

Place/no place: The Jewish Diaspora in the Early 21st Century

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Abstract

It was on an artist residency in 2012 on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana, U.S.A. that I began to fully embody the experience of having no place to which I belonged. Despite years of soul searching and political activism challenging the cultural heritage of Israel/Palestine as the Jewish home/land, it was the Cheyenne's sense of oneness with their ancestral lands that provoked in me an exquisite sense of attunement to "place". And correspondingly, my connection to "no place". As a second generation North American Jewish woman from Queens, New York City, U.S.A. whose Jewish grandparents fled pogroms in Eastern Europe, this embodiment of "no place" led to deep grief and mourning. As part of our cultural heritage as eastern European Jews who had escaped anti-Semitic violence, we embraced Israel/Palestine as our ancestral home/land. Yet my refusal to accept that view—to be landless—was only amplified by my experience on the reservation. Approaching 60 years old, I find myself in flux about what it means to be from a refugee family and being in the Jewish Diaspora. It is this phenomena - the shifting over time of one's understanding and performance of cultural heritage that I will discuss in my paper.

In this auto/ethnographic paper, drawing from Judith Butler's work on mourning, politics and violence I will consider the socio-political circumstances that provoke changes in and performance of cultural heritage. I will discuss how the global refugee crisis and the impending U.S. presidential election urges the reassessment of cultural heritage. Finally, I will suggest alternative conceptualizations of the relationship to land/place of Jewish people - an ethnic/religious culture who have historically been forced to "wander."