

Performing Auschwitz: Situating Community in a Diasporic Mourning Practice

Author(s): Melina Baum Singer, University of Western Ontario

In the last twenty years, a great number of Jews are re-establishing European locations of memory in public and collective ways. These visits are performed by not only survivors of the European Jewish Holocaust, but also second and third generations of Jews who were born after traumatic dislocation. The locations of return are increasingly not cities or towns, but concentration and death camps and their on-site archives. Auschwitz has become the infamous signifier for the Holocaust as well as for the Jewish communities that existed before the War. Consequently, it has become the locus for Jewish return visits to Europe. In the past, individual or familial visits characterized the experience as private, but increasingly Jews are taking part in organized programs or tours that structure the experience as a collective and experiential journey.

My research focuses on the first part of an annual two-week journey called *March of the Living* where Jewish teenagers from around the world come together to visit three concentration camps in Poland. Although the iconography gleaned from the camps' educational displays arguably plays a role in structuring the participants' experience, the journey culminates with a performative encounter with the past. On 25 April, Holocaust Remembrance Day, the participants retrace the three-kilometre distance separating Auschwitz from Birkenau where the Nazis forced hundreds of thousands of Jews and other so-called undesirables to march to their death. As a scholar of Canadian Literature and Culture with a broad interest in understanding how the past is understood, I asked myself three interrelated questions of the experience: What kind of community is being formed? How, if at all, do globalizing processes influence the participants' experience? Does the march confirm or contest their autonomy?

Drawing on official printed material and the program's website, I theorize the encounter as materializing a mourning practice for a lost community, an encounter that ostensibly re-establishes community but in a new form. The march implicitly situates itself as a diasporic return, a return to the past and to a past home. Through dramatizing the past, the march recalls the largest rediasporization or displacement of European Jews and the historical conditions under which it took place. In so doing, it makes an important intervention in the understanding of Jewish diasporic formation as it memorializes the genocide of European Jews rather than the original dispersion of Jews from Judea that typically grounds definitions of Jewish Diaspora. The type of community formation created on the march responds to the transmission of a cultural trauma — the transgenerational affects of the Holocaust.

I understand globalizing processes as having a two-part effect on the participants' experience on the march: they both enable a new type of community formation to emerge and play a role in structuring the experience of Auschwitz as familiar. The productive and emancipatory roles Arjun Appadurai believes the imagination can play under globalization is central to how the process of dramatizing enables the participants to shape their own understanding of the encounter itself. In contrast to traditional methods of memorializing the past, which solidify the autonomy between self and other, individual and community, and present and past, the act of dramatizing creates a fluid space between

these binaries and provides a role for the participants' imagination in the process itself. This understanding of the march extends the encounter beyond the acquisition of knowledge to one where the imaginative process generates a politic through community formation. The insistence on repeating traumatic past events not only makes visible the specific place as a site of genocide, not to be forgotten, but also demarcates Auschwitz and by extension Europe as a place where Jews belong and claim as a broad homeland. As a diasporic return home, the march contests the largely successful erasure of Jewish presence in Europe by the recurrent presence of a community of returnees. The march materializes a creative practice that responds to the cultural trauma of the Holocaust and articulates a desire for a collective public space where the practice of mourning can take place.

Although the encounter on the march itself and the material reality of Auschwitz impart feelings of horror, the participants also approach the experience as one of the most familiar moments in recent collective Jewish public memory. I found that its familiarity has arisen due not only to the shock and horror of learning the experience of European Jewry, but also significantly to the consequence of large-scale globalizing processes. By creating a form of collectivity based on the immediacy of creative practice, the march combats globalizing processes' subtle reification of the Holocaust. Through emphasizing the importance of remembering the specificities of a cultural trauma, the participants, then, are able to move from the Holocaust to an awareness of other sites and experiences of genocide, war, and collective pain.

The March reminds Jews of a particular history and of their autonomy as a community, while also claiming Auschwitz as a global home, a place where transnational solidarities may be felt but in non-exclusive ways that do not deny other forms of identity that each individual brings to the site and to the experience. The march's encounter with the past also raises the question that if home and by extension community are desirable forms of social relations maybe they are not solely spatially located in territory or temporally located in a specific moment. Rather, through these means of conceptualizing the social, the significant work the march produces is bringing people together politically, a bringing together with the aim of imagining a form of community whose commonness arises in the extension of private rituals of grief and mourning to the public space and whose ultimate goal is to prevent the recurrence of future tragedies.