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# GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ABSENT PRESENCE OF MARGINALISED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE PUBLIC REALM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a collection of papers drawn from a session sponsored by the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group at the Annual International Conference of the RGS-IBG in Cardiff (2018). This subsequent dossier seeks to advance our understanding of the ‘absent presence’ of marginalised children and young people in the public realm. The idea of an absent presence has permeated many fields of geographical scholarship and generally refers to the influence that is exerted by something that is not physically present (anymore); this can be an idea, object or person. The empty playground visualises such an absent presence in children’s geographies. The three papers in this dossier discuss children and young people in public spaces in respectively the Netherlands, New Zealand and the US. The dossier closes with a commentary that reviews the theoretical, conceptual and substantive learning that has emerged across the papers.

**Key words:** absent presence; marginalised children; public space

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## ABSENT PRESENCE IN GEOGRAPHICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The idea of an absent presence has permeated different fields of geographical scholarship over many years, including population geography (McKendrick 2001), emotional geographies of heritage spaces (Micieli-Voutsinas 2017; Rhodes 2021), gender geographies (Willis *et al.* 2015), social and cultural geography (Hetherington 2004), urban geography (Callon & Law 2004; Gulson 2007) and children’s geographies (Valentine 2010; Blazek & Esson 2019). These geographical positionings attest to the potential of absent presence to illuminate understanding. This is understandable given that the idea is associated with

being, which is generally associated with occupying a place. Although not malleable, its uses are multiple.

It can refer to influence that is exerted by something that is not physically present. Here, it is typically associated with loss, the ‘presence’ being that which is felt by those left behind by someone who is no longer alive (or to a lesser extent, who can no longer be with them). For example, Blazek and Esson (2019) demonstrate the various ways in which the absent presence of children illuminates the understanding of adult human trafficking between Slovakia and the United Kingdom. Official statistics on this exploitative trafficking underestimate the role of children in the process, given that they are often ‘left behind’ in Slovakia. However, it is

their absence presence that allows the trafficking to function, with Blazek and Esson (2019, p. 325) arguing that it ‘... underpins both the exploitative practices of human trafficking and the trafficked adults’ resistance and recuperation’. The ‘left behind’ children in Slovakia remain within the reach and control of the traffickers’ network. Traffickers are described as exploiting the parent’s economic vulnerability and desire to provide for their children when arranging the move to the UK, and when this transpires to be an exploitative arrangement, the child ‘left behind’ becomes leverage to coerce the trafficked parent to deliver what is demanded of her.

Equally, the ‘presence’ that is not physically present can be an idea, such as the lingering influence of ideology that has been suppressed by a new regime. Or, as in the case of Gulson (2007), this might refer to how understandings of an absent presence shape urban regeneration strategies. He re-interprets *Building the Future*, ostensibly a change in education policy, as part of a wider convergent process of gentrified urban renewal in Sydney, Australia. Gulson presents the middle class as an idea that is foregrounded and emphasised in how a new school in this gentrifying area positions itself in the local education market, necessarily underplaying the presence of the ‘non-middle class’ and Aboriginal students who populate the school.

Not all presences of the absent are influential. On the contrary, and best encapsulated by the idiom ‘elephant in the room’, absent presences can be suppressions. Here, the absence speaks louder than the present, but the very obvious absence paradoxically gives presence through simmering discontent or the awkwardness of avoidance. Moran and Disney’s (2019) reflections on absent-presence in relation to incarceration exemplify this. They describe how a ‘present absence’ can characterise visits in which conversation has stalled – in a sense that presence being inflicted with absence, sometimes a function of the unusual social context in which they find themselves. They also refer to ghosting as a form of absent presence in which the prisoner finds her- or him-self alone in the visiting room among peers and their visitors when they have been ‘ghosted’ by their visitor who has not presented. They situate

their paper against emerging literature on absence, seeking to extend the empirical range of these studies by exploring the complexities of presence and absence in the context of prisoners, their estranged family and prison visits. Conscious suppression to induce awkwardness through the absence of an anticipated presence might be viewed as a variant of this. The attempt to provoke awkwardness is also political and highlights the import of the absence through its omission. Willis *et al.* (2015) not only lament human geography for the absence of scholarship and activism on the issue of childhood sexual abuse but suggest that this may signify whether this is being consciously repressed and denied by a discipline more concerned to protect its own. McKendrick (2001) also criticised the absent-presence of children in population geography, observing that this sub-discipline is one in which children were superficially prominent as a subject of in the study of family migration, child and infant mortality and fertility studies, without – at the time – emerging as a focal point. Engagement with the then-emergent field of children’s geographies and childhood studies was proposed to enrich an understanding of children’s population geographies.

Mass-mediations can give an illusion of a presence, with the ulterior motive of provoking a transaction, securing viewing participation (in turn, with commercial value in generating advertising revenue), or entertaining. Here, to a greater or lesser extent, participants voluntarily enter into the illusion of absence-presence. On the contrary, Hetherington (2004) demonstrates the illusion of an absence, problematising the idea that disposal (the creation of an absence) is final. His argument extends beyond waste management to explore how unfinished absences in the social realm can be troubling if the temporary nature of these absences manifests itself as a returning presence.

In structuralist theory, when signifiers refer to the signified, presences are referring to absences. Although not referring directly to structuralist theory, ruminations on the landscapes of children’s playgrounds have argued that these sometimes maligned environments represent the right to a presence in the wider environment for young children

(McKendrick 1999; Skelton 2022). The empty playground continues to signify children and children's space and may have value beyond its functional utility. The post-structuralist theory also finds utility in absence-presence with the argument that the absence of the writer leaves the text open to misinterpretation. Michieli-Voutsinas (2017) deploys a more-than-representational approach to explore affective heritage at the 11 September Memorial Museum at the World Trade Center site in New York. *Reflecting Absence* was the winning design for the heritage site. Drawing on a wide range of evidence – auto-biographical, key informant interviews and focus groups – it is demonstrated how visitors are encouraged to sense the presence of the absences and to encounter absences and presences at the museum. The milieux evoke trauma and stir an emotional response, stimulated by presence and absence, that could be mobilised and could continue to shape political positioning in relation to the events of 11 September 2001. However, Michieli-Voutsinas' concern is to illustrate that political subjectivities are experienced and that in this instance the absent presences are mobilised to stir strong emotions.

## INTRODUCTION TO THIS DOSSIER

This dossier seeks to advance our theoretical and substantive understanding of the presence of children in the public realm, drawing from the experiences of a diverse group of marginalised children in a range of geographical settings and contexts, and exploring how ideas of absent presence can help achieve this. Through this collection of papers, we intend to explore the tensions that abound when making sense of children and young people in everyday environments. While some lament the withdrawal from public spaces of children and young people, others seek to curtail and constrain this on account of the dangers they are perceived to present and face. We focus on the experiences of what is already widely understood as a marginal population.

These papers were drawn from a session sponsored by the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families Research Group (RGS-IBG,

UK) at the Annual International Conference of the RGS-IBG in Cardiff (August 2018). The wider session from which this dossier is drawn comprised 15 papers that explored how ideas of absent presence could enrich an understanding of children's lives in historical and contemporary times, in places as diverse as China, USA, Northern and Southern Europe, India, Turkey and Chile, and in a wide range of settings, including playgrounds, parks, neighbourhoods, schools, urban and rural areas, woods and sporting arenas.

The three papers in the dossier discuss the absent presence of children in, respectively, the Netherlands, New Zealand/Aotearoa and the USA, and are concluded with a review by Tracey Skelton (2022) of the theoretical, conceptual and substantive learning that has emerged across the papers. Van Melik and Althuisen (2022) critique the marginalisation of issues pertaining to disabled children in Dutch municipal play policies, focusing on two municipalities in the east of the Netherlands. Ergler *et al.* (2022) counter the arguments of those who question young children's competencies in planning processes, showing how pre-schoolers in Dunedin (New Zealand/Aotearoa) can contribute to the quest to realise child-friendly cities. Finally, Aitken *et al.* (2022) share how they applied the ideas of Nira Yuval-Davis (1999) to give presence to 11th grade students from a high school in a marginalised neighbourhood in San Diego (USA). As a collective, the aim of the dossier is to reflect on the examples of children's and young people's geographers as researcher-activists, positioning and problematising this work against the wider tradition of applied geography.

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