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# Living absence: the strange geographies of missing people.

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# Living absence: the strange geographies of missing people

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**Abstract.** In this paper ‘missing people’ gain an unstable presence through their (restaged) testimonies recounting individual occupations of material urban public space during the lived practice of absence. We explore ‘missing experience’ with reference to homeless geographies, and as constituted by paradoxical spatialities in which people are both absent and present. We seek to understand such urban geographies of absence through diverse voices of missing people, who discuss their embodiment of unusual rhythmic occupations of the city. We conclude by considering how a new politics of missing people might take account of such voices in ways to think further about rights-to-be-absent in the city.

**Keywords:** missing people, strange city, presence–absence, rhythms

## Introduction: the present absence of missing people

In a recent paper Sigvardsdotter (2013, page 524) discusses the curious absent presence of undocumented migrants in Sweden, arguing that “being officially absent robs undocumented persons of their capacity to define space, adding paradoxical qualities to the undocumented spatiality.” Sigvardsdotter lends insights into ‘being undocumented’ (in preference to ‘being migrant’), specifically relating to absence and presence, rights, resistance, identification, and the use of public space. This paper builds on these concerns and related calls to explore ‘geographies of absence’ (Frers, 2013; Meier et al, 2013), but in the context of a quite different kind of ‘living absence’: that of domestic ‘missing persons’,<sup>(1)</sup> with specific reference to ‘being missing’ in urban places. We thus explore the paradoxical qualities of present but absent spatialities, through insights into what we are calling ‘missing experience’ (see below a note about our terminology). We also elaborate current thinking about the city as an assemblage of unusual cartographies, ones which include “well-trodden, but not always visible, tracks ... inhabited by increasing numbers of people, and ... new circuits of belonging, fear and suffering” (Amin, 2007, page 101). We are thus engaging with often *hidden* uses of the city and a largely unrecognised ‘group’ we are calling ‘missing people’ [previously also ignored by human geographers; see Parr and Fyfe (2013)]. In doing so, we seek a distinctive contribution to current thinking around absence, *not* from the (more common) perspective of the left behind (Wylie, 2007) but from the perspective of those who have (temporarily) gone.

<sup>(1)</sup>The technical definition of a missing person in the UK is detailed in the main text, towards the end of the paper for the purpose of argument.

This paper is empirically partial, being based on findings from a UK-based research project,<sup>(2)</sup> and it is acknowledged that there are other kinds of human disappearance across the world (Edkins, 2011; Parr and Fyfe, 2013). The situated experiences of which we write still allow us to make general points about how people in crisis access relational urban topographies of the human and nonhuman. In contemporary cities, where it is increasingly recognised that there are new kinds of urban precarity and a new kind of urban precariat which traverse such spaces, domestic cases of missing people should be considered alongside the geographies of homeless, trafficked, and migrant peoples (Waite et al, 2013). Reflecting on how missing people access urban public space contributes to ideas about how the urban is an “important site of civic becoming [and contains] possibilities for urban well-being and collective recognition” (Amin, 2008, page 22). Relatedly, it is thus appropriate to consider what rights missing people might have to the city, alongside those of other marginal groups, as we discuss below.

In what follows, we are interested in the absence of missing people as an embodied performance, responsive and resistant to particular kinds of urban governance, notably policing (Cloke et al, 2008; Parr and Fyfe, 2013). Frers (2013, page 2) has recently argued that “the problem with accounts of absence is that they implicitly or explicitly use absence as ‘the other’, the opposite, the unknown, the spectral, the immaterial. Absence is posited as something that derives its inherent quality from the fact that it is beyond mere materiality, beyond the body and its embeddedness in the physical world.”

By privileging personal cartographies and performances of living absence, understood from the ‘inside’, we access something of ‘*what it feels like*’ to be a missing person, as well as showing how ‘missingness’ is articulated in and through urban geographies via testimonies which we interpret with attention to rhythm. In doing so, we address Frers’s concern with the predominant *abstraction* of absences and the need to acknowledge “the experience of absence [and] its embeddedness in the body, in bodily practices, sensual perceptions and emotions” (2013, page 3; and see Madrell and Siddaway, 2010). Understanding more about *where* and *how* people reported as missing ‘go absent’ thus helps to elaborate thinking on embodied, paradoxical absence [forms of which are undocumented by the academy and others, despite the surprising fact that there are 350 000 annual reports of missing incidents recorded by the police in the UK (SOCA, 2013)].

Sigvardsdotter (2013, page 530) suggests that, for the undocumented in Sweden, absenting oneself from the world “is a kind of resistance without coordination or planning; a situational self-help tactic that avoids any direct confrontation” (with the state, in her case). There are parallels with people reported as missing in the UK, where the absence is often ‘accidentally deliberate’ or enacted as an unplanned crisis [a ‘crisis mobility’; see Parr and Fyfe (2013, page 623)] and also constitutive of a self-help tactic. Unlike Sigvardsdotter, however, there may be less sense here in discussing this kind of absence as a conscious ‘resistance’ than in positioning it in relation to debates about collective identifications, rights-to-the-city, and individualised and unorthodox occupations of urban space (Amin, 2008; Lefebvre, 1996).

For Sigvardsdotter’s undocumented populations (eg, rejected asylum seekers), they are ‘jointly anonymous’ and constitute a curious collectivity of people who *are* and *are not* present. This point relates to how undocumented people may be physically present but disappear from the state’s radar and registers, with implications for political subjectivity and related refusals to allow such people any visibility, voice, or official presence (see also Sigvardsdotter, 2013). Thus, Sigvardsdotter argues, undocumented people are a politically ‘indistinct group’ that cannot be visible *as themselves*: indeed, “only a joint anonymous presence is possible” (2013, page 533). Such points resonate with Edkins’s (2011, page 7) concern for the ‘missing missing’

<sup>(2)</sup> ESRC funding: ES/H030166/1: “Geographies of missing people: experiences, processes, responses”.

and Pratt's (2005) referral to the 'doubly missing'. What stands out from Sigvardsson's (2013) account is the process by which such absent people are not just represented as victims or 'lost', but instead 'gain appearance' and thus an unstable presence—in material public space, but also political debate—as a group. In our paper missing people risk *remaining* 'jointly anonymous', given our representational restaging of their voices (via pseudonyms) as we seek to 'bring them into view', and yet they do 'gain appearance' of sorts, but *not* in precisely the same ways as is proposed by Sigvardsson in her use of Arendt's work on political presence. Merely representing or restaging voices of 'the missing' cannot guarantee their *gaining appearance* in political terms, but we can argue this is a first step towards a *recognition* of their embodied presence as *people*<sup>(3)</sup> and as part of a new politics of the *person* as missing (Edkins, 2011).

We begin our paper by further situating our contribution in relation to homeless mobilities and cartographies in particular (Cloke et al, 2008, page 242).<sup>(4)</sup> In such work 'other kinds' of city life are encountered, especially homeless lives, as a kind of "performativity ... bound up in complex ways with the architecture of the city itself". We assess the implications of such thinking for understanding missing performativity and we also enrol notions of a 'strange city' in unusual use, with reference to instances of 'urban arrhythmia' (unusual or disruptive rhythms), as missing people 'live absence' (Edensor, 2010; Lefebvre, 2004). We also disclose such geographies of absence by including voices of missing people and by depicting key elements of experiential missing 'journeys',<sup>(5)</sup> in a (partial) representation of their leaving, journeying, emotions, and return. Such a tactic risks imposing temporal and spatial order on a rather messy practice, but we interpret these elements with reference to missing rights-to-the-city (Lefebvre, 1996). In conclusion we return to consider paradoxical spatialities of absence–presence and suggest directions for future work.

We experiment with a new kind of language to represent missing people and the changed social relations that such human absence can produce (Parr and Stevenson, 2013a). We deliberately invent phrases like 'missing experience' to indicate the complex experiences of people related to those who have gone missing. 'Missing situation' is a related (and literal) phrase indicating a range of people and processes that may be involved in different ways once a human absence is noted (see Payne, 1995). This language, if grammatically strained, begins to suggest that a new vocabulary around missing people may be helpful in stimulating public debate and marking their distinctive experiences via reclaimed words (although see Godrej, 2011).

### **'The strange city': embodying unusual cartographies of absence**

For Amin and Thrift (2002, page 30), urban life is characterised by a "complex intermesh between flesh and stone, human and non-humans, fixtures and flows, emotions and practices". Geographers of homelessness have been working creatively with these ideas (Cloke et al, 2008; Lancione, 2013), in order to reimagine the city in *unusual use*. There are, of course,

<sup>(3)</sup> We have created stories of missing experience, published as text and audio resources (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013b). These are being used in police education to affect empathetic operational responses from police officers. The stories have also contributed to a change in operational policing of missing people in Scotland through changes to their Standard Operating Procedure (Police Scotland, 2014).

<sup>(4)</sup> People who are reported as missing do travel to, from, and within rural areas, but we are specifically addressing urban missingness.

<sup>(5)</sup> 'Missing journeys' implies a coherence to absent mobilities. The term 'journey' here is used as a device for specifying the episode of being absent. We have 'rationalised' these episodes into chronological journey 'stages' such as 'leaving, moving, encountering, returning' [and as depicted in Stevenson et al (2013)], in order to help translate a chaotic experience to multiple audiences (academic, policing, public). We acknowledge that this risks a 'smoothing' of traumatic experience and domesticating it for more general consumption (cf Tamas, 2011).

overlaps and differences between experiences of being missing or being homeless (see Parr and Fyfe, 2013) in that homeless people may sometimes be missing and missing people may not be homeless. The particularity of the crisis-led mobilities that missing people occupy potentially renders them unstable subjects for the purposes of analysing the city, precisely because they may not sediment their 'alternative' spatialities in ways that homeless people might: their 'flesh and stone' relations with city spaces are differently configured. Unlike being homeless, which often means accessing shared collective experiences and identities (and emotive 'structures of meaning') on the street or in a hostel, being missing is usually highly individualised and short in duration, maybe involving performative attempts to 'hide' or 'escape' from others. The ways in which homelessness and missingness are governed also differ significantly, and these contextual points frame how missing people might embody the city in ways both similar to and different from those in which homeless people embody the city. Jocoy et al (2010, page 1946), for example, suggest "service geographies structure homeless presences and mobilities", while Cloke et al (2008) contend that such service geographies are not the only story of homeless cartographies:

"routines of movement and pause are intimately associated ... with a practical knowledge of the micro-architectures of the city ... . In this way, small back streets and alleyways provide channels for relatively 'invisible' movement through the city" (Cloke et al, 2008, page 244).

"shop doorways become sleeping places, public lavatories become bathrooms, underground walkways and concourses become gathering points, with ... specific graffiti each serving as signs by which this other homeless city is variously marked out" (Cloke et al, 2008, page 245).

Such comments suggest a city to which homeless people become *especially attuned* in their *repeated* readings and occupation of urban space. For a temporarily missing person, such codifications are not as readily available, for they have no repetitive experience or wider collective community upon which to rely for translation. Their use of the city is possibly more chaotic, random, and risky in its raw and suddenly embodied versions of 'unhome' (Veness, 1993), a situation that homeless people must have first embodied as they left their homed environment. Veness (1993, page 321) argues that "un-home refers to a conceptual category and social space that defies easy classification and resists standard explanations and prescriptions [, for] un-home describes the personal worlds of people whose environments and experiences do not conform with society's standards but which uphold their personal values and needs." Although commenting on the precarious lives of people who live in a range of environments and situations, set against ideological or dualistic understandings of home and homelessness, Veness's (1993) definition is also helpful in conveying something of the situation which missing people might be deemed to occupy as they temporarily make themselves absent from their homed or institutional lives, with no secure prospect of shelter, assistance, or community. The crisis-led mobility that comprises missing experience is one that prompts related but different kinds of questions about the strange use of the city (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Cloke et al, 2008) and what we call below 'arrhythmic' cartographies of absence.

We begin to use a language of rhythm partly because missing experience seems out of time with much of the dominant ways of using urban spaces. Pinder (2011, page 689) considers the diverse 'potentialities' at stake in 'ordinary' walking rhythms across the city, noting:

"Lefebvre's writings are particularly suggestive for considering the ways in which this involves attending to the generative practices of bodies and their rhythms in opposition to their being channelled, choreographed by dominant powers."



As we show below, missing people do lots of walking, although only very occasionally in conscious opposition or resistance to forms and processes of *locating* power. Rather, missing mobility can be understood, in part, as predominantly pedestrian, but in ways often arrhythmic to usual patterns of embodied urban geographies (even perhaps those of homeless people). Using a language of rhythm orientates us to both missing time and space. Missing time is usually brief [90% of missing persons cases in the UK are resolved within a week; see Tarling and Burrows (2004)], perhaps better cast as durations of “heterogeneous temporality” (Simpson, 2008, page 811) than as clock time. The ways in which missing people also report using space is particular, involving stuttered, uncertain, and highly emotive occupations of less visible pathways or parts of cities not obviously under surveillance. While we do not fully interpret missing geographies via rhythm analysis (Lefebvre, 2004), we are nonetheless inspired to use its insights to access something of how the experience of missing absence is often felt as “out-of-sync with dominant diurnal beats” (Edensor, 2010, page 4). More broadly, Lefebvre’s (2004) participative visioning of urban places, as opposed to just cities (Purcell, 2002), is infused by a concern for ‘lived space’ and “a person’s actual experience of space in everyday life ... not just [as] a passive stage on which social life unfolds, but [as representing] a constituent element of social life” (Lefebvre, 1991, page 39). Geographers and others often work with politicised readings of Lefebvre and lived space to consider how it might be possible to have rights to change ourselves by changing cities (Harvey, 2008). We use Lefebvrian thinking selectively in this regard, in order to generate reflections on whether arrhythmic missing absence may—paradoxically—have a rightful place in the urban, notably in light of how many missing people generate significant levels of police search in efforts to end or correct such forms of aberrant human behaviour (Parr and Fyfe, 2013).<sup>(6)</sup>

Until recently, almost nothing was known about what people *do* and *where they go* and *how they return* when they are reported as missing (but see Parr and Fyfe, 2013; Parr and Stevenson, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; Stevenson et al, 2013; Woolnough et al, 2014), and the next part of the paper seeks to remedy this by detailing selective accounts of their missing journeys. In doing so, we are continuing to work towards “a discussion of absence that bases the understanding of absence on its experiential qualities” (Frers, 2013, page 431).

### Encountering people reported as missing

The paper draws on interviews with forty-five men and women<sup>(7)</sup> in the UK reported as missing to the police, but returning between the years 2009–11. Accessing this sample of the 250 000 annual cases of returned missing adults (and 350 000 annually recorded ‘incidents’, including repeat cases) was achieved through work with two police force databases in England and Scotland, and with assistance from the UK National Missing Persons Bureau (UKMPB). A letter of invitation was sent to all reported missing persons for 2009–11 in each force [for full details, recruitment pathways, and sampling frames, see ‘Technical appendix’ in Stevenson et al (2013)]. The low response rate was expected with such a sensitive research thematic, but we met intended recruitment targets. The research project was a partnership between academics and police, conducted with the support of the UK charity Missing People,

<sup>(6)</sup>This paper, while not deeply Lefebvrian in its conceptual resources, is nonetheless inspired by how Lefebvre—in different parts of his corpus—was moved to take seriously both ‘rhythms’ and ‘rights’. Indeed, a sense arises of the need to appreciate the grain of lived city rhythms on the part of its many inhabitants, as a prelude to politicised reflection on their rights to be present and ‘flourishing’, even in their difference (and see Elden, 2004).

<sup>(7)</sup>Twenty-one women and twenty-four men were interviewed in two forces in Scotland and England. 44% were employed, with the remainder out of work, and there were no gender differences in this. The sample were predominately white Scottish/British. 36% had been reported as missing on more than one occasion. 93% were aged between eighteen and fifty-nine.

and the work was intended to address a lack of evidence about where missing people go when they are absent. The results have been fed into police and charity education, training, and support work (see [www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk](http://www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk)).

The semistructured interviews conducted asked about the period of time immediately before the missing event, the event itself (in terms of ground covered, modes of mobility, encounters, communication, emotional reflections, police interactions, and processes of return), and after the event. The opportunity to talk was welcomed by those who participated and, indeed, one resounding message from interviewees was that *more* talk about being reported missing should be available at the moment of return with police officers and, afterwards, with dedicated professionals (Stevenson et al, 2013). There was a disparity between people interviewed in whether they identified with the term ‘missing person’, and many rejected the term, understanding themselves instead to be merely *absent in practice*. Our decision to adopt a language of missing experience is a loaded one, then, in that it is not straightforwardly responding to a call from interviewees to do so (and see Parsell, 2011). However, given that this is a lexicon *already* at work within police and (inter)national security and tracing agencies, we are keen to infuse it with a more substantial orientation to *people* and their voices. Talking in detail to people reported as missing about going absent is a deliberate attempt to record the *specificity* of particular missing people (after Edkins, 2011; Parr and Fyfe, 2013), and to move away from (just) collecting generic, categorical information about incidents based on operational data in order to inform police records (although our qualitative data are now being used to inform good police practice guidance and training).

## Geographies of missing people

### Leaving

The circumstances leading to adults being reported as missing are complex. While some people make a conscious decision to leave, the situations resulting in people going absent are not entirely of their own making. Well-known drivers for missing absence include mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, relationship breakdown, and financial stress (James et al, 2008; Stevenson et al, 2013). In some instances, both men and women report feeling trapped within a social situation and physical location, and the need to leave is expressed as a response to a time, place, or situation that can no longer be tolerated. Unable to share feelings or locate effective forms of support in situ, people use absence as a tangible way to create time and space where it might be possible to resolve difficult or traumatic feelings:

“I’d had enough of me handing myself out to everybody and nobody being there for me and that, and so it was just like ‘I can’t cope with this, I need time and space for myself’” (Trish, missing twenty-four hours).<sup>(8)</sup>

Deciding to leave created a moment of calm, clarity, and short-term relief for some; as Jack (missing three days) says: “It was instant relief from the hassle and the stress and the nerves.” Rhianna (missing six hours) agrees: “I felt free when I left. As soon as I walked out of the door I felt free.” These feelings are often linked to a sense of control for many interviewees, whose absence was all about “getting control back again” (Lesley, missing six hours). Initial feelings of release, freedom, and control, however, were often revised as people continued their missing journey. Interviewees left from a variety of locations, including their own or family homes, locked and open mental health wards, workplaces, and from the midst of commuting routes. Women were more likely than men to plan an absence, but planning usually occupied only a small window of time, with no bearing on time away. The act of leaving was described as both physical and emotional:

<sup>(8)</sup>We note the time frame for missing experience just once for each respondent.

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“One minute I’m smoking a cigarette, the next I’ve gone, bang, bang, over the fence” (Max, missing forty-eight hours–seven days, repeatedly).

“I had got dressed and I looked out of the door and all I felt inside was this real adrenaline rush” (Amanda, missing sixteen–forty-eight hours, repeatedly).

A visceral sense of the bumping speed and calamity of ‘taking leave’ was expressed in many accounts, a sensing quickly followed by describing a period of brief calm.

### **Journeying**

Nearly all people interviewed reported that their missing journey was not predetermined in terms of how long it would last or the exact locations to be traversed. Often the first few hours of a journey were spent focused on unstable decisions about where and how to go, and the majority of our interviewees chose to walk in urban environments. Reflections on this period of initial walking were dominated by ‘tactical talk’, in which avoidance of public transport and urban surveillance was a priority:

“I kept thinking if I go and get on a bus somewhere, half the buses now have CCTV, so they’ll know where I’m going. So that’s why I started walking. No one will know where I’m going, they can’t follow me” (Trish).

Using public transport meant that the scheduling of journeys was largely outside an individual’s control, and waiting at bus stops added to the anxiety of being located. An awareness of the ability of CCTV or other systems, such as Automatic Number Plate Recognition or Oyster Card technology, to track movements in time–space also influenced decisions about mode of travel and movement through environments:

“I drive, but straight away it has to be registered and especially nowadays and the police know straight away through their computers. So to get a car and be anonymous is very, very hard and [to have an Oyster Card], you know, I don’t have anything that can be traced back to me” (Max).

Many recognised the advantages of walking as they could move with less fear of observation and choose their own routes: “I decided to walk up the High Street and then I joined some back streets and they were quiet. I was able to walk along there for a bit and avoid the crowds” (John, missing sixteen hours). As Middleton (2009) suggests, walking opens up the possibility of doing *other things* in ways that urban transport does not. Walking, then, for those reported as missing, allowed a performative and perceptual avoidance of policing surveillance; and, as Amanda describes, it also helped in managing conflicting thoughts and emotions:

“The pacing was significant of how my mind was at the time. My mind was going nineteen to the dozen and I couldn’t sit still. I had to keep moving because my mind was in such disarray and the pacing was to try and keep up with the anxiety that I was feeling inside. ... I just desperately needed to keep on the move all the time and then when I started walking along in the streets I was walking really quite quickly. Initially the decision to move was just a physical need to move. The pacing up and down and the stomach churning was getting so intense it was painful. So the only thing that seemed to relieve it was walking fast” (Amanda).

Some thirty-eight of our forty-five interviewees reported mental health problems [in line with estimated national averages of 80%; see Gibb and Woolnough (2007)] and, perhaps related to acute crisis, journeys were described as nonlinear and characterised by circles, loops, or squares. This mobility was narrated as a deliberate, if shaky, set of decisions about *where* to walk and the *geographies of walk*. For many interviewees, staying local and walking in familiar or emotionally significant places was important. Many specifically steered clear of their home street for fear that they would be detected, but the noted risk was balanced by the recognition that “If I had gone somewhere I didn’t know it would have been a lot harder to get through the next few days because I wouldn’t know where anything was” (Matthew, missing



twenty-six days). Knowing streets, as Matthew shows, and being able to navigate areas comfortably, allowed people involved in the act of going missing to blend in and not appear out of place or lost, and so missing performances were often—*paradoxically*—local ones. Missing people are both absent and present, then, and choosing *where* to go to be so was revealed as a surprisingly conscious and deliberative process, as well as an act of memory and crisis.

### Environmental encounters

Johnsen et al (2008, page 197) found that the common everyday needs of homeless people are, unsurprisingly, “subsistence, ablutions, socialising and sustaining themselves financially”. Narrators of missing experience concur, as interviewees described the myriad ways that they used the built and natural environment to meet these needs. However, this temporarily absent group did not readily identify with or have knowledge of homeless service provision and support networks, which, coupled with a perceived need to hide throughout their journeys, made for stressful experiences. Even when unaware of being reported as missing, interviewees were attentive to environmental resources that facilitated their need to hide. Hiding performances and behaviour included taking shelter to avoid detection, avoiding CCTV, changing clothing by stealing new clothes off washing lines or from charity bins, and staying with friends who did not disclose their whereabouts (see table 1). In the following interview extract, Amanda reflects upon how she used the environment to hide:

“I got worried every time I heard a car, and so I would duck into someone’s garden quickly and come out again.”

As Amanda explains, she used unusual spatial tactics to lower her chances of being seen. She highlights how missing people can be acutely attuned to surveillance and the possibility of police search, and how they might use the built and natural environment as resources to avoid this.

Wooded areas and derelict buildings were often deliberately chosen and parks in (semi)residential areas featured in just under half of missing journeys as popular resting places: “There’s like a park. I remember sitting on a bench for ages watching basically drunks walk past and the cops were on the go and the trees sort of shaded and nobody noticed you” (Trish). As journey time continued in the constant cycle of motion and emotion, places to rest both momentarily and for longer periods of time increased in importance. Transport hubs, such as bus and train stations and airports, offered opportunities for missing people to rest, eat, wash, and sleep masked by the usual rhythms of these spaces. Daniel (missing forty-eight hours—

**Table 1.** Hiding on missing journeys.

Hiding performances and behaviour	Percentage of subjects ( $n = 39$ )	
	males	females
Changed physical appearance		5
Changed clothes	5	8
Wearing dark clothing or clothing to conceal face	8	5
Using false name	10	3
Hiding in natural environment other places (including parks, woods)	18	10
Hiding in built environment (including friends, sheds, and derelict buildings)	13	16

Column does not total 100% as subjects may have been involved in more than one type of hiding practice or none at all.

seven days, repeatedly) reflects on staying overnight at an airport: “lots of people arrive early for flights they’ve got to catch early in the morning and they stay over at the airport so you don’t really stick out.” Although such places offer access to facilities, there was recognition that they were heavily policed environments, and interviewees were often wary of ongoing and ‘active search’, in which case such places potentially offered *less cover* than might routinely be the case for homeless people.

### **Embodying missing rhythms/‘being missing’**

In the sections above, people reported as missing are represented as more or less *consciously* absent, although this absence is one which often occurs in crisis and with uncertain intentions. We have argued that *walking* the city becomes a dominant mode of mobility, in tandem with a need to hide (via backstreets and in crowds, hedges, and undergrowth) and to respond to confusing emotional states by movement. We now turn to engage more directly with narratives of missing mobility and attune to their reported rhythms, in a partial attempt to understand more about missing performativity. Here, we recognise that missing journeys are constituted by curious tactical rationalities of individuals, occasionally in tandem with others. The urban maps that result often seem ‘strange’ and even ‘irrational’, in that hiding and concealment and basic survival experiments in urban settings can result in aberrant city rhythms and unusual behaviour. Below, missing people and their performances on missing journeys are represented by using their voices to illustrate their arrhythmic embodiment of urban space.

### **Bodily rhythms**

The need for our missing people to be constantly on the move was interspersed by sudden requirements for rest and food. The momentums that constituted these strange geographies, meant that usual rhythms of eating and sleeping might have been abandoned prior to the journey, and also further disrupted en route: “I didn’t sleep, I didn’t eat, I just kept walking” (Matt, missing sixteen–forty-eight hours, repeatedly). Despite not having alternative ‘food maps’ of the city, missing people used their existing resources to buy food or access food from supermarket bins: “I spent time looking for food. I found food from bins” (Alex, missing seven days). Missing performance might here be understood as involving versions of ‘impression management’, like that discussed by Cloke et al (2008). Many discussed attempting to eat and drink ‘under cover’ of a crowded public environment, so as to somehow deflect their absent status. Here, however, they were also vulnerable to disruptions of such missing performances:

“I had a few pub lunches. I don’t recall eating them. I remember one meal in the pub in the evening and there were some raucous couples sitting together and I felt irritated. I remember having the best part of a bottle of wine to myself and trying not to cry” (Rachel, missing seven days).

“I went into that café and got changed and had a wash and stuff [but] I might [have been] behaving differently and acting strangely” (Wilma, missing sixteen–forty-eight hours in repeated journeys).

In light of their unfamiliarity with free food sources, and anxieties over their performativity in public spaces, some people turned to off-street locations and rough sleeping in order to cope and hide. Here the environment and weather framed bodily rhythms, the *sensational* geographies of outdoor encounter with natural settings for long periods of time constituting a significant physical and emotive challenge:

“In the day time I walked down to the beach. Occasionally I slept on it if it was warm enough. You couldn’t sleep much at night because of the cold. You had to really think about getting through ... to get through it for another night. By the time you got to dawn

coming, you'd think 'I hope it will be a good day and not pouring with rain' " (Andrew, missing seven–twelve days, repeatedly).

"I was so depressed, it was cold, it was wet" (Rhona, missing for longer than seven days–six months, repeatedly).

Without more tactical and rational resources for surviving outdoor rest and sleeping, most interviewees discussed their constant physical movements, often interwoven with what we might call 'arrhythmic thinking'.

### Thinking rhythms

Edensor's (2010, page 18) review of the rhythmic patterns and potentialities of everyday life allows for both longer-term and everyday rhythmic consistencies *and* "moments of arrhythmia". He cites Labelle's (2008, page 190) work in elaborating how rhythms become established and repeated *within* people, pointing to how what 'audio' is 'going on' in one's head ('self-defined choreography') links us to "existing architectures of space and time". Edensor extends the possibilities here "to consider other gestures, daydreams and performances through which personal rhythms ground individuals in place" (2010, page 9). His work also acknowledges the fragility and transience of human rhythmic routines, asking how life events (like having a mental health crisis) can "cause instability and anomie without secure and consistent temporal tethering" (Edensor, 2010, page 16, citing Alheit, 1994). Parr and Fyfe (2013, page 630) also suggest that research on mental illness and different kinds of "mad transits" (Knowles, 2000, page 84) in the city may provide resources for understanding missing rhythms, encouraging sensitivity to "moving and motions through", rather than just occupying, space. Knowles's work reveals how disenfranchised people with mental health issues can live constantly mobile lives which are (violently) punctuated by uncertainties. Likewise, in our collected accounts of people being reported as missing (Parr and Stevenson, 2013b), the 'interior' or 'thinking life' of people in crisis was intimately linked to their missing mobilities, characterised by stuttering duration, fast and uncertain rhythms, and even clumsy occupations of space. The very act of absence seemed to throw people out of their usual rhythms and into temporary rhythms which speeded up or slowed down in unusual ways for them. These strange rhythms were not disconnected to the wider city and its logics, but *also* intimately connected to conscious and unconscious interior emotional states:

"I couldn't settle and had just this churning in my stomach, my heart was beating faster and my mind was going nineteen to the dozen. I was just really, really distressed. The agitation, the constant nervousness and jumpiness was actually physically painful after a while. The anxiety became physical ... I was so tense. I thought I would lose that by disappearing. I would lose those sensations from my body and then it would just be okay" (extract from 'Johnny's story' in Parr and Stevenson, 2013b).<sup>(9)</sup>

Johnny's rhythms, "keeping in time with what was going on in my head at that time", are voiced as a response to disruptive psychic beats registering in his anxious body. As Katie (missing seventy-two hours) says: "I was wandering the streets just having this need to keep going forward somewhere ... I can't tell you how many miles I did that night. I just kept walking, but nothing was getting sorted out in my head." The anxious emotionality of being missing is not always bound up just with logics and performativity of concealment, but is also connected with the beat of thinking rhythms. The pounding confusion of crisis-led thinking

<sup>(9)</sup> 'Johnny's story' is included in a collection of stories of missing experience—published as textual stories and audio resources (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013b). The stories were written with a composite and creative approach, combining elements of different individual interviews, but edited and reworked to form a 'typical story' that recurred across forty-five interviews (see [www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk/downloads/techappendix.pdf](http://www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk/downloads/techappendix.pdf)). The politics of writing here are important—we use verbatim individual experience, but 'collate' this in order to harness essences of missing journeys in order to affectively intervene in policing cultures (Parr and Stevenson, 2013c).

seems to propel bodies forwards, and round and back again, not always leaving local areas but *being missing*—absent and present—within them.

### Individual and collective rhythms

Some interviewees made ad hoc links with those in street and homeless communities, especially if trustworthy friends could not shelter them:

“I stayed with a couple of lads in this run-down flat. I suspected they were drug addicts by the look of it, the way the house was and the way they were. They gave me a settee and a duvet and I slept there. I was grateful” (Daniel, missing for forty-eight hours—seven days in repeated missing journeys).

“I ... was in a place where a lot of street people congregate ... I struck up conversation with this street person. He was living rough and I think I told him what I was feeling and he didn't seem that surprised by it ... when he realised I had a bottle of vodka, he was my friend for the day. Towards the end of the evening he said he knew a place where I could stay” (‘Stuart's story’ in Parr and Stevenson, 2013b).

These connections were more possible for those who were absent from their usual everyday lives for longer periods. Matthew, missing for twenty-six days, talks about how he “*got into routines*” and rhythms, some of which involved making a transition from the frenetic pacing of early absence to a slowed-down form of missingness, through which it was possible to make new connections in street communities:

“I was sitting in the square one day and this guy came up to me. There was a few homeless people hanging about in the square, and one comes up to say, ‘they are looking for you man.’ This was the first indication I had that anyone had been looking for me ... and then some other homeless guys turn up and they say ‘oh is that the guy?’ and they said they were shown a picture of me. That made me jump and really think, you know, they are actually out there looking for me.”

Where links were made between missing people and homeless people, they often involved directions, food, shelter, brief companionship, and versions of care (Cloke et al, 2008), all of which might be cast as ‘provision opportunities’ (some more formal than others). All of our respondents were relatively short-term members of street communities, sometimes living in and out of cheap hotels and bed and breakfast houses, sleeping rough only briefly. There is no known ‘accommodation’ (literally, legally, or metaphorically) for people who are only briefly absent from their homed lives, and the exhaustion of being missing is reported as profound, often prompting a return. The thinking body in emotive arrhythmic mobility tires quickly, and a return to usual rhythms is sought by some:

“You start seeing things more basic again ... I was tired, exhausted. Two days and you're exhausted, you want to go home, you do not want to be running around the streets” (Wilma).

### Return

Previous research has found that the majority of missing persons incidents are resolved quickly (Tarling and Burrows, 2004), which is broadly consistent with the findings of our work: the majority (54%) of adults returned or were located within forty-eight hours, and 24% percent were missing between forty-eight hours and seven days, with only a minority outstanding for several weeks (Stevenson et al, 2013). In discussing their considerations for a return, those interviewed relate a transition filled with practical considerations and various emotions of guilt, uncertainty, fear, and relief. These conflicting feelings were often caused by uncertainty about *how* to return, as two interviewees, Amanda and Max, suggest:

“I wasn't sure if I was in trouble with the police or not. I didn't know and I thought if they found me I would get arrested. You don't know what procedures are” (Amanda).

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“When you get to that situation and you are about to go back, your mind is thinking about ‘what am I going to go back to face?’. It’s just like the whole situation and you get a cramp in your stomach. It makes you feel anxious” (Max).

There are multiple impulses for return and mechanisms for being reconnected, from being located by the police, friends, or family, to ‘running out of steam’ or feeling the need to reengage with regular routines and rhythms. Uncertainty about what going missing *means* in terms of police procedure, as well as wondering what family responses would be, looms large in anticipatory anxieties about return. Some 93% of interviewees reported police involvement in ending their journeys, with varied experiences of police handling ranging from Wilma—“the police are the soundest. They’re the ones that are least judging”—through to Angela (missing for sixteen hours), for whom police interaction was embarrassing and induced feelings of being ‘criminal’. In such cases missing people were provided with limited opportunities to discuss their missingness, despite many having the need to do so (see Stevenson et al, 2013). This neglect led to traumatic memories in some cases, and also lost opportunities for ‘informed policing’ about the realities of missing experience (Parr and Fyfe, 2013; Shalev et al, 2009). The research suggests that what officers *say* and *explain* about being a missing person is important, even for months or years after the event (see also Fyfe et al, 2014).

The act of returning from a period of being reported as missing is a troubling one involving strong reactions from family, friends, and workplaces. It involves readjusting routines and rhythms and occasionally consulting with medical or counselling services (although this was a need often unmet). Often, however, these profound experiences were reported as being met with silence, for missing experience has no easily translatable frame of reference. There is no recognisable public language about it, or missing community, and the NGOs in this field are usually enrolled in provision for families of missing people, and even here there is a surprising lack of attention to the dynamics of return (Parr and Stevenson, 2013a; 2013b). Until recently there were no public voices of missing experience beyond the few registering in the media (but see Parr and Stevenson, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). With annual incidents reaching 350 000, this is an uncanny silence, and perhaps one bound up with the strange cartographies of absence, described above, which do not fit neatly into ‘homed’ or ‘homeless’ categories of human geographical experience (Veness, 1993). It is against this silence, and in response to the strange maps and rhythms narrated above, that we now discuss the question of missing rights and the city.

### **Rights to urban absence for missing people**

The notion of a right to the city in Lefebvre’s writings is closely tied to his understanding of the city as an oeuvre, a work in which all citizens must be allowed to participate. The right to the city is for Lefebvre, therefore, bound up with the right to urban life, the right to be part of, and present in, the city, and the right “to places of encounters and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of ... moments and places” (1996, page 179). Many geographers have drawn inspiration from this vision, and in Mitchell’s (2009) work he and his coworkers have addressed experiences of the homeless and the urban poor, documenting how they attempt to survive in the city—by seeking out places of shelter, foraging for food, and finding spaces to wash and sleep—space now routinely under threat from the drive to ‘secure’ the city by powerful economic and political elites. There are a wide range of mechanisms by which this enhanced social control of cities and the ‘fortress impulse’ in urban design are being realised, but common to many is a radical intensification of the surveillance of urban spaces. As Mitchell and Heynen (2009, page 628) observe, this intensification creates an urban habitat of ‘total exposure’ based on a ‘structure of visibility’



which may erode the civil liberties of those who wish to remain anonymous in public and “engage in activities not directly regulated and approved *a priori* by the state” (page 619).

These arguments may have a resonance for *how* missing people inhabit the city. They use the environment to forage for food, find places to wash, and seek spaces of shelter, but also engage in hiding behaviours to avoid detection by surveillance systems (such as CCTV). Missing people struggle to inhabit public spaces in the city while maintaining their invisibility. The hour-to-hour, day-to-day tactics and strategies they employ also need to be read at a broader level, in terms of a politics of being missing, and the expression of a right to be in the city, free from interference by others, free from *search* (and see Parr and Fyfe, 2013). Indeed, being missing could even be cast as a transgressive act, as well as a response to emotional crisis:

“I’m exercising my freedom and my right to roam ... I’m exercising my freedom of mind; I’m exercising my right to ... freedom of thought. I’m exercising my right to think how I want, my right to have the beliefs that I want, the right to go where I want when I want” (Wilma).

“As far as I can see people should have a choice to go missing, you know what I am saying? People [are] supposed to have equal rights” (Jim, missing seven days, repeatedly).

As these reflections illustrate, the act of going missing is entangled with wider meanings associated with the exercise of individual rights. Several respondents invoked what they viewed as a right to go missing, arguing that they were simply exercising a fundamental freedom and expressing what Hohfeld (2000, quoted in Attoh, 2011, page 670) would term a ‘liberty-right’, free of any duty:

“I think a lot of people would just like to get up and go, you know what I mean? But people are tied down with mortgages and properties, and all that lot, and when things are going completely chaotic, lots of people just feel like they want to get up and go, you know what I mean? But they are tied down so much they can’t. It’s like a noose round their neck. They can’t go nowhere, do you know what I mean? Whereas for me, I just think to myself ‘why should I be forced into a situation?’, ‘Why can’t I walk away?’”(Mayowa, missing seven days).

In the UK underpinning this perceived liberty-right is actually a legal right to go missing, relevant to anyone who is eighteen or older and not detained (‘sectioned’) under the Mental Health Act or not legally in the care of another person (this right is one shared by most democratic states and was enshrined in UN resolution 7/28 in 2008). The right of a person to go missing is complicated, however, by the requirement of police officers to search for someone reported as such. Once someone is reported as missing, the police must rapidly establish whether this is an ‘intentional’ absence (that is, someone has decided to go missing, perhaps to have some time away from other pressures) or an ‘unintentional’ absence (that is, someone is lost, perhaps as a result of mental illness or dementia, or a victim of an abduction). Locating where a missing individual lies on this ‘missing continuum’ (Biehal et al, 2003) is therefore a key challenge, because it will inform what is an appropriate police response.

Rights to be missing also need to be seen in relation to responsibilities of the police under Human Rights legislation and their statutory duty to protect life. Determining what constitutes an appropriate police response in missing situations will typically hinge on a process of risk assessment, informing the scale and direction of the subsequent investigation (Newiss, 2004; 2005). However, as Ericson and Haggerty (1997, page 92) have noted, in any process of risk assessments, “measurement is inexact, statistical probabilities are imprecise, and indeterminism is therefore ever present” (and see Smith and Shalev Greene, 2014). Practical policing matters always frame a discussion of rights to be missing in the city. Lefebvrian visions of urban participation do not easily feature in this accounting

of the city. Where is the rightful place for arrhythmic absence in the above? How can the *practice* of missing mobility be accommodated in cities that are under surveillance and subject to risk-averse policing governance? These tricky questions are prompted by the obvious disparity evoked by narratives of missing experience and notions of a fortress city in ‘total exposure’.

During 2013 further tensions crystallised around such dilemmas by the introduction of new definitions of missing absence in the UK. As a result of national (nonmandatory) guidance, some police forces in England and Wales now draw a distinction between those they categorise as ‘missing’ and those they label as ‘absent’, adding a further dimension to the relationship between rights and risks. A missing person is defined as “anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established, and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be subject to crime or at risk of harm” (ACPO and NPIA, 2005, updated 2013, page 6), and in such cases officers will be deployed to carry out search and investigation. An ‘absent’ person, meanwhile, is defined as “a person who is not at a place where they are expected, or required, to be” (page 6), and here officers will not be deployed initially and the incident will be monitored remotely. The rationale behind the introduction of this distinction is an attempt to ‘reduce bureaucracy’ in cultures of policing where “risk aversion had resulted in a culture of ‘over-recording’” (Bayliss and Quinton, 2013, page 8) rather than responding to questions of rights. The new guidance may, additionally, address the anger and frustration expressed by interviewees about the decision of others to report them as missing, effectively infringing their right to be absent:

“I’m angry that I’ve been reported missing. That’s the main thing. I don’t feel I should have been reported missing. ... They treated me like a child” (Agnes, missing forty-eight hours–seven days, repeatedly).

“[Being reported missing] actually really ruined what this was about” (Darren, missing seventeen days).

“I was furious because I just thought he was wasting police time. I said ‘I’m not missing’ but technically of course I was” (Daniel, missing forty-eight hours–seven days, repeatedly).

These comments are significant because they suggest that, in invoking a classic liberty-right to be absent, respondents are also invoking a right to be free from surveillance or search or to be called ‘missing’ in the city and other locations. The politics of nomenclature around missing people is acute in light of this recent legislation and further complicates our arguments for reclaimed language. The fact that only *some* UK police forces have taken up these new definitions also means that such distinctions are unstable.

Initial evaluations of new rights-to-be-absent have already identified concerns where there are differences in the assessment of risk between the police and other stakeholders, such as care homes, with cases being labelled as ‘absent’ by the police but viewed as high risk by those reporting the person missing (Smith and Shalev-Greene, 2014). What such tensions bring into stark focus is the question: ‘Who has the right to determine whether a person is missing and on what basis?’ Failure to secure the rights of those reporting a person missing to have the case treated as a missing person investigation also means denying the use of a wide range of physical and human resources that would be mobilised to carry out a search. There are hence profound complexities in claiming rights-to-absence, with deep implications for those we have called missing people throughout this paper, their families, and searching police officers.

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**Conclusion: for the appearance of missing people**

“Undocumented persons are present in the public debate as an indistinct group, indicative of the impossibility for undocumented individuals to be visible as themselves. Only a joint, anonymous presence is possible”.

(Sigvardsdotter, 2013, page 533)

In her recent work on the missing, Edkins (2011) evokes the dilemmas that also face the undocumented persons discussed in Sigvardsdotter’s writing—namely that missing people are often treated collectively (in problematic ways as ‘the missing’) and state identification and tracing systems do not allow for their individual presence to be acknowledged and retained. Edkins thus calls for a new kind of “politics of *the person* as missing” (2011, page 7, our emphasis). These comments and calls have particular resonance for UK domestic missing persons cases and for the materials and issues profiled within this paper. We have argued for missing people to gain an appearance of sorts (in part by adopting a new language of missing experience), but as a diverse collection of individual voices and experiences; and as such, some narrative representations of being missing have been included above. Such voices may help to counter the tendency for terms like ‘missing persons’, ‘mispers’, ‘missing incidents’, and now ‘absence’ to be routinely discussed in police procedures and guidance without any reference to the *lived experience* of absence (Frers, 2013; Parr and Fyfe, 2013). Our research resources are aimed at shifting perspectives here, at least in terms of *beginning* new kinds of public conversations about being missing, in which voices of missing *people* feature more distinctly. We might problematise the writing of absence that traces only what and whom missing people leave behind, in objects, police records, and the testimonies of others (such as family and friends). Working with interview material from people reported as missing but who have returned allows a new recognition of living, embodied absence that might be put to political use.

In this paper missing people and their experiences gain appearance primarily in the context of an argument about strange cities in unusual use, attentive to the distinct rhythms that are embodied in brief episodes of lived absence. These narrative accounts, selected, compiled, and rationalised into representations of missing journeys, are related to a (not unproblematic) ‘smoothing’ of traumatic times and chaotic spaces for the social purpose of retelling stories for audiences of influence and potential intervention (Parr and Stevenson, 2013b; 2013c). Through such narrative resources, we have begun to suggest that missing people enact missing performances, bound up with hiding, concealment, and passing, in concert with nonhuman environments and resources, in ways that chime with homeless people’s experiences (Cloe et al, 2008). We have also drawn out differences between homeless and missing people, and tried to specify further what might constitute the strange cartographies of missing mobility, drawing upon narratives about compulsive walking in response to barely registered thinking rhythms which seem to compel a nonlinear and constant tramping of largely *local* ground. Missing people thus report being paradoxically, and occasionally self-consciously, present and absent, and they depict what it feels like, helping us to know more about something previously unspoken and unacknowledged.

Lastly, we drew out some related dilemmas about rights to the city. Riven through this discussion are the paradoxical elements relevant in this terrain of debate (about the right to be missing or absent; the right to be found; the requirement to search for those whose absence is deemed ‘out of character’ for those left behind; and the subjective and unstable risk assessments dictating the extent of police search). These paradoxical elements might confuse any emergence of a coherent politics of recognition, including the recognition of what Edkins (2011, page 194) calls a ‘missing-person-as-such’ “for who they are and not just what they are”. There may be simultaneously, then, a need for some kind of distinct and collective politics to emerge around rights to missing and absent mobility, a politics that

further recognises specific individual voices and stories ‘as such’ (Edkins, 2011). This politics might also debate what missing mobility means in broader terms and in the context of late-capitalist societies that are structured on risk-averse forms of governance seemingly bent on constantly locating their citizens (Bauman and Lyon, 2012). What might also be lacking for missing people is not only a politics of recognition (Edkins, 2011), in which the paradoxical and narrated spatialities of missing experience have a place, but also a ‘fine-tuned’ politics of urban mobility (Cresswell, 2010, page 29) that might inform ways of understanding and acting around lived absence in the future.

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