

Introduction – Between absence and presence: geographies of hiding, invisibility, and silence

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In both capital-P Politics, such as spectacular world events, and the 'little-p' politics of everyday practices, absence and presence have been, and continue to be, particularly potent political tools, utilised to reinforce particular power relations, narratives, and control over space. Absence, for example, has a long association of denying others' claim to spaces, places, and participation. Whether excluding particular ethnic groups from certain residential areas (Anderson, 1987), young people from shopping centres at particular times (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008), or homeless people from urban regeneration sites (Katz, 2001), making absent has been used as a stratagem of control that removes dissenting views and experiences from particular time-places. In short, it demarcates territory where acts, people, and ideas can not belong. Similarly, the opposing part of the binary, presence, has traditionally been used to emphasise deviance. Schivelbusch (1995) has shown how in the development of the modern metropolises of London, Paris and Berlin, artificial illumination was used as a means to give 'presence', to misdemeanours and criminal acts which were previously concealed by shadowy and darkened spaces. For Foucault (1977), the body of the condemned served as a warning to others of the consequences of their transgressions, creating a 'spectacle of suffering' (Spierenburg, 1984). In both these cases, fixing unwanted attention on the body was a way of installing discipline both to the perpetrator and to the gazer. Both absence and presence, in this sense, have been used as methods of social control; through a mixture of writing-out and constructing a spectacle, they denote what belongs where and when: what is in place, and what is out of place (Cresswell, 1996).

However, presence ought not to be reduced to the spectacular, for the spectacular serves to emphasise extraordinary acts, not banal occurrences. It is these more banal occurrences, however, that are widely regarded as constructing 'normal' subjectivities, acts, and bodies in everyday life. Billig (1995), in his seminal *Banal Nationalism* evokes the argument that nationalism is not constructed by epic battles that give birth to the nation, but through long-term exposure to particular symbols, routines, and ideas which are normalised into everyday life. Such a conceptualisation of national identity has strong parallels with Bourdieu's *doxa*

(1977), the common-sense understanding of accepted and expected norms based on the *habitus*. The spectacular arises, in part, from *crises of doxa*, where it is disrupted by acts and behaviour that it is at odds with the expected and accepted. The spectacular, however, draws the gazer's attention away from the *doxa* and its ways of being. It is reduced to a blurred background, a contrast against which the spectacular is defined, but without being able to distinguish its residual forms precisely or in detail.

Absence is often reduced to not being present, and presence to not being absent. The papers in this special issue examine the way in which absence and presence are intricately woven rather than exist as binaries: they are co-constituted, and co-exist simultaneously. In this sense, they build on the precedence taken by work on the ghostly (Maddern and Adey, 2008; Wylie, 2007) which acknowledges the interdependency of these two concepts. Places become 'haunted' through the convergence of time – past and present – at a particular site. Edensor (2008), for example, discusses the haunted landmarks he encounters on his daily commute. A former cinema is now a block of flats, but retains its distinctive aesthetics; cafés around Manchester City's former Maine Road ground are deserted, yet attest to their past capacity and business. Elsewhere, Rose and Wylie have characterised engagements with landscape as being shaped by spatial and temporally specific "tensions between presence/absence" (2006, p. 475); when the material landscape is experienced, imaginings, understandings and attachments to it are "synchronously...[moulded by] *the absence of presence, the presence of absence*" (Wylie 2009, p. 279, original emphasis). Traces remain, but the absence is conspicuous. This temporal aspect is etymologically referenced by the terms presence and present. Its momentary nature is acknowledged, recognising that it is not a fixture but something that has come to be and will eventually disappear (Holloway and Kneale, 2008). This temporal aspect is the foundation of the ghostly; the contributions to this issue explore other ways in which the binary is collapsed.

These various ways of being present and absent are examined in this issue. As we illustrate above, there is a tendency to discuss absence and presence through the medium of the visual.

The rhetoric that is widely used (in English, at least), is that of sight. This is unsurprising, considering the occularcentricity of late modernity. However, constructing the visible as present and the invisible as absent is problematic. As Beck (2011, p. 127) notes, clouds are “the visible trace[s] of an invisible atmosphere”; the absence of clouds does not mean the absence of an atmosphere or of various processes. Similarly, as Martin (2011) demonstrates, the presence of another atmospheric phenomenon – fog – destabilises pilots’ ‘spatial certainties’ and creates difficulties as mountains, structures, and other obstacles can not be identified by sight alone. Darkness also destabilises these ‘spatial certainties’: shadows simultaneously reveal the presence of various structures, but can also hide others, while the use of different parts of the eye during dark conditions means that the landscape is experienced differently. Colour contrasts are less important than the texture of the surface which reflect light to different degrees and can allow navigation (Robinson, forthcoming). Despite these different ways of seeing, reducing the present to the visible and the absent to the invisible privileges one sensory experience above others. This issue considers other experiences of absence, such as the distant, the virtual, the silent, the unspoken, the obscured, and the hidden. By focussing on other phenomena, the papers in this issue consider ways of absence that are multiple, rather than reduced to (in)visibility. Such a conceptualisation allows for exploring the ways acts, bodies, and ideas may be absent in one sense, but present in another.

This special issue brings together six papers that were presented at the annual meeting of the *Association of American Geographers* in Seattle in April 2011, and formed part of two sessions which sought to bring together different theoretical conceptions of absence and presence with a whole range of empirical examples that highlighted the social, political, and lived experiences of absence and presence. Specifically, the papers addressed three key questions:

How are various practices employed to conceal/silence particular groups?

How do individuals and groups distract attention from themselves and how are absences used tactically to meet their ends?

How do issues of absence/invisibility/silence relate to experiences, conceptualisations, and the production of landscape?

Taken together, the papers that emerged from these sessions highlight implications for a number of fields including ethical governance of the internet, regeneration and youth spaces, national identity and geopolitical imaginations, prisoner rehabilitation and integration, multicultural provision and the rural idyll, and strategic regulation and deception.

The papers in this issue discuss different conceptions of absence and presence, brought about by different processes. The contributions are drawn from a range of geographical locations and at different scales, but with the theme of the everyday running throughout. Vince Miller's paper opens the collection through a discussion of the ethical issues brought about by technological innovations. The diffusion of the internet and social networking technology into the core of everyday life and interactions has created new forms of (virtual) presence while being (physically) absent, challenging moral frameworks that are grounded in notions of proximity. In the second paper, Kirsii Kallio examines the politics of noise and voiceless political participation among the youth of Oulu, Finland. Despite the range of formal political processes open to the city's youth, she argues that their use of tactical and disruptive forms of informal participation need to be understood as a 'politics of noise' that has not been transformed into a 'politics of voice'; her paper raises questions of recognising and acknowledging political participation, particularly in regards to who and what is 'heard' and how. An oral theme is also apparent in the third paper, in which Danielle Drodzewski deals with the unspoken and contested memory of the executions of Polish Prisoners of War in Katýn. Her paper outlines how the event constituted both an absence and a presence in Polish collective memory, as discussion of it was suppressed by Soviet authorities; its selective commemoration of it in public was engineered to fit particular narratives of the Polish nation. Conversely, its place among the Polish diaspora's imagination of the homeland highlights spatial implications not only relating to diasporic proximity, but also to that of publicity and privacy. The next two

papers relate to aspects of belonging through spatial presence and absence. Jennifer Turner's paper examines the way in which prisoners, through being physically and visually made-absent through being placed 'behind bars', are further denied a role in citizenship systems. The increasing emphasis placed on community-based active citizenship hinders processes of rehabilitating prisoners. Her paper examines attempts to integrate prisoners into life outside the prison, such as volunteering with the Citizens Advice Bureau, which is countered by a prison regime which emphasises the distance from the 'outside' world through regulating prisoners' interaction with it. In the fifth paper, Rhys Dafydd Jones adopts the concept of the subterranean to understand the negotiations made by Muslims in rural west Wales in encountering absence in their everyday lives. Accounting for 0.2 per cent of the region's population, and reliant on 'storefront' sacred spaces, they are visibly absent but physically present. He argues that rather than conforming to the usual clandestine characteristics attributed to the social underground, the negotiations of Muslims in west Wales can be better understood as a tactical making-do with resources at hand. The final paper also examines the juxtaposition between visible absence and physical presence. James Robinson examines the camouflaged landscape of the British 'home front' during the Second World War. He argues that this dissimulationist approach constitutes a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1990) that preserved the morale of the civilian population in the face of devastating air power, enabling continued contribution to the war effort, highlighting how a making-absent can be a method of self-preservation.

Collectively, these contributions highlight a number of issues that intersect with current debates about space. Firstly, many of the case studies speak to issues about publicity and privacy. Recent work has decoupled these actions from their spaces (Staeheli, 1996; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2004, 2008), to acknowledge the different spatialities of politics. For some, disrupting these spatialities highlights acts, bodies, and ideas that are 'written out' of public space; breastfeeding in public is such an example of a deliberate transgression that sought to normalise it as a legitimate practice in public space. Such transgressions, then, can be considered as acts of citizenship to make public space more inclusive and reflexive. Similarly, those denied access to

the public may make tactical use of private spaces at hand for public purposes, functioning as a 'counterpublic arena' (Fraser, 1990). These contributions highlight a range of ways politics of absence and presence are related to politics of acknowledgment, acceptance, and normalisation, skimming the surface of the public and private realms.

Secondly, physical (or virtual) presence is often seen as requirement for belonging and participation. In his study of mosque development in Sydney, Dunn (2004) notes that many letters of objection constructed areas as absent of Muslim residents, asserting that the worshippers at facilities would be outsiders. Similarly, Woods' (2003) account of windfarm development conflicts in mid-Wales identified a discourse where opponents were constructed as 'outsiders' (despite often living in the area) with an idyllised imagination of the region that is out-of-step with those of 'local' inhabitants. Such a discourse seeks to discredit particular views, experiences, or groups as not belonging to a place, and threatening its characteristics. In these cases, physical proximity is seen as essential in having a stake in discussion, while dissenting views are constructed as those of outsiders and subsequently excluded. Such approaches delineate belonging in a dyadic sense that ignores complex ways of belonging that straddles 'inside' and 'outside', such as propinquity (Amin, 2004). Smith (1993), for example, examines how a locally-born lady who complained about the inclusion of racial archetypes in the annual carnival in Peebles in the Scottish Borders was dismissed as an outsider who had been exposed to Edinburgh's sensitivities for too long, while both racism and multiculturalism were constructed as urban and English phenomena. At the heart of these kinds of considerations are questions about who is acknowledged as present, and subsequently as belonging and having a voice. The papers in this issue examine how proximity does not equate a voice, and the different figurations of proximity and acknowledgement.

Absence and presence is evoked through a range of social and spatial processes. A particularly pertinent example is that of nation-building, where selective representations of the nation are apparent. Jones and Merriman (2009), for example illustrate how monolingual English-

language road signs erected in Wales were quotidian reminders of exclusion of the Welsh-language (and, by extension, acknowledgement of the minority nationhood) from the British state. In France, the nation-building projects of 'turning peasants into Frenchmen' that commenced following the revolution but continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century placed emphasis on consistency in its republican citizenship rather than acknowledgment of difference. Particular narratives are emphasised, and made present through national curricula, infrastructure programmes, art, so that the societal culture penetrates everyday life as a taken-for-granted and common-sense experience. Such making-absence is not limited to the territorial confines of the national homeland. Even among the diaspora, often popularly imagined as an emancipatory space, particular narratives and interpretations of the nation permit some interpretations, but not others. Marston (2002), for example, illustrates how the Ancient Order of Hibernians refused to allow gay and lesbian people to march in its St Patrick's Day parade, reflecting Catholic influence in perceptions of Irishness. For many Irish émigré(e)s, who had left the Republic of Ireland – where homosexuality had only been decriminalised in 1995 – for New York's more liberal and tolerant society, such exclusionary attitudes were not only out of step with their perception of the city, but more conservative than those in Ireland. Similarly, Ehrkamp (2007) notes how the Kemalist secularism of Turkey was found in its diaspora in Germany: Sunni customs were encouraged in classrooms of Turkish schools, while those of minority denominations such as Alevis were sidelined and discouraged, much as had happened in Anatolia. Such exclusionary practices, which seek to deny particular groups' representations in particular political communities highlight implications about hospitality. Constructing others as outsiders based on perceptions of absence through distance diminishes expectations of responsibility compared to those of the present – the here and now – which places the outsider as the recipient of hospitality (Barnett, 2005). However, such understandings are largely based on notions of the stranger as 'an outsider who comes today and goes tomorrow', but not, as Simmel (1908, p. 143) notes, those who 'stay tomorrow', ignoring those proximate others at the margins of citizenship. Various

categories – youth, convicts, and religious minorities – are constructed as outsiders within, and have to negotiate acknowledgment and recognition as such.

The contributions to this special issue also highlight broader concerns for the study of absences and presence. Firstly, it raises the epistemological question of how one can know. As intimated earlier in the introduction, much attention on presence relies on visibility. Being seen is paramount in being acknowledged and recognised. It is the basis of most forms of surveillance, as being seen allows for identification and measurement. Similarly, acknowledgment of popular figures also takes visual forms, from the spectacular (statues, biopics) to the more banal (commemorative stamps, ‘blue plaques’ recording celebrated previous residents of houses). Other sensory ways of being present are also fairly prominent, most notable sound, but also touch (Dixon and Straughan, 2010; Paterson, 2006), suggesting that presence is an embodied experience. However, presence also rests on ontological tangibility: they must have a condition which allows them to be named and recognised as such.

Recognising absence is more difficult an operation; one that rests on the absent being conspicuous. For Sherlock Holmes in Conan-Doyle’s short story *Silver Blaze* (1981, p. 347), the “curious incident of the dog at night-time” was conspicuous by its absence. As the guard-dog did not bark, it was evident for Holmes that the intruder was not a stranger. Yet, absence has more nebulous characteristics in everyday life. Ghostly places and spaces keep some residual and material traces of the past; other spaces and places may not have such characteristics. Consequently, absence is constructed in the context of what is present by what ought to be present. However, constructing the absent as revealed by the present means creates a danger of overlooking events that could have happened. While ‘ghost towns’ such as Adamstown near Dublin are the result of housing booms which overstretched their potential (Kitchin *et al.*, 2012), other ‘failed projects’ – such as proposed multicultural provision (Dafydd Jones, in preparation) or planned museum attractions (Maddern, 2008) – which did not leave ‘the drawing board’ are absent absences. As they never materialised, it is their presence (in archive

papers or planning documents) that is conspicuous against their absence. Consequently, there is also need to understand the processes that keep absences absent, as well as those that make absences present and presences absent.

These considerations also highlight the need for robust methodological approaches to explore absences and presences. How can absences and presences be known? What kinds of senses and phenomena are privileged in research designs? What is the best medium to record them? What are the social, political, and ethical implications of absence and presence? How are absences and presences experienced and negotiated? Does anybody notice if things are absent? How can the absent be captured, without transforming its meanings and associations?

Alongside these methodological considerations, reflection is needed on the ethical issues of exploring absence and presence. As Williams (2008) illustrates, inquiry has long attributed a rhetoric that evokes senses of finding 'truth' through revealing, uncovering, delving, and so forth. Such a position places the researcher as a parallel to the heroic labourer working for society's benefit. This is problematic not only as it emphasises the researcher as expert in contrast to other forms of knowledge, but also assumes that the groups, structures, and bodies that are absent want – and ought – to become present and public. Expectations, it seems, are focussed on discovery, making something 'new' knowable, measurable, and mapable. However, we align with Lefebvre, who claimed his influential *The Production of Space* (1991, p. 89) was not an attempt to understand "things in space, but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relations embedded in it": there is value in not only examining what, where, and when is absent and present, but also how it is absent and present. What kinds of processes permit things to become visible, heard, acknowledged, and understood? What must remain absent, and what is allowed to be present? Who decides and how? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of the contributions to this special issue, but is developed from their engagement.

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