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Literature Fellows Seminar
Professor Mann
10 May 2020

On Jewish Summer Camp and the Importance of Material Place

Summer camps hang in the balance, as many Jewish American youth and young adults find themselves scrambling to find language that adequately expresses the significance of these plots of land with bugs and rust and bad food. The creative allowances of the graphic essay helped me begin to express why camp is precious to me. The essay features photos, drawings, and a personal element that my writing could never genuinely articulate. In reflecting on audience, I came to the conclusion that actually, it's for me. If it communicates to readers the value of Jewish summer camp or why the physical space is special, I'd be elated, but the essay is in fact a meditation on an experience that belongs to me. Furthermore, my essay tries to capture and honor the Jewishness of camp, which is its primary identifier.

The central question of the essay, which until the penultimate page is largely implicit, is what is camp without material place? Can the "magic" of camp be replicated outside of the camp setting? Throughout the creation of my project, I decided that places, similar to objects, can be important to us, and it is okay to miss them. In the face of the global pandemic, *it's okay for American Jews to mourn camp like it's a person*.

I used this project as a therapeutic opportunity, which is partially why it is scrapbook adjacent. I initially planned to use comic-style stills, but quickly realized I could not articulate my thoughts in a linear way, plus it would not do justice to the chaotic energy at camp. So, I borrowed from Krug's style in *Belonging*. Additionally, it tries to emulate camp in the sense that it is both childish and personal, and I attempt a summer camp aesthetic. Being drawing-challenged worked in my favor here in retaining a youthful energy. Similarly, I used stickers and washi tape as a means of achieving that youth. The marble paper is reminiscent of tie-dye, which is both classic camp attire and a beloved activity. Finally, the essay is colorful because color enlivens and invigorates the art, lending a camp-like magic. The only supply I didn't have and wished I did was glitter, which would really help me show the wonder and other-worldliness I struggle to explain.

Judaism distinguishes Jewish summer camps from other American camps. Full Jewish immersion and primarily experiential education separates Jewish summer camp from other forms of Jewish education. The essay hardly translates the interspersed Hebrew and reads right to left as part of a desire to relay how at camp, Jewishness is a given. Judaism, as proven in quarantine, is a largely in person, physical activity. It also revolves around things. On the Shabbat page, for example, the objects drawn reflect how Jewish life mandates physical proximity. The pages on prayer and Jewish education at camp also show how camp is a classroom and objects are tools of learning and connection. The Judaism that makes camp what it is does not exist without camp; they are deeply entangled.

Most people will say that camp is special because of the people, which is true. However, camp is also about the place, an isolated paradise. My essay contains drawings of places as objects and objects that are common at camp. The drawings are not decorative, but mean to depict the importance of stuff to place. The essay isn't just about a place or experience, but about the material things that make camp unique. Instead of saying "I love my campers," which is true, I included texts and excerpts from notes my campers have written to me, to show that the connections created in the material space last beyond and transcend actually being there. Some might dismiss this point as materialistic. But a respect for and value of material culture is not inherently materialistic; frankly, we should investigate why we think materialism is always a bad thing. Materials are tools to create meaning and connection among people. The essay is a physical object trying to talk about a physical place and the sanctity therein. Behind the object is me and similarly, behind camp is also a community and a team of intentional educators building a perfect place for Jewish children.

My graphic essay is not exclusively a love letter to camp, though it certainly is also that. It's quietly and subtly subservive, saying that place, space, and physicality are crucial to the nature and success of camp. The second to last page is a provocation and actually, really the point of the project entirely. Part of loving the people and the community we create around our camps is loving the place. I take seriously how important physical spaces can be, especially for children.

Hi Professor Mann,

I attached my graphic essay and my reflection paper. I have to apologize for the weak scan-- the scanner attached to our printer is broken. If there is something you cannot read even when zoomed in, please let me know and I will send you a picture of it up close. I also hope it's okay that I didn't engage explicitly with the readings so much; I had a hard time keeping down my word count.

Thank you so much for an excellent course. I thoroughly enjoyed it, even when we had to move to zoom. I must admit to having been very doubtful of the importance of material things, but the course has truly changed my thinking. I am also very appreciative of your feedback, both in the classroom and on assignments. I am taking a gap year, but then will be returning to JTS for Rabbinical School and hope to see you around and get to learn together then.

Best,
Noa