

Contemplating Place in Nursing: Ontological Understandings

Erica Samms Hurley, Keith King, Margot Jackson, & Vera Caine

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Abstract

How nurses understand and integrate their understanding of place is important to nursing practice. In this paper, we explore the concept of place in relation to our varied backgrounds, with the understanding that this concept differs from one person to another depending on their experiences. By coming together to talk about place, and the intersections between our common circumstances, interests, and beliefs, we share and discuss the realm of place as home, as relationship(s), as memory. Each of our unique and distinct identities—Mi'kmaw, Métis, Jewish, and newcomer to Canada—brought varied perspectives on how place is integrated into our lives and our work as nurses. When we pay close attention, we can begin to understand that nursing research, practice, and education are intertwined with place. Along with spirit and healing, these factors have implications in our health and wellbeing.

Author Info

Erica Samms Hurley, Faculty of Nursing, Memorial University of Newfoundland
Keith King, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta
Margot Jackson, Faculty of Nursing, MacEwan University
Vera Caine, School of Nursing, University of Alberta, Email: vcaine@uvic.ca

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Contemplating Place: An Ontological Understanding

Over the past year, our group came together at regular intervals to talk about what matters to us personally and as nurses. All four of us have many years of nursing experience either in acute care or community settings, or in academia. It was during our conversations that we noticed how each of us kept returning to ideas and understandings of place. We did not intend to come together to discuss the connections between nursing and place, but rather this focus on place evolved organically. Geographically, our stories were linked to the places we found ourselves while having conversations; during which, we often recognized the lands we were on and their First Peoples. What unfolded was

a meaningful exchange of ideas, wherein all of us felt the urgency to re-think place, and how future responses in nursing might consider the significance of place.

Keith: Thinking about the recent events - the unearthing of the death and bodies of Indigenous children across Canada located at residential schools - I have been thinking about how much place holds memories, silences, and injustices.

Vera: This sense of unearthing Keith that you talk about has a notion of revealing and exposing. It calls us to take responsibility. Yet, it too makes me think about the notion of displacement . . .

Erica: . . . displaced purposefully to cause harm. I am acutely aware that places not only hold the bodies of children, but they also hold acts of harm. Harm that continues to shape intergenerational stories of Indigenous peoples - harm that was caused by displacement and by being denied access to place(s) and relationships that are considered our home.

Margot: Until recently, I understood place as grounding, as a way to recognize what was meaningful to people. In the past I used to think about how a place holds the possibilities to feel at home, the possibility to recognize and celebrate connections.

Keith: It is interesting Margot, as I think with the sense of place you are describing. For a long time, questions like ‘where are you from?’ or ‘where do you want to be buried?’ seemed easy for me to ask, and also answer. It is only in the last few years that this sense has been disrupted for me in profound ways - these questions now are not only complex, but also complicated. These questions have helped shape my thinking about and with place.

In this paper, we outline a relational practice, which looks like connecting the practice of nursing’s relationship with health back to the ontological roots of place. Equally, it looks like place being central to health and healing. We begin this paper with fragments of one of our conversations—fragments that we will further contemplate later on. While we each carry distinct identities, which include being Mi’kmaw (Erica), Métis (Keith), Jewish (Margot), and a newcomer to what is now called ‘Canada’ (Vera), we also all come to this work as nurses. In the later part of this paper, we begin to explore how we might take up ideas of place in nursing. We make visible that place plays a central idea in healing, health, and wellbeing.

We are particularly focused on place in this paper, and understand that “[p]lace is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning” (Tuan, 1979, p. 387). We turn to our own experiences as sites of knowledge and knowing. In this way it becomes visible that place is embodied and calls forth particular experiences. At the same time, we know that our experiences are shaped by the “world conditions of exile, displacement, diasporas, and-inflamed orders, to say nothing of increasingly tumultuous struggles by indigenous peoples and cultural minorities for ancestral homelands, land rights, and retention of sacred places” (Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 5). As we inquired into our experiences and made visible the complexities we each live in relation to place (Clandinin, 2013), we recognised that all of us were shaped by feminist pragmatist ideas (Addams, 1902).

Place as Home: Place as intertwined with Spirit, Healing and Belonging

It is Erica who helps us see place not only as home, but also as intertwined with spirit. Place in this way is connected with our bodies, with who we are, and with who we are becoming.

Mi'kma'ki. The territory and traditional homelands of the Mi'kmaq. My home. My nation. I was raised on the west coast of Newfoundland where I now raise my children. There was a time where I thought I might leave my home, mostly due to the idea that other places could offer better jobs, more money, and more happiness. However, my dad would keep me grounded by saying: 'There are other places and you may always chase after more money but none of that is better than being home'.

With the words of Erica's dad in mind, we begin to wonder about the connection between place and home. Are the ideas of place and home tied to happiness? What creates a sense of having to move? What pushes us to move? What holds us in place? It is Feld and Basso (1996) who help us think about these experiences in terms of rootedness, uprootedness, or transrootedness. Erica continues:

I left my mother's womb and entered into the physical world in Mississauga, Ontario. My parents moved from the island to pursue jobs and what they were told was important. However, it was in Ontario that my father quickly realized that he could not live away from his homelands, away from family, from the lands of his ancestral roots. The disconnect he felt was sickening. I only lived in Ontario a few months before my parents sold everything and moved back to Newfoundland. My children were shocked when they found out that I was not born here, perhaps due to the fact that I have always referred to the island as home. I never thought too much about this until I started to travel and every time I left I longed to come back. This longing and need to be in my place allows for a feeling of deep personal ancestral connection.

Here, we see the ties to place across generations. The stories of Erica's dad reverberate and carry forward in Erica. The longing to return home can be profound and shape how our lives unfold, and also gives us purpose. The land embraces who we are, and perhaps it calls us back each time we leave. Yet, there are times when staying in place becomes difficult:

My mother's father did not want to go to the hospital for palliative care and she cared for him at home; he and my grandmother lived next door to our house. Next door to their house lived my great grandparents. His strong desire to stay rooted at home and my mother's willingness to give whatever she could to make that happen shaped how I see my connection to the place. Through watching them, I began to understand that health and healing was more about an individual's place and family, than any one act of care he would receive in institutional settings that were located far from the place that mattered to my grandfather.

As Erica tells the stories of her grandparent, we fall silent and are called to think about our practices as nurses, and as people who care for and with others. Yet, Erica's story offers us something more—it makes visible that even the most attentive care cannot provide healing and well-being if the spirit is sick. The spirit is connected to place; it provides depth and meaning, it calls us back often, and it holds the stories of who we are, have been, and are becoming. This connection also provides grounding for ceremonies. The physical notion of connection, either to geographical place

or to a physical being, is discussed within the literature (Cummins et al., 2007; Carolan, Andrews, & Hodnett, 2005), yet there is a need to expand nursing to encompass the link between spirit and place:

I thought I was attuned to the idea that place and spirit were deeply intertwined, because I grew up with teachings and knowledge. However, it was not until my first fast that I realized that I was mainly processing information cognitively, through colonial constructs of thought. It was by being in place that I began to attend differently. I recall writing the following note to myself after reflection upon my fast:

As I emerge from the tent, I feel a cold drop of dew run down the back of my neck, which had fallen from the tent most likely. It sends a prickling sensation up and down my neck and I shiver slightly. The cool morning air engulfs me like a familiar embrace and the sounds of the birds are in the air. I can feel those who visited me yesterday are with me still and this type of happiness mixed with contentment is something I never experienced before. I look down at the pinecones left at my tent door and smile.

How does one know when a place provides comfort, security, and connection? As we can see, when Erica experiences her first fast and has ancestors/family visit her, who she is begins to shift. The ceremony was an eye-opening experience and created a deeper understanding for Erica about her connections to place. It is a place that embraces us, that calls us home. After reading Erica's words, place becomes a way of understanding the world, rather than being an object. There is a need for nurses to reach beyond their own understandings, to be present in their experiences, and to allow for the alignment of place and spirit.

Place and Relationships: Place as Being Contested

The snow woke me (Keith) up, as though the soft sound of the flakes striking the various surfaces outside my window were an alarm. It's 4:00 AM, the hour I often find myself awake, and not alone in the world. Winter always surprises, it was 8 degrees and sunny 10 hours ago, and now the snow is beautifully blowing her cold embrace across everything outside. I say a silent prayer for all the kin sleeping rough, may they be sheltered from cold wind cousin, and if not, may the journey to the creator remind them of the dignity they may not have been afforded in this life, on these lands from which they have been dispossessed. I go around closing the windows, the building's heating system hasn't switched to spring mode so our apartment was too warm at midnight when we went to bed. I had left windows open to cool us in the night, Winter may have seen an opportunity to be mischievous, and sent the wind and snow to tour our home. Luckily, I heard them and now their beauty has me staring out the window and marveling at these spirits and the unending and constantly shifting landscapes they create in our world. The streetlights make visible each perfect snowflake as they are carried by the wind towards their next destination. I'm working on decolonizing my mind, and I consciously think to shift from thinking of water as a feminine spirit, they might be more like me, *tastawiyiniwak*, an in-between spirit, neither man nor woman. Perhaps some of the flakes are one or the other, but perhaps each one is simply unique and beautiful at this moment before spring comes and joins them all together again in a new form. It's strange at 41 years young to be reflecting on my life as a process of re-learning, re-claiming, and re-sisting so much of what I was taught as a child and young person.

Place encompasses the elements of wind, snow, sun, and rain, which shape place/our experience of place in unique and profound ways. Keith's writing reminds us of how society contests the idea that relationships can be their own places, too. This contestation impacts one's ability to be somewhere and connect with who—and not what—one is. In nursing, connecting with who, rather than what, is central to therapeutic relationships. Who we are is shaped by where we are—equally, where we are from influences how we care for one another, and how we implicate place in our healing. Place, as Keith shows us, is organic and calls us to resist the need for control. Instead, it calls us to understand that life is an ongoing process of re-learning, re-claiming, and resisting. There is a need to “worry less about place in broad philosophical or humanistic terms, than about places as sites of power struggles or about displacement as histories of annexation, absorption and resistance. Thus, ethnography's stories of place and places are increasingly about contestation” (Feld & Basso, 1996, p. 4).

I wonder if I had been given the teachings of the ancestors in less subtle ways, how things may have been different for young me. Would I have spent so much time with alcohol and other intoxicants? Would I have hurt myself so many times, trying to fit my beautiful and expansive spirit into the tiny boxes of western expectations and toxic masculinity? I know in my heart that most of those teachers meant well for me, were in their way trying to make the path easier, but as I've heard said, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I'm grateful for other teachers, who encouraged me, both human and other-than-human. The accepting ones, who saw me, and embraced the parts that others found uncomfortable. Today, I continue to learn and connect with community and kin, proud and comfortable in my Two-Spirit Métis identity, with a growing knowledge of the ancestors on both settler and Métis sides of the family. This connection would not be possible without a deeper and more expanding sense of place.

It is important to understand where one is on their journey. There is a need to shift towards being in relation with place as both a spiritual and physical being. Webber et al. (2021) differentiate between land-based education and place-based education by stating that, while both work towards similar ends of social and ecological justice, land-based education addresses issues of sovereignty from Indigenous perspectives. Place is implicated in the process of becoming a nurse—therefore, the ways in which place teaches us, enriches our learning, and provides opportunities to learn with and from the land (as good relations), are critical to acknowledge. This shift in thinking reminds us of Seawright (2014), who identifies how settlers claimed individual ownership of land while Indigenous peoples felt they belonged to the land. Connecting to land as a place goes beyond connecting to a geographical physical landscape. Our life stories are connected to the physical land, as well as to the stories, meanings and feelings that create a sense of belonging, wherein one trusts instinct over thought processes. This instinct is both unexplainable and individual.

I have new and deepening relations with Elders, knowledge keepers, community and family. These connections had wilted, and are now being revived with care and attention. I've learned to listen more carefully to our relatives who aren't human, and to care for those relations as I would for family. The Métis homeland and our people's stories have new importance for me, and it is through this revitalization of relationships that I continue on the journey of living in wahkohtawin, the sacred balance of good relations.

We listen carefully as Keith talks. We can hear in their voice the importance of being simultaneously in place and in relationship. Keith expresses that they will feel free once they identify all parts and places associated with themselves, and don't have to contest or explain who they are. This might

seem ironic—that reconnecting allows one to be free—but Keith explains that reconnecting through relationship is what creates balance.

Living with and between Bodies: Place as Being

In 2010, I (Vera) wrote an article whose title partially read *traveling to and within unfamiliar landscapes*. As part of the abstract of the paper I wrote:

Drawing on the life stories of Debra, an Aboriginal woman living with HIV, I reflect on the feeling of (dis)placement from a geographic landscape and cultural heritage that both Debra and I experienced, although in different ways. I explore how place is inscribed onto and into our bodies and how home can be understood as embodied. In this way I explore place as geographic position of home and as ontological. In the living out of her stories, Debra made me not only understand the deeper conditions of human life, but that stories told are not fixed texts, that they are composed in and out of the living and in relation to others. (Caine, 2010, p. 1304). It was and continues to be Debra's experiences that make me consider and (re)consider place.

As we think about these stories, we note that they are more than just fixed texts or accounts of experiences. Indigenous peoples have used stories and storytelling as a way to offer teachings, share knowledge, and create connections for individuals. The same way that stories are more than just text, place is more than just a geographical location and offers more than the ability to “have somewhere to go”. The etymology of the word place shows a vastly different and evolving understanding of place over time. In its earliest recognition, place referred to a room and space, and to an openness. Much later, it became linked to social status, and to one's position on a social scale. Over time, the meaning of place grew attached to a definition of things happening over time (ie. something taking place). More recently, the notion of someone or thing being ‘out of place’ has given it a more relational context.

In thinking about place, I return to my childhood home and the deep connections that exist between place and my family's history. I recall that as children, wherever we ended up with my parents, there were always stories of place, stories that connected them and us to geographical locations that mattered to them. Yet, in as much as it called forth histories of people and events, it also was about an imagined future. Our future, the future of my parents and the future of my life were tied to the places we visited. There was a sense that place was forecasting my future. With time, I increasingly felt out of place.

Vera examines how the concept of place in itself has morphed and changed across different cultures, over time, and in different contexts. Perhaps it morphed and changed as she grew older, gaining different perspectives and understandings. The notion of place in reference to comfort and connection leads us to examine it as something that can bring unwelcomeness, or as Vera describes it, a feeling of being “out of place”. How can something that can bring such contentment also be something that can bring such hurt? In order to truly understand the vast meanings tied to being in or out of place, perhaps one must examine the individual's relationship with oneself.

I left home several times during my youth, lived for short periods of time on the street, or hitchhiked to places that promised a homecoming in ways that only a stranger could imagine. I think about my time of living on the streets in Paris, I was just a few years

older than Debra when this happened. She was barely 11 when she began sleeping in emergency room wards to avoid going home with strange men who wanted her body mostly and sometimes more than that. It was a story that has stayed with me. Thinking about my time in Paris, I remember the guard at the local showers offering free showers in return for sexual favours - I can still feel the disgust present in the moment when he approached me. I am sure he expected me to agree. That day I learned something about the vulnerability of being displaced, of being without place and of being out of place. I think that day marked a different homecoming for me. Place was never quite the same after that.

The vulnerability of being displaced, of being without place, and of being out of place can be profound. How one interprets place is based on how one interprets being. It takes vulnerability to consider that we might be in a place that goes beyond just our physical location. Vera continues on:

It was years later that I met Debra and that I learned about a lifetime of (dis)placement. Home was nowhere, and the (im)possibility of a homecoming was marked by the visible scars of her body. It was Debra who taught me that home lives within our bodies - that the scars and marks on our body become the maps and the landscapes of our lives - the scars tell the stories of being in and out of place. Debra helped me, for brief moments, to be at home in a place that I have never belonged to, that remains foreign and uncomfortable in my life. Whenever people ask me where my home is, I struggle to find an answer. Debra intuitively knew that I struggled to answer this question. It was Debra who raised new wonders for me and opened up new possibilities. One of the wonders she raised, was: Could my body be my home, could it be the place I am from and the place I will return to?

Debra helped Vera to see that her body could be a home, that it could be the place where she was from and the place she would return to. For Indigenous peoples, this notion of place is not new. Part of this notion is the idea that we are spiritual beings within a physical form, and that connecting emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually all help to create a balance. This balance is essential to staying healthy. Additionally, being healthy and well allows one to connect spiritually through ceremony and to understand life as a journey. Embracing intuition allows one to understand place as being connected more to being than to just living. Vera's story reminds us of how our experiences in our bodies, lives, and the places we inhabit shape the directions our lives take as people and as nurses. We wonder: How do the embodied places of our childhoods—our early lives—influence our decision to become nurses and healers?

As I continue to think with Debra's story, I begin to wonder again what differentiates place and home. Can one be displaced and still be home? How might Debra think about displacement? Can one be displaced intentionally? Or is it always unintentional? The Oxford English dictionary (n.d) defines displacement as 'the act of forcing somebody/something away from their home or position' (np). Since the late 1940s the word displacement has been associated with refugees, where there is an understanding that people are forced to flee their home due to violence, conflict, and persecution. Often refugees leave their home, their places, with no possibility of return - or where the only return is grounded in the imagination. It is Rushdie (1981) who writes in his book *Imaginary Homelands*: "But the photograph tells me to invert this idea; it reminds me that it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (p. 428).

As we contemplate displacement in terms of place, we realize that place also grounds one's feelings of displacement. If one gets stuck on that place—as well as the past—is home, then the present is foreign and brings about a sense of displacement. However, knowing that place is where we come from and where we will go can release one from the feeling of being neither here nor there. It is in these moments that we turn to Brah (1996), who states that “[t]he concept of diaspora places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins” (pp. 192-193). Moving away from the notion of ‘fixed origins’ opens up a dialogue to further explore how nursing might attend to issues of place, rootedness, and displacement.

Place as Holding Memory: Evoking and Calling Forth Stories

As I (Margot) sit at my computer, I have a purple sticky note with the word HOME written in bold letters stuck to the side of the screen. I wrote this word and stuck the note up many months ago right after a personal therapy session. The word is to remind me of what is important, what I have lost, what I have built, and what I strive for. When I think of home, the first thing that comes to mind is the house where I grew up. I can still feel the sense of belonging and calm that would come over me when entering the door. My parents puttering around, the dog barking in the yard, and a feeling of true familiarity that was comforting. I always think of that house as my home.

As Margot contemplates what ‘home’ means to her, we hear her words: What is important, what I have lost, what I have built and what I strive for. The word home invokes thoughts that are linked to the sounds of parents puttering around, a dog barking and a feeling of familiarity. In this way, place becomes the feelings and senses that cannot be replicated by anyone or anything else. The definition of ‘home’ is multifaceted and complicated, as it can refer beyond a tangible space, region, or group of people who live in one household (Hundt, 2014). Home can extend to a feeling or emotion that grounds who we are within ourselves. Equally, a sense of home can be felt within ourselves or in connection to another person. Home is complex but often brings about a sense of peace, familiarity, and belonging. Margo continues on:

After the passing of my mom and then the decline in my father's health, things shifted. The house was no longer calming or provided a sense of belonging; it was a reminder of times past and memories coupled with sadness of what could no longer be. I wanted so desperately to hold onto the time and place when this house was my home. Unfortunately, life and time had moved on; my world had shifted and home as I knew it was about to change.

As we listen to Margo, connections between memories and the physical space become visible. Basso (in Feld & Basso, 1996) says:

The experience of sensing places, then, is both reciprocal and incorrigibly dynamic. As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed, and the movements of this process – inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternately both together – cannot be known in advance. When places become actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where the mind may lead is anyone's guess. (p. 55)

What happens when the feelings, sounds, and things that trigger and sustain our memories fade? Does who we are change? What if the connection was not sustained by a physical object, but by a connection to the land, or to a geographic location that will remain without us? Is there comfort in knowing that one resides on the same lands as their mother once did? In this case, does the land bring deeper and more meaningful connections? Or is it the stories that are tied to place and relationships that ground us? When we lose the stories and the memories, do we lose our grounding points?

I did not realize until many years later how the loss of this physical space impacted my sense and feeling of what home is. It has taken many experiences and losses to recognize the importance of 'home' and what this means to me; I am not fully there yet. My father's health decline and eventual passing from dementia immediately following my mother's death led me to a place in which I questioned much about life and a sense of home. I felt alone and ungrounded despite having a family of my own. I lacked a place where I felt that I belonged or had a foundation. These feelings led me to a long and difficult journey on how to rebuild a sense of home for myself. How was I to provide this feeling of home for my children if I did not feel this within myself? Slowly, I started to rebuild.

The sense of loss is profound for Margot, and uproots her in ways she did not anticipate. When we think about place, we can see how closely it is intertwined with those who matter to us. Home is not simply an architectural structure or physical place—rather, it is a complex and often intangible mix of factors brought forth by senses of belonging, attachment, memories, experiences, and familiarity, which are interwoven (Li, 2015). Perhaps this deep sense of being alone and ungrounded is temporary, and only persists until we find ways to come back to the land, which continues to hold our memories and stories. It is Erica who reminds us that the physical self is connected to a spirit—and, connecting one's spirit is key to moving forward and to finding oneself. Margot's journey of rebuilding has a sense of reaching backwards or returning, perhaps to the same place, yet not as the same person. This return looks different for all of us. For Erica it was reconnecting with a deeper understanding of ceremony. Keith worked on relationship building with community. Connecting and having a deeper understanding of oneself and the relationships that matter were important to Vera. For Margot, it was through her understanding of connections and her memories that she was able to rebuild.

Turning towards Nursing and Health

As we near the end of this paper, we return to our conversations about the importance of place in nursing. Initially, it was our shared sense of nursing that brought us together, and a call to make visible the importance of place. As we reread and revisit our ideas, it becomes apparent that our experiences with and thoughts on place have had a significant impact on the ways that we engage with nursing, both as people with diverse experiences and as nurses. Place has not been a central idea in nursing or nursing research (Andrews, 2003), yet there is a need to think about it if we want to engage in healing (Wilson, 2003). In our conversations, we see how place shapes the act of nursing for each one of us. By making visible how place shapes the act of nursing, we can unravel how nursing research, practice, and education are entwined with spirit and healing.

Erica echoes Simpson (2014), who points out that it is the land that teaches us, and that there is a need for Indigenous peoples to "reclaim land as pedagogy" (p. 1). The land is pedagogical, and it helps us "[m]ake meaningful connections and provide order and continuity in a rapidly changing world" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. xiii). It is the land that holds our stories and the continuity of time.

This continuity is important as it shapes our identities and wellbeing in the world. Bras (2018) notes:

I know that the land and my relationship with the land holds embodied knowledge, that memories are present and continue to be planted deep within the soil. As I walk alongside my students, as we share places of significance, I can feel our relationships shifting – our ethical spaces are no longer just between us, but include a commitment and responsibility to the places that shape who we are. (p. 161)

We would argue that, as nurses who walk alongside those we care for, we too experience what Bras describes. In the moments when we pay attention to place, we can see who people are and are becoming. It is with this in mind that we must attend to place when we engage with nursing. Silko (1997), offers further reasons as to why, writing:

[i]t begins with the land; think of the land, the earth, as the center of a spider's web. Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider's web radiate from the center of the web. (p. 21)

Although we arrive at the end of this paper, the conversation regarding place and what it means for nursing has only just started. We return to our conversation one last time:

Keith: Not unlike our Two-Spirit kin, nursing, in a sense, has become dis-placed. In trying to find a place to 'fit in' to the colonial projects of medicine and healthcare systems, is it possible nursing has forgotten that it has always belonged in our communities?

Erica: Nursing has not re-claimed its place, it's home within communities. Indigenous healers lived with the lands, not just on them. They conducted their research, learned with nature as a relative, shared medicines, gained knowledge from working with others, and cared for themselves as part of the community that cared for others.

Jackson: There is a need to implicate settler-colonialism as a form of dis-placement. It makes me wonder, how do the relationships with place, displacement, and ideas of being in place impact the way nursing is conceived, conceptualized, and enacted? Do nurses acknowledge their place, on and in the homelands of others?

Vera: As I think about our conversations, I wonder about a sense of belonging, and also a deep sense of loss that exists for many who have been displaced. I think it was you Erica who said: How do we acknowledge that place is a piece of one's soul, for if one has no community, no home, no recognizable place - who will they be? And where are they from?

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