bikinians were already there and had harvested some of the nuts and cut them open. On our arrival they held them out and asked if they were safe to drink. “Sure,” said McCraw, “they’re good,” and he made a motion for them to drink. But they hesitated. One of them held his coconut out and made the same motion to McCraw. Laughing, he took the nut and drank from it till it was empty. The Bikinians laughed too and drank with confidence.

—(Mydans 1968, 33)

Five years later, medical doctors discovered that the bodies of the atoll’s residents had ten times the safe level of radioactive Cesium and four times the safe level of Strontium (Simon 1997). Scientists found the radioactive contamination resulted largely from eating the coconuts. In 1978, those living on Bikini were once again expelled from their atoll. A Bikinian said of the experience:

[W]e really didn’t have any worries until those scientists started talking about the island being poisoned again. . . .
We were so heartbroken that we did not know what to do. . . . We were sad, but we didn't want to make a problem for the Americans. If they say move, we move.

—(Pero Joel quoted in Niedenthal 2002, 72)

This tragic episode in Bikini’s history raises questions about the limits of the ability for discourses to remake places. While people are compelled to understand the material landscape only through the ways in which they conceptualize it, it is important to see the limits of any approach where conceptualizations and representations are viewed as driving place production completely separate from the material environment. As is painfully obvious, all the scientific discourse in the world could not wash the Cesium-137 out of the food chain or reconstitute the three vaporized islands. This is not, however, to say that the scientific discourses produced about Bikini did not enable social practices to produce a certain kind of place.

Just as the culturally biased proclamation of Admiral Pratt that the atoll was “unhealthy” in 1946 enabled certain uses of the atoll, the scientific declaration of “healthy,” however mistaken, allowed the repatriation of Bikini in the 1970s to take place. When new evidence—the contamination of the Bikinians—came to light, it was the change of designation of the healthfulness of the atoll that then drove the policy of removal. Once again, it was the conceptualizations of the atoll’s material attributes, in this case radioactive or not, that informed the uses of the atoll.

Understandably, the past experiences of the Bikinian community affect their decisions regarding repatriation today. At present, there are conflicting views regarding the safety of Bikini, and many Bikinians remain distrustful of scientific proclamations regarding the safety of the atoll (J. S. Davis 2005). During my discussions with members of the Bikinian community, people often expressed frustration over the mixed messages they had received from different scientific reports. In particular, there was a strong reaction when the Bikinians recently discovered that the U.S. EPA standard for radiation in the United States is 15 millirems above background level, while 100 millirems above background level is considered safe for the Marshall Islands (personal communication 2001). The existence of this double standard for radiation exposure, regardless of the scientific merits of the 100 millirem standard, has further eroded the Bikinians’ trust of scientific studies on safe levels of radiation.

The place-myth that has developed in the minds of many Bikinians and non-Bikinians is that Bikini is a contaminated place that ought to remain deserted. Currently, most people consider the atoll safe for short visits, but longer stays and eating local food resources are both too risky to be attempted. This designation, along with the material remnants in the landscape from nuclear testing and the worldwide name recognition of the atoll, has made possible a new conceptualization of Bikini based on the deserted-isle place-myth: tourist paradise.

The Production of a Postnuclear Paradise

In a neo-colonial process, it is often imagined that it is the right of the wealthy contemporary tourist to travel the world in search of difference—parts of the world are colonized by tourists (with their enclaves and colonies) and their distinctive tourist infrastructures and technologies.

—(Edensor 1998, 22)

Needless to say, the transformation of “a nuclear graveyard” into a tourist site that might generate revenues for the Bikinians seems both symbolically and materially bankrupt.

—(Teaiwa 2000, 109)

It is what you picture in your mind. . . . It’s a remote, beautiful South Pacific island. Beautiful beaches. There’s nothing to do. No television. No phones. It’s what you want it to be. We all wonder why the Bikinians aren’t here. It’s such a beautiful place.

—(Bikini Atoll tourist, 2002)

Tourism has been recognized as a category of practices that can privilege the needs and desires of nonlocal visitors, usually from wealthier countries, over the needs and desires of local people. Many geographers have shown that tourism produces “other-directed” landscapes that can sever the connection between local conceptualizations of place and the resulting fabric of the physical landscape and its associated social activities (Urry 1990; DeOliver 1996; Hoelscher 1998; Oakes 1999; Chang 2000; Cheong and Miller 2000; D’Arcus 2000). From this perspective, it would seem that tourism on Bikini, like military colonialism in the past, will lead to the Bikinians again being denied the ability to re-fashion Bikini Atoll according to their desires. Tourist conceptualizations of the atoll, however, are only one set of current imaginings for the atoll. Many Bikinians still view the atoll as a potential homeland. Also, the Bikinians may have an advantage over other tourism host groups in that they own and operate the resort themselves. The Bikinian experience with tourism highlights the fact that there are always multiple conceptualizations of a place and that the reproduction of place is a
complex weaving of conceptualizations, practices, and power.

In 1996, the Bikinian government started operation of their tourist resort on Bikini Atoll (Figures 4 and 5). The Bikinian government, which goes by the polylocal moniker of the Kili-Bikini-Ejit Council, is based on Majuro Atoll in the southern Marshall Islands and is composed of an elected council and mayor that represent Bikinians living on Kili Island, Ejit Island, and the rest of Majuro Atoll. The government-run resort on Bikini is over 400 miles from the population center on Majuro and, as one of its employees noted, is “modest on amenities and high on diving” (personal communication 2001).

Divers from around the world have converged on Bikini Atoll to stay in the simple hotel, stroll the white sand beaches, and dive among the wrecked warships that lie on the bottom of Bikini’s lagoon. The resort attracts high-dollar tourists who are qualified to do the deep and technical dives, many of which are over 55 m (175 ft) deep and involve swimming into the wrecks. In addition, the divers must do a series of decompression stops underwater where they breathe a special blend of air (Nitrox) before surfacing. The price for the week is US$2,700, not including the substantial airfare to get to Bikini. Most tourists stay on Bikini for one week and spend much of their time diving.

The ships on the bottom of Bikini Atoll’s lagoon have a history almost as varied as the atoll itself, with many dating to the World War II era. The most famous vessels are the battleship USS Arkansas, the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga, and the Japanese battleship HIJMS Nagato. The ships were sunk during the atomic tests in 1946 after which they were largely ignored. In the 1970s, they rated mention only as “numerous obstructions” on the charts of Bikini’s lagoon (Pincas 1975). In the 1980s, however, title to the ships was transferred to the Bikinians because they viewed the scrap metal as a possible source of income.

In 1989, the U.S. National Park Service’s Submerged Cultural Resources Unit performed a study to assess the tourism potential of Bikini Atoll. The research resulted in a text that catalogued the ships in the lagoon, described their condition, and recommended a plan of action to turn Bikini Atoll into a national park (Delgado, Lenihan, and Murphy 1991). The authors of the park service document wrote in excited prose about the historical importance of the sunken ships and the potential for a scuba-diving-oriented park.

While the national park status was never realized, the document fostered the idea that the sunken ships on Bikini were a tourism resource. The Bikinians sent a delegation to Las Vegas to review offers from private corporations, including Club Med, for the development of tourism on Bikini (J. Davis 1994). The Bikinians, however, opted to forego corporate involvement in order to maintain financial and aesthetic control over the operation. While they initially formed a partnership with a small diving company based out of Majuro Atoll in the Marshall Islands, the Bikinians now own and run the entire business. This strategy has been successful. The resort continues to attract tourists in increasing numbers, and in December of 2001, the Bikinian council distributed over $250,000 in profits in equal shares to every Bikinian man, woman, and child.

While higher profits for the entire community was a key factor in the Bikinians’ development strategy, other considerations also played a role. Initially, the Bikinians worried that an outside tourism company might allow

Figure 4. Gazebo on Bikini Island.

Figure 5. The lagoon beach on Bikini Island in front of tourist resort.
divers to scavenge pieces of the ships and other Bikinian artifacts from the age of nuclear testing, which are seen as cultural and economic resources (personal communication 2002). While it may seem odd to some that there is a concern for maintaining the “pristineness” of a set of decaying ships that have been underwater over fifty years after being pulverized by nuclear weapons, divers are attracted to Bikini because the wrecks have been preserved. A lawyer working with the Bikinians commented,

One of the most important issues was control. And the control was not so much the fiscal control as much as the cultural and diving control. We looked at Truk [a wreck diving site in the Federated States of Micronesia] and we saw how these once pristine ships had been stripped of all their instrument panels and virtually anything that is movable. And we realized that if we didn’t set this up the right way that was going to happen to Bikini. And we could sign a deal with the Acme diving company, but we wouldn’t be out there, we wouldn’t know what was going on. And clearly a diver slipping a $100 to a dive master would probably be able to take a tachometer off a plane, or a trinket off of something movable. And we felt that would be wrong. And we felt, OK if Bikini is going to open itself up to the public we wanted to keep it pristine.

—(personal communication 2002)

What may seem even more surprising is that the atoll itself is also spoken about in terms of its pristineness. The Web page for Bikini displays numerous quotes from diving and travel magazines referring to Bikini as “paradise,” “utopia,” “the Garden of Eden” and “unspoiled by development” (http://www.bikiniatoll.com). One of the divers who led diving tours on the atoll was quoted as saying, “The lure of the place is that for forty years nobody has been here” (Kristoff 1997b, 31). In another article, the same diver says, “This is a wilderness. This place hasn’t been touched in forty years” (Kristoff 1997a, A4). Of course, if the view into the past is expanded from forty years to sixty years, it may be one of the most “touched” places on the face of the planet. It is also interesting to note that the conceptualization of Bikini as untouched for forty years ignores the repatriation attempt in the 1970s, the periodic blasting for construction materials on the south end of the island, and the Department of Energy experiments on Bikini that involve scraping off large areas of soil, removing palm fronds, and pumping seawater through the soil. As one tourist said in regard to Bikini, “It’s kind of in a precarious balance between being undisturbed and completely disturbed (personal communication 2002). This quote could easily be dismissed as nonsense if it were not for the fact that I found this kind of portrayal of Bikini to be very common.

Whether the atoll is “really” pristine is less my concern than the fact that many people interacting with the atoll conceptualize it as pristine. What is important is that, increasingly, the place-myth of the pristine, deserted isle paradise has been applied to Bikini by travel writers and tourists visiting the atoll, even though most of these people know Bikini’s nuclear history.16 The fact that Bikini Atoll is now developing into a tourist attraction demonstrates the malleability of conceptualizations of place and their ability to be merged even when they are not complementary. As Shields (1991, 25) writes, “The meaning of particular places is a compendium of intersubjective and cultural interpretations over time. Thus a place may go from being considered a resort to being an industrial centre.” He further contends that in his research, “[i]mages and myths were found to have a complex historically-changing relationship with empirical facts and practices. In some cases images preserved past practices, in other cases they followed changing ‘realities’ strictly” (Shields 1991, 261).

Not only do these place-images and myths reinforce old practices or change with the practices, but the new images can come from the realm of discourse and inform new practices. It is not just that new conceptualizations of the atoll have come about from practices on the island, but rather that the practice of tourism on the island has been enabled by the reimagining of the place as a tourism attraction. Discursively, the Bikinian government has been able to unlink Bikini from the image of contamination (even though, as discussed above, the safety of the atoll is still an issue of intense debate) and successfully link Bikini Atoll to place-images about tropical paradises on deserted isles that have been circulating in Western civilization for centuries (Howe 2000).

Like many other tourist places, however, the deserted isle place-myth is one of several for the atoll, and it is a directed one. These images of Bikini as a tourists’ paradise are primarily disseminated through the Bikinians’ Web site and through articles in tourism magazines. As shown above, there are still many inside and outside the Bikinian community who regard the atoll as a contaminated place. The Bikinian government also continues to promote the image of Bikini as a contaminated place to the U.S. government during negotiations for more clean-up money.

Another major place-myth prevalent in the Bikinian community is of Bikini as a lost homeland with intense cultural significance. While some in the community may never be convinced Bikini will be safe enough for repatriation, a substantial number of people believe it is safe
enough now or that it can be made so soon. One official in the Marshalls stated,

If you ask somebody [Bikinian], even if they are living in Arkansas or New York, if you ask them where their place is they'll tell you it's Bikini. In their belief that was given to them by God and they have a particular piece of land up there or maybe several where that is what they belong to. So maybe you wouldn't see 3100 people move up there tomorrow but at one point or another, most of those people would go back and at least visit if they had the opportunity.

—(personal communication 2002)

Delving more deeply into Bikinian representations of Bikini and Kili Island, I found that, unlike some groups living in exile (Malkki 1995), the Bikinians have maintained a very strong sense of collective identity based on their shared historical narrative of dispossession, their collective confinement to formerly uninhabited (or very sparsely inhabited) islands, and their political defiance of the traditional paramount chiefs (Iroij) of the Marshall Islands that dates back to before 1946.

While they have maintained a coherent ethnic identity, the Bikinian way of life has been influenced by the inclusion of the Marshall Islands in the world economic and cultural system. Bikinians on both Kili and Ejit have access to consumer products such as cars, canned food, televisions, and other imported goods. In fact, because subsistence is extremely difficult on the single island of Kili, the Bikinians have become almost totally dependent on imported goods. To many Bikinians on tiny Kili and Ejit islands, Bikini is seen as a homeland with a greater amount of land, an abundance of sea life, and a variety of edible plants. Like the tourists and travel writers, many Bikinians refer to Bikini as paradise. There is a clear difference, however, in the kind of place that is imagined under the label of paradise. While both the Bikinians and tourists use “paradise” to denote an Edenic place of origin, to the tourists, Bikini is represented as a generic, deserted, tropical island. It is a purely symbolic site and, as Tim Edensor notes in his discussions of other tourist attractions, “symbolic sites are represented as synecdoches or metaphors for larger spaces” (Edensor 1998, 19). For tourists, Bikini is a paradise in comparison to the everyday spaces of their lives in industrialized countries. Conversely, the Bikinian conceptualization of Bikini as a paradise is rooted in a historical experience on the atoll that is compared to a life of forced migration to a small island almost universally referred to as “the prison.” As one Bikinian said, they think of their Bikini [compared] to Kili. Kili is a single island and they live here [on Bikini] before, the old people. And I think that’s why they say that Bikini is paradise. . . . Like it is easy for them to go fishing and it’s easy for them to go on the other islands, not like Kili. . . . Majuro is good, but it’s kind of a lot of people over there. And I think that when they were here everybody share what they had and their life here was really easy for everybody. That’s why they say some of the people they always think about the past, what they were on Bikini.

—(personal communication 2002)

This quote emphasizes the political nature of Bikinian representations of Kili and Bikini to me as a researcher from the United States. It would be foolish to think that representations of Kili and Bikini presented to me were not also directed and political. This is not to say that the Bikinian representations to me were disingenuous, but rather that they must be examined in the context of the ethnographic encounter. Henry Barnard, reflecting on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, noted, “Reflexivity is not achieved by the use of the first person or by the expedient of constructing a text which situates the observer in the act of observation. Rather, it is achieved by subjecting the position of the observer to the same critical analysis as that of the constructed object at hand” (Barnard 1990, emphasis in the original). It is important to note that, as my stay in the Marshall Islands lengthened, there appeared to be a change in the narratives I was told about the desirability of Bikini. There appears to be a “stock narrative” about the desirability of Bikini versus Kili or Majuro that is told first to visitors, and that is then followed by comments that a life on Bikini might feel isolated and a bit boring (especially among younger respondents who have never lived on Bikini).

While it is unclear when repatriation will happen, and just how many Bikinians will establish their primary residences on the atoll, it seems likely that it will occur someday. When the return occurs, it is likely that the “contaminated place” conceptualization of Bikini will largely be overcome. But how will the two competing place-myths of homeland and the deserted-isle, paradise mix? The kinds of social practices encouraged by these visions of place may not be compatible on a small island. In my research, many tourists stated that they believe the return of Bikinians would detract from the tourism experience. One tourist stated that she believed the repatriation of the Bikinians would “ruin Bikini.” She said, “Well it’s going to be a shanty town about like it is out here [in Majuro]. It would look like Tijiana I think. It would change it quite a bit” (personal communication 2002). Some tourists did support the idea of the Bikinians moving back under certain conditions. Many
tourists brought up the idea that the Bikinians could live separated from the tourists but close enough so that tourists could interact with them in a sort of cultural-tourism type of interaction where they could experience, briefly, “island life” and buy crafts.

Others were also skeptical about how tourist social practices and Bikinian social practices would coexist on Bikini. One Marshallese worker at the tourism operation said,

I think it’s better if they [Bikinians] don’t come here when there are customers on the island. Because once they are here they do lots of stuff, like if they want to go fish or they want to go birds—killing birds, or something like that, or eating the turtles. They can do it in front of the customers, and that’s one thing I’m afraid of.

—(personal communication 2002)

Conversely, some Bikinians have concerns about how they might be offended by tourist practices. In a twist of incredible irony, tourists wearing the bathing suit named after the atoll are considered by many Bikinians to be culturally inappropriate. One Bikinian man working at the tourism enterprise said,

Our custom, that’s the problem. Like right now, no family, no Bikinians stay with us right now. [When they are here] the custom is really different. They [the tourists] can not just wear the bikini [bathing suit]. It [would] really destroy our custom.

—(personal communication 2002)

Most of the tourists, tourism managers, and Bikinians I spoke with believe that the best solution is to keep the tourists separated from a repatriated Bikinian community. There are many different ideas on how to do this, ranging from having both on different parts of Bikini Island, to having the tourists or the Bikinians on another island of the atoll.

It appears that the deserted-isle, paradise place-myth, and the homeland place-myth may encourage practices and alterations to the material landscape that will be difficult to reconcile in the same place. The Bikinian government and tourism managers, who are interested in continuing to generate income from the tourist operation, seem willing to explore the idea of separating the tourists and local inhabitants when repatriation occurs. In this way, the Bikinians would attempt to minimize conflicts by encouraging the existence of both the homeland and deserted-isle, paradise place-myths of the whole atoll while constraining the practices associated with each imagining to finer-scale spaces within the place.

Given that the Bikinians own their tourist operation, the institutional control over tourism practices should allow them more choice over how tourism will shape their atoll in the years to come; however, if the Bikinians hope to keep attracting tourists they will have to reproduce the atoll, or at least parts of it, in a fashion that is in symmetry with tourists’ conceptualizations of what a vacation paradise should be. If the Bikinians want to compete with other dive operations in a global tourism marketplace, external pressures will have to be considered even if governmental control over the atoll and tourist operation remains local.

While the Bikinians have so far been successful in attracting tourists, it seems there may be dangers in promoting their atoll as a place that fits Western conceptualizations of the deserted isle. For example, as I have already discussed, many tourists are not supportive of the idea of having local inhabitants in their spaces (and vice versa). While the income from tourism may be welcomed, the potential social problems associated with tourism need to be considered. Researchers of tourism have documented that while tourism may bring needed income into local economies, it can also negatively affect local places by spawning corruption, prostitution, dispossession of land, erosion of traditional cultures, environmental degradation and greater income inequality (Doxey 1976; Erisman 1983; E. Cohen 1988; Dogan 1989; Urry 1990; Britton 1991; King, Pizam, and Milman 1993; C. Hall 1994; Pearce 1994; Simpson and Wall 1999; Chang 2000; Holden 2000).

**Contested Meanings and the Politics of Place**

I want to recover a less essential notion of place not necessarily allied with the geopolitics of resistance but as an unstable terrain which in fact problematizes not only hegemony and domination, but resistance as well.

—(Oakes 1997, 525)

Representations of Bikini demonstrate the many different conceptualizations of the atoll through time. In addition, this article is itself another representation, one that conceptualizes the atoll, through academic discourses, selective interviews, and my personal experiences, as a contested place with multiple, fluid interpretations. There is not one true way of seeing the atoll, but people considering the atoll today may see it as a radioactive place to be feared, a place ravaged by a succession of neocolonialist practices, a tourism paradise, a lost homeland with plentiful resources, or a combination of these perspectives. After all, which is the true representation of Bikini? The one made by a seventy-year-old Bikinian man who once lived there, or a thirty-year-old male tourist, or the workers who operate the tourist resort, or the U.S. Department of Energy, or an
academic author, or a travel writer, or the mayor of Bikini, or a fifteen-year-old Bikinian woman born on Kili Island?

While some may disagree as to which of the above is the “correct” essential nature of Bikini Atoll, the analysis of place as a discursive-material formation I put forward holds that there is no essential nature to the place. Rather, there are multiple place-myths of Bikini based on a plurality of readings of the atoll. Each place-myth is based on a select subset of the atoll’s attributes, formed by the relationship between the observed physical site and the way that past experiences with the world predispose the observer to find meaning in places. These imaginings of what a place is, and should be, are then used to construct representations that aim to legitimize certain rules that govern activities in the place as well as modifications to the physical and built environment.

While the analysis of the mechanisms for place production outlined in this project is useful for studying the ways that places are reproduced and contested, there are three implications, two analytical and one political, that need to be discussed further. First, my choice to characterize Bikini as an indivisible place rather than as a partitional space has ramifications for the way that conflict resolution can be theorized. By choosing to analyze Bikini Atoll as a place, I have chosen to emphasize it as a singular and undivisible space. The reason for making this choice is that this is the way most people imagine it. The respondents in my study place a label on it that applies to the whole atoll. For the most part, the whole atoll is characterized as a paradise, contaminated place, or homeland. I have, in many ways, “followed my data” and portrayed it as a singular place as well. As is evident in my discussion of conflicts between tourist uses and homeland uses, however, Bikini Atoll can be seen as a dividable space where tourists are relegated to part of the atoll and Bikinians to another part. The solutions to resolving future disagreements may depend on people’s ability to see the atoll as a space rather than as an indivisible place.

Great care also needs to be taken to emphasize that power exists not only when the imagined landscape is made real, but also when the real landscape is made imagined (Figure 2). All of the different place-myths discussed in this article are influenced by the ability different actors have to link them to other representations of place and the power some groups have to mobilize certain representations and disseminate them. As is obvious from this history of Bikini, some groups have had a much greater ability to produce representations of the atoll. In 1946, the U.S. military had the power to physically force the Bikinians off their atoll and explode nuclear weapons there, but they also had the power to legitimate it through the labeling of the atoll as a “deserted isle” and the labeling of the Bikinian people as “primitive” and “nomadic.” Today, tourist representations of the atoll have come to dominate through the dissemination of a re-imagined conceptualization of the deserted isle of Bikini as a tropical paradise open for foreign visitation. In both 1946 and today, the view of the atoll as a homeland struggles to compete against these more popular representations.

Third, by arguing against the idea of “correct” and “incorrect” views of place, I run a risk of undermining anticolonial political projects. Rather than delegitimize the political claims for place governance espoused by colonized and exploited people by claiming that their views of place are merely one among many, an analysis of the mechanisms of place reproduction can lead not just to a theory of resistance but to tactics of resistance. I believe that there is political benefit in understanding that there are always multiple views of a place by different individuals and that those views can be changed through institutional control over the place (sovereignty). This, though, is only one way to change places. Places are subject in many ways to economic, cultural, and political forces emanating from far outside the official boundaries of political control.

There are also ways to gain institutional control through discursive campaigns that serve to legitimize subaltern representations of what a place “is.” Being able to demonstrate that the currently hegemonic view of a place is historically contingent, political, exploitative, and dependent on its being seen by people as legitimate can be a powerful starting point for a group that lacks economic, political, and institutional power due to years of exploitation. Tactically, in any contest over place, to say that your view of place is right and another group’s view of a place is wrong is only the start. It is imperative to understand how other groups have discursively constructed and imagined the place, how they have marshaled adherents to their views, and how they have gained the ability to inscribe their views in the material landscape. It is important to consider these discursive-material mechanisms of place reproduction in order to influence them for political ends.

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Notes

1. The vast majority of the interviews were tape recorded, although a few were done with only written notes. I transcribed the recorded interviews and then coded and analyzed the responses using “AtlasTI” computer software. While many other people were consulted casually during my two stays in the Marshall Islands, a total eighty-eight people were officially interviewed. Most interviews were conducted in English, except for some that were done in Marshallese with the assistance of a local translator. Most interviews were done one-to-one, but some interviews, particularly those with tourists, were conducted in small groups.

2. See Web site at http://www.bikiniatoll.com

3. This was done through a review of the Reader’s Guide to Periodic Literature. The periodicals that commonly contained accounts of Bikini included Life, US News and World Report, New York Times Magazine, National Geographic, Newsweek, and others.

4. As noted, there is a strong tendency in Soja’s work, as well as in writings by Edward Casey, David Harvey, and other theorists, to portray different kinds of spaces as more abstract (or “thin,” or “placeless”) than other spaces more infused with a sense of place. These abstract spaces appear to be tied to domination by the bourgeoisie or an outsider authority. Two strong critiques of this tendency have been offered by feminist theorists as well as by researchers examining spaces of consumption. Doreen Massey and other feminists claim the perspective of abstract and lived is generated from the very narrow viewpoint of privileged males who have historically enjoyed the ability to control spaces and easily cross the boundaries between different social spaces. See, for example, Massey (1991). The feminist critique that spaces must be viewed (and categorized) from multiple perspectives based on the varied experiences of space by gendered individuals undermines the idea that spaces can be viewed and categorized according to simple binaries (or even “trinaries”). Furthermore, the work of Jon Goss and others has further eroded the distinction between abstract and lived space by demonstrating how people find a wealth of meanings even within the most contrived and capitalist controlled spaces (MacCannell 1976; Goss 1993, 1999; Gortdener 1997).

5. See also Bourdieu (1977).

6. The Pacific is, however, not the only place where places are subjected to these traveling place-myths. For example, see Shields (1991) for discussions of the Canadian “North,” and Watt and Head’s (2002) discussion of the Kimberley Mountains in Australia.

7. The publicity, photographs, and film accounts of the tests also served the domestic political purposes of normalizing atomic testing and militarization. See Kirsch (1997).

8. For a complete listing of the ships sunk at Bikini, and the whereabouts of the ships that survived, see Delgado, Lenihan, and Murphy (1991); Delgado (1996); and Niedenthal (2002).

9. This is the portrayal of the Marshall Islands used on a mural in the airport on Kwajalein Atoll.

10. See, for example, the National Geographic article on Bikini in 1946 (Markwith 1946). The documentary film Radio Bikini, produced by Robert Stone in 1988 (nominated for an Academy Award), also shows in vivid detail how the military’s meetings with the Bikinians were staged and reshot numerous times.

11. “Juda” refers to the Bikinians’ Iroij (leader) in 1946.

12. While the two American portrayals of Bikini as a nonplace and as a marginalized place may not necessarily be logically consistent, they were used in a complementary manner to conceptualize Bikini as an experimental space. This effectively legitimized the use of atomic weapons at Bikini.

13. For a more detailed discussion of the connections between the bathing suit and Bikini Atoll as well as a theoretical analysis of the similar marginalization and exoticizing of women’s bodies and Bikinians, see Teiwa (2000).

14. The Nagato was formerly Japanese Admiral Yamamoto’s flagship, from which the attack on Pearl Harbor was commanded. The other major ships in Bikini’s lagoon include the destroyer USS Anderson, submarine USS Apogon, destroyer USS Lamson, merchant vessel USS Carlisle, submarine USS Pilotfish, and the Japanese warship HIJMS Sakawa.

15. Bikini is not the only former bombing range to be considered as a possible national park. See also Misrach (1990).

16. Interestingly, Bikini is not really what could be categorized as a site of “dark tourism” (see, e.g., Lippard 1999). While tourists like to dive around the wrecked ships, the divers I interviewed displayed much less interest in the tragedy of the nuclear testing than in the military histories of the ships themselves.

17. This follows from the idea that if the Bikinian government gives the go-ahead for repatriation, it will likely be because the atoll is no longer viewed as contaminated. There is, however, a spatial component to the contamination. It is possible that the Bikinians could return to some of the southern islands of the atoll while contamination remained a problem for the northern islands. The Bikinian government has repeatedly stressed, though, that there will be no return until they can have unrestricted use of the entire atoll.

References


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