

The importance of absence in the present: practices of remembrance and the contestation of absences

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cgj.sagepub.com**Lars Meier**

Technische Universität Berlin, Germany

Lars Frers

Telemark University College, Norway

Erika Sigvardsdotter

Uppsala University, Sweden

Introduction

What is missing, where and for whom? And how does that which is absent relate to the things and people that are present?

This special issue of *cultural geographies* demonstrates the relevance of absence in its social and spatial dimensions. By focusing on that which does not claim physical presence, that which is missing or hiding, this issue demonstrates how an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of absence can provide stimulating vectors of analysis.

The social sciences and the humanities are mostly concerned with what is present, observable, tangible and measurable. This tendency has gained weight in cultural geography too, in the context of what has been characterized as the re-materialization of geography.¹ Against a long backdrop of studies that draw on the linguistic turn and that prioritize the study of language, discourse and the construction of social and cultural facts, this re-materialization focused the academic attention on the importance of things, matter and processes of embodiment. This development has, on the other hand, also led to a counter-reaction. The danger perceived in this context is that the (re-)constructive quality and the processual character of materialities are being lost or not adequately represented – the focus on the material could go along with an anti-intellectual bias that posits matter and the concrete as the real, supposedly solid base of society.² The contributions to this special issue are emerging from this field of tension. They share the concern with the down-to-earth, the banal or the everyday on the one hand, and a conviction that the mundane is also entangled with representational elements, with processes that involve more than mere matter.³ It is exactly in this

Corresponding author:

Lars Frers, Telemark University College, Postboks 155, 3672 Notodden, Norway.

Email: lars.frers@fu-berlin.de

tension that absence manifests itself as a mediating phenomenon. As recent studies in many different fields display, absences connect both poles in the field of tension: the realm beyond death with everyday stuff,⁴ and the experience of transcendence with concrete human practices.⁵ It is this peculiar characteristic of absence that makes it so productive in the context of human and cultural geography as well.

Over the course of the last decade that which is not there entered the awareness of human geographers mainly in two forms. A first set of studies focused on hauntings (such as the articles collected in the special issue of *Space and Culture* edited by Hetherington and Degen in 2001)⁶ and spectrality (compare the special issue of *cultural geographies* edited by Maddern and Adey in 2008).⁷ These contributions follow the fading but not lost echoes of Walter Benjamin's footsteps during his dreamlike walks through Berlin.⁸ Remembering his own experiences, he encounters multiple faces of history that shine through the city as ghosts. Pondering a ghost-like past during walks, or while driving through the city, several authors have studied related issues,⁹ often from a perspective informed by Derridian deconstructionism¹⁰ and spectro-politics.¹¹

The second strand of studies can be set against this background, and related to the non-deconstructionist end of the cultural-studies spectrum. It was their concern with fleshy, material expressions of decay and erosion that refocused our attention away from ghosts and spectrality and onto the concrete side of absence.¹² While absence is usually conceptualized as having a strong link to the past, for example in the personal memories of former times, or in places that offer representations of the past like ghost towns,¹³ this special issue focuses on the present, and on practices of remembering that are rooted in the present. It offers articles that investigate absence less as a disputed articulation or representation of the past and more as part of contemporary everyday activities, bodily experiences and contestations.

As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, absences do not only arise at dusk or midnight or in rare and secluded places. To the contrary, absences make themselves known in routine passages, in everyday encounters and in the management of ordinary affairs. Nevertheless, they are imbued with an affective quality that differs from experiences of present entities. In a way, this special issue is shaping a response to the question about the relation between the materiality and the immateriality of absence – as Morgan Meyer did too in his review of two anthologies that deal with the topic of absence.¹⁴ His proposal is to cast absence as a relational phenomenon, something that is produced in the back and forth between absence and presence, materiality and immateriality, the social and the natural: 'Essentially, this means to see absence not as an existing "thing" in itself but as something that is made to exist through relations that give absence matter.'¹⁵ While this relational ontology of absence is certainly a productive approach for dealing with the instability of absences, it remains unaware of a central property of the phenomenon of absence: while it is certainly correct that absence is not a 'thing in itself', and while it is also correct that absence is relational and traceable, it still remains an open question as to what gives life to absences. Meyer demonstrates that place matters and that we need geographies of absence to understand how they are produced. But there is a missing link in his argumentation: the fact that absence is experienced and that it arises only, and without exception, in lived experience.

The contributions to this volume pay heed to this fact in different ways, but they do show how absences are given life through the corporeality of those who experience them, they are embodied and they respond to or create a lack of resistance; in short, they are highly dynamic, they call forth the emotions and the affective energy of all those – things and people, living and dead – who are involved in their creation, placement, maintenance, and evanescence.

Accordingly, the intersections of the material, affective¹⁶ and political qualities of absence are put into focus to demonstrate the fact that absence is all but a void; that it manifests itself in

concrete places, people and things; that it is embodied, enacted, remembered and contested. Exploring the geographies of absence, this special issue improves the understanding of how remembrances of things past and people gone are realized in things and people present in the here and now. Going further, the special issue investigates ways in which absence is part or result of contestations and negotiations and it inspects how these play on the emotional registers of those who participate in them. A wide range of different actors is involved in the production of absences and their spatial, cultural and political organization – be it voluntary or involuntary, on the margins or in the center.

Remembering

In his book on the history of the 20th century as the age of extremes, Eric Hobsbawm complains about the loss of historical awareness or, more specifically, of the loss of consideration of current experiences and occurrences in light of former ones.¹⁷

What was there before has an impact on what is here today, but this does not mean that the past is automatically taken note of and considered by people. The active consideration of absences is based on making a relation, on specific knowledge about a relation of present and past that allows one to notice something or somebody as absent in the present situation. Encountering the remains of a castle, Doreen Massey writes that ‘the “presentness” of the horizontality of space is a product of a multitude of histories whose resonances are still there, if we would but see them, and which sometimes catch us with full force unawares’.¹⁸ Histories become alive in embodied and place-related memories. Absences need memories to fill them with life, just as they need traces in the socio-material world that can draw them into a present situation. This central importance of memories, the importance of remembering, needs to be understood before the distribution of absences and the coming into being of absence can be properly mapped.

The ability to remember, or, in this context, to perceive what is absent today and to compare this with a present situation is also linked to specific personal experiences like it is with Benjamin’s flâneur and his specific knowledge of the past¹⁹ that build on a relationship to social identities.²⁰ Places (like houses,²¹ workplaces²² or cemeteries²³) are highly relevant in the context of personal memories²⁴ and may trigger narratives that tell the history of people’s lives. In the encounter with such places, former occurrences can become vivid and visible today, and seemingly minor traces might call forth memories of vast arrays of practices and materialities – of rooms or things or of those who have used them in their own peculiar ways. Even if only fragments remain, memories may be triggered for those who encounter these traces, as demonstrated by Dydia DeLyser: ‘the power of synecdoche in landscapes is that such a fragment takes on greater meaning: the projected meaning of the imagined whole.’²⁵

In this special issue, memories are not considered as documents of the past but as documents of today. What is remembered through its perceived absence today rises from a perspective on the present situation, from a feeling of loss that might be triggered by ongoing encounters with texts, photos, material residuals,²⁶ or from the questions and shared narratives that are produced in the course of an interview. This special issue demonstrates that remembrances of things past and people gone are realized in things and people present. With the help of the concept of absence, present experiences, social interactions and social positions can be understood as not being without a past, as being powered by specific memories, by occurrences of absence.

Memories are very selective and much is left in oblivion. That which is remembered as absent becomes present in a different way – it is being sought out at the borders of intentionality²⁷ and is thus awoken from oblivion. This strange awakening of the lost is addressed by metaphors of the

spectral, the uncanny, of ghosts or of hauntings.²⁸ These metaphors display the relation between past occurrences and the present in its eeriness. As becomes apparent in many narratives, memories often refer to a past that is recast in a specific perspective. Sometimes the past is being imagined as uncanny, sometimes as being better, as an idealized past, where nostalgia gives a different glamour to what has passed – the absent of today taking the form of an idealized past.²⁹

When memories and the remembering of what is absent today are being analysed in this special issue, the focus does not lie on occurrences of the past but on how they become present today – as something that has to be filled with emotions, experiences and connections of those who experience the absence. Absence therefore is considered as interwoven with present experiences, with social interactions and negotiations of positions in the social field.³⁰

Contesting

What and who has to be absent and what and who is allowed to be present? Absence also has a political dimension, it is negotiated and contested. This special issue demonstrates that it matters to attend to absence because considering today's absences provides insight into ongoing contestations of the right to be present or absent. This change of focus gives a different kind of awareness of power relations, and of easily forgotten and overlooked subaltern positions that might be washed into oblivion by the fast moving current of the contemporary, deeply political distribution of attention. When one considers absence as negotiated and contested, the absence-presence relation needs to be addressed. This is necessary precisely because of two different qualities of this relation. First, what is present and what is absent are subject to negotiation and change. Second, the absence-presence relation is seemingly paradoxical.³¹ Both qualities become easier to handle when it is understood that what is absent comes to be present not in and for itself, but only insofar as it is attended to as being absent. This requirement, the necessity of being or becoming aware of an absence, displays the inherent interwovenness of absence with present experiences.³²

Because absences need to be attended to, and because they relate to public and personal narratives or memories, they are highly selective. It is this selectivity that lends absences to contestation by different social groups. By putting a specific perspective on history and by presenting different threads together in a discursive formation, powerful narratives are created that neglect many alternative, contradicting and subaltern forms of narrating and representing history and changing identities. What is absent is remarked upon and gets its contemporary life in and through such sites and practices of representation – while others fall in oblivion at the same time.

It has to be emphasized that when we understand absence as something that arises in experience only, then that which is absent is different from that which is completely gone, erased from all memory and vanished without a trace. We conceptualize the latter state as void, a far step away from absent and not part of the focus that we have in this special issue. The contributions to this special issue deal with that which currently has an uncertain status, something that is attended to in some way, being challenged or negotiated based on its lack of presence.

We are focusing on ongoing struggles and negotiations, on the geographies of absences, the traces and experiences they build upon, and the people who engender them by their formal or informal everyday activities. The articles in this issue display how entities are currently being made present in their absence, that is as present in embodied and placed experience, as related to traces and situations, and not as present in the form of actual physical entities.

Precisely because of the theoretical challenges that such a focus carries with it, we want to emphasize that the unstable epistemological status of absences makes them ideal areas of social negotiations on different scales and scopes. Inspecting absences, the contributions to this special

issue examine both contestations of what is deemed to be worthy of representation and what is not, as well as concrete and embodied practices of doing absence. Those who are not allowed to be physically present might even have to hide, they might have to maintain their absence from the eyes and tracking technologies used by those in power – in spite of their need for recognition.³³ Those who lack the necessary power might recede – or aim to put up a struggle for the right to decide about their presence and absence themselves, thus putting up tactical resistance³⁴ and questioning the legitimacy of official rules or practices.

Contributing

The critique of an understanding of absence that mainly locates it and its relation to presence in the realm of paradoxicalities and in the deconstruction of phenomenological understandings of the human-world relation is at the heart of Lars Frers' essay 'The Matter of Absence'. By examining the actual experiencing of absences, Frers establishes absence as something embodied in the corporality of everyday lives, while making it tangible that an understanding of absence based in phenomenology does not imply a free flowing communion with the world but rather points to the disorientation, pain and suffering that can arise when absences are experienced.

The everyday lives of the past are summoned in Tim Edensor's article, 'Vital Urban Materiality and its Multiple Absences: The Building Stone of Central Manchester'. Following the materiality of stones and the marks etched into this stone, the most archetypical matter of all, he is led to a host of people, places and things that have left their traces in the stone. Examining the stones, their extrusion, production, transport and placement, those who were forgotten are recovered in their absence. Their past can be recognized in the stone. The building blocks of the city thus display their potential in the recovering of the city's past, and of the love and labour that went into it.

The threat of falling into oblivion is manifest for the former industrial workers who are confronted with the loss of the places where they have spent their working lives. In his article 'Encounters with Haunted Industrial Workplaces and Emotions of Loss' Lars Meier shows how strongly they experience the absence of the dynamic life in the factory, the sheer amount of stuff that was brought into, transformed and shipped out of what they experienced as the core of industry and the core of a shared experience of collective struggle. The former workers encounter former workplaces with a class-related sense of place. The embodied connection to this deteriorating past presents itself in the suffering of its absence, and even more so in the threat of its complete obliteration.

Similar to age of industry, the age of socialism seems to be threatening to fall into oblivion. Petr Gibas, however, displays in his article 'Uncanny Underground: Absences, Ghosts and the Rhythmed Everyday of the Prague Metro' how the materiality of the socialist past maintains a connection to former times. The intractable past of socialism makes its absence present to those travelling along Prague's underground, confronting and disturbing them with the simultaneous presence of the traces of the past and the current, seemingly oblivious present. Becoming absent instead of being completely erased, the past taints the glossy present, pointing to the fact that contemporary capitalist urban development in Prague is based on a bedrock of socialist interventions in the city's spaces and rhythms.

Avril Maddrell points to a different disturbance in publicly accessible spaces. Examining how those who grieve the loss of a beloved person use material markers to maintain a connection to their lost ones, she explores the ambivalences created by these markers of private bonds in public spaces in her article 'Living with the Deceased: Absence, Presence and Absence-Presence'. Informal memorials make absences present in the material structure of places. They

contest the process of forgetting and claim public space as a site for the display of emotion and attachment. Absences again become tangible as socially as well as materially rooted experiences that have to be negotiated in everyday practices by actors with different claims to the use of public space.

The question of who can and should be visible in public space is at the core of the last contribution to this special issue, 'Presenting Absent Bodies: Undocumented Persons Coping and Resisting in Sweden' by Erika Sigvardsdotter. For undocumented persons, this question signifies the challenge to their status and to their ability to develop a livelihood. Lacking in the right to make their presence known, undocumented persons need to maintain themselves as hidden in the eyes of the public, evading the gaze of police and prosecution. Struggling, however, to change this status, they also need to make their absence known as such, as a lack of actual presence that would go along with the potential to legitimately participate in the negotiation of their citizenship.

The issue of absence needs to be accounted for in the social sciences and in the humanities. This issue demonstrates that absence is all but a void. When absences are embodied and experienced today, absences can be part of contestations about the representation of the past but also about current social positions. To realize that absence is relevant is to become aware of what is covered by an obtrusive presence.

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Author biographies

Lars Frers, is Associate Professor at the Department of Teacher Education at Telemark University College in Norway. His research interests include materiality, movement and corporality, qualitative methods, social theory, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, climate change, and social control. He is currently working on his next book with the working title 'From Meaning to Sense: Social Science in Motion'.

Lars Meier, is Lecturer in Sociology at the Technical University of Berlin. His work is mainly on spatial and social transformations, social inequality and diversity, migration, urban studies and qualitative methods. Currently, he is editing a book on *Migrant Professionals in the City - Local Encounters, Identities, and Inequalities* (Routledge, 2013) and co-editing an issue on '(Im)mobilities of Dwelling'.

Erika Sigvardsson, finalized her doctoral dissertation 'Presenting the Absent – An Account of Undocumentedness in Sweden' in Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University in 2012. Her main research interests are mobility and borders, displacement and (dis-)orientation, intercorporeality and experiences of everyday life.