Both There And Not
Stories from the Space of Missingness

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Abstract
This work of creative nonfiction and accompanying exegesis explores ‘missingness’ – the individual, interpersonal, social, and political nuances of a person’s absence. The term ‘missingness’ has been used by a range of researchers of missing persons to describe the diverse but linked experiences that arise when someone goes missing. Missing persons cases are common in Australia, with an estimated 38,000 people disappearing annually. For each person who goes missing, an estimated further twelve are directly affected. While the vast majority of missing persons incidents are resolved within a week, some cases linger for much longer, or are never resolved. With or without resolution, absences pose a range of questions. Answers are often lacking, or ambiguous. This research project excavates narratives of those who have been personally and/or professionally affected by missingness. I do so in a work of creative nonfiction and through reflective, theoretical work drawing on the frameworks of Practice Theory and narratology.

I argue that these ongoing ambiguities place those affected by missingness in a space of liminality – their unresolved experiences render them distant from the communities and cultures they are nonetheless still part of. While liminality can be an isolating and frustrating personal experience, I also find that those subject to it are well-placed to offer important reflections on the nature of missingness, and in turn, on their communities and cultures. The creative work follows individual stories to render the experiences and insights therein accessible to a wide audience. It gives readers the opportunity to empathetically engage with the concept of missingness and maps out both where significant improvements could be made to better support those affected, as well as the limitations of what is knowable. It concludes that ambiguity – while disturbing and difficult to confront – is no obstacle to building more constructive responses to absence. The exegesis reviews existing literature around missingness. More explicitly it shows, through the theoretical lens of Practice Theory, how narratives produced in a liminal space are important because they can provide new information, challenge existing misinformation, and work towards storytelling models whereby the irresolution the narrators have experienced is both acceptable and a source from which the teller derives expertise. Here, those in a liminal space tolerate their discomfort because it is ultimately enlightening. The exegesis also reflects on how the practice-based form of creative nonfiction is a robust vehicle to bring experiential insights to a general audience, and posits ways in which creative nonfiction could and does make valuable contributions to scholarship.

Keywords: missing persons, missingness, storytelling, liminality, Practice Theory, narratology, ambiguous loss, creative nonfiction.
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I feel very fortunate to have Siobhán McHugh as my supervisor, who gave me encouragement and guidance through all stages of the project, and imparted vital insights on interviewing people with presence and curiosity. I am grateful as well to my co-supervisors: Marcus O’Donnell enthusiastically helped map out the research in its early stages, and Cathy Cole made many insightful suggestions and edits to help bring the project to fruition.

I’d finally like to thank Lindon Roberts for his continued encouragement and assistance.
I certify that I am responsible for the work submitted in this thesis, that the original work is my own and that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

I certify that neither the thesis nor the substance of the original work contained therein has been submitted to this or any other institution for a degree.

Erin Stewart
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CREATIVE WORK

A revised, edited, and updated version of the creative work that initially formed part of this thesis will be available under the title *The Missing Among Us: Stories of Missing Persons and Those Left Behind*. Published by NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, Australia, in March 2021. ISBN: 9781742236797.
EXEGESIS
Introduction

This exegesis and its accompanying creative work developed from my passionate interest in those people who go missing, the families and friends they leave behind, and the workers in social agencies whose job it is to find them. In exploring a subject as emotionally laden as this, I was particularly interested in what each of these groups meant to one another and how their interwoven narratives could be given voice. I was aware of social research and statistical analysis which would provide me with the details I required to conceptualise the ways in which people disappear, but my task was a far more complex one than that. I wanted to critically examine – through interviews and cultural analysis – full, multi-voiced narratives of what it means to be missing, and what we might learn from searches for understanding. In developing this approach, I became aware of a community interest in the topic which necessitated research that was accessible in nature. For this group, I developed my creative project, a work of creative nonfiction which examines and illuminates the deeper philosophical and social aspects of disappearance.

The first step of my research journey involved interviews with people associated with the world of missing persons. Through this process I gained insights into the labyrinthine world of the search. My research ranged widely and included those who had once been missing but had now returned, the families of those still missing, and the people who search. The interviewees had a deep level of understanding about key issues around disappearances, which refined my own research interests. One of which – the problematic patterns of attention and inattention given to missing persons cases – is the focus of this exegesis.

In my interview with Charlie Hedges, a man who has spent his career dedicated to missing persons cases in the context of local, UK-wide, and international policing, Charlie described a case of two young girls who had disappeared from school. Through the investigation, law enforcement agencies realised that the girls had been abducted, and then murdered, by their school caretaker. It was a troubling case for the public, and all the more so when it was found that the caretaker had a history of sex offence allegations made against him. When he moved to a new region of the UK, because none of the allegations led to a conviction, his records did not follow him. If they had, he would not have been allowed to work at a school.

‘And that started a process where it was recognised nationally that there needed to be a joined-up system where information could be shared,’ Charlie explained to me. ‘Millions of pounds were put into it. It eventually led to the creation of the Police National Database.’ The database would make it easier for institutions such as schools to make adequate background checks of staff. It would also help police see relevant records for cases across the UK. This all sounded promising, until Charlie explained a shortfall in the database’s implementation. ‘What got missed off was nobody bothered to put anything about missing persons on it!’ Even though a missing persons
case prompted discussions around the database, the database was not set up to address missing persons cases on a national level. Although the case gleaned public concern and attention under both media and policy frameworks, Charlie observed that once the case was solved, there was little enduring interest in issues pertaining to missing persons.

Charlie's observations expose the way missing persons cases achieve then lose newsworthiness. In general, public interest in missing persons cases fixates on the disappearance itself. Sarah Wayland’s (2015) doctoral study in which she interviewed nineteen family members of long-term missing persons, found that family members of missing persons felt that coverage of their loved one’s case focused on the investigation itself. Yet, there were numerous aspects of the experience of having a missing loved one (such as ‘the pain of ambiguity’) which did not find space in the public narrative (p. 142). Loren O’Keefe, a woman who runs a non-profit organisation for left behind families in Australia, the Missing Persons Advocacy Network, and has experienced her own brother go missing, told me during our interview that there is an ambivalence in public conceptualisations of missing persons. ‘People cannot help but to be intrigued by it. There’s so much mystery and drama. And there’s so much emotion around this topic.’ Paradoxically though, ‘when it comes to talking about it, or having information about it, people are – I don’t know – paralysed? They don’t know how to broach it.’ While there is room under specific conditions for worried media reports on those newly missing, broader understandings – what causes a person to go missing, how we could prevent or mitigate disappearances (such as through national databases), and what happens in the long aftermath of a person going missing – are neglected topics within public discourse.

My creative work is dedicated to exploring the ambiguity exemplified by disappearances. One of its key findings is that in a context of a person’s absence where you cannot directly ask or know what a missing person may be grappling with, you can still meaningfully turn to aspects of their story that surround the disappearance. My work tracked a number of cases, looking at the contexts in which an individual has gone missing and the lingering impact of the incident on their and/or others’ lives. It is a work of ‘breaking the story’ in the sense of ‘breaking the status quo’ – bringing marginal yet true accounts of a phenomenon to light in the hope of challenging stereotypes, myths, assumptions, and ignorance with a view towards changing consciousness as well as calling for more systemic change (Solnit, 2016). The people I spoke to who have been involved in missing persons cases (whether as investigators, missing persons themselves, or family members of missing persons) contextualise this central mystery with details of life before and life after the disappearance. For various reasons, this contextual information serves an important, yet neglected, part of the phenomenon. Missing persons cases seem shocking, but are not always random. Thus, understanding the problems that led to an individual’s disappearance can form an important part of understanding how to prevent future disappearances; as well as how to find the
missing person. Likewise, the long aftermath of a person’s disappearance can be instructive on the more universal theme of coping with ambiguity. It can also lead to practical insights into how to form more supportive communities which recognise that losses can come in various forms – not just the death of a loved one but in their ambiguous departure.

Addressing issues such as the prevention and causes of people going missing, and supporting those left behind can have enormous implications for all those involved with a case. A person is deemed missing when those close to them do not know their whereabouts and are consequently concerned (James et al., 2008). The Australian Institute of Criminology estimates that over 38,000 people are reported missing, on average, each year (Bricknell, 2017: 4). James et al. (2008) note that individuals may be reported missing to the police or another agency (such as the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service or the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service). Police data reveal that, for the year 2005-06, the rate of missing persons reported was 1.5 for every 1000 people over the entire Australian population. In the UK, according to 2013 data, 327,000 missing persons cases are opened each year (Stevenson et al., 2013: 23). In the US, FBI data show there were 635,155 missing persons reports made in the year 2014 (FBI National Crime Information Center, 2015).

Although the definition of ‘missing person’ seems a straightforward one, who gets designated as such can be open to some complexity, as I discuss in my creative work’s first chapter. Being missing is not merely a physical phenomenon – it is socially and politically constituted, and has social and political implications. A person may not define themselves as missing – they know where they are (Harari, 2013: 15). Instead, an individual has to be reported missing by another person who is concerned for them. They have to maintain a predictable whereabouts for their absence to be discernible, and in order for their case to be investigated there must be some social designation that they are at risk. Further, it isn’t necessarily a person’s physical absence that is disturbing to those left behind as much as is the disappearance of the role they have played for them (Payne, 1995). I use the term ‘missingness’ (originally evoked by Sedlak et al. (1990) but used by a number of other scholars) to refer to the social complexities of absence throughout this exegesis (this concept is explored in greater depth in Chapter Two). The term ‘missingness’ acknowledges the reality that being missing is not a simple, physical state. Who is seen as missing, who becomes missing, and what impact absence has are social and political questions also. ‘Missingness’ also provides a key lens for understanding the impact of missing persons, to reflect the fact that while a huge number of people are reported missing each year, missingness has a wider impact. It is estimated that for each missing person, twelve other people, on average, are affected in some way (Henderson et al., 2000: 4). Moreover, social and political circumstances can affect the prevalence and patterns of disappearances.
My creative work has mapped out the peripheries of disappearances: what happens before and after a person goes missing, and the social and political contexts in which the absence occurs. In so doing, I argue for the value of nonfictional storytelling as a robust way to understand and analyse what have been largely subterranean experiences.

**Background**

Background discussion on what a missing person is, who goes missing, why people go missing, and how cases are investigated are dispersed through my creative work. However, I will briefly summarise some key points here.

A major component to becoming a missing person is a friend or relative or (in the case of absconding from hospital, school, or prison) staff members of an institution not knowing a person’s whereabouts (Biehal et al., 2003, Edkins, 2011, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit et al., 2003, Fyfe et al., 2014, Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2002, James et al., 2008, Swanton et al., 1988). In order to get ‘official’ recognition that a person is missing, those they have left behind register their concern with police or a tracing service. In general, it is local law enforcement agencies that have a duty to investigate missing persons cases. There are also stipulations in international law, as documented by Henckaerts et al. (2005) which place responsibility upon governments for locating missing persons and reuniting families in contexts of displacement and war (pp. 2742-2774). For police or governments to do this work, a person must be identified as absent from their ‘normal haunts’ (Swanton et al., 1988: 44) by someone who has recognised them as ‘missing’. Additionally, apart from issues about whether a person would self-identify as missing, there is also the dilemma of whether a person has intended to go missing, and whether that person has a ‘right’ to go missing. All adults retain such a right, unless they are legally required to be at a certain place, such as a prison because they have been found guilty of a crime, or in inpatient psychiatric care if have been involuntarily admitted (Biehal et al., 2003: 2). Potential conflicts police deal with in relation to a missing person’s right to privacy and a family’s concern as to their whereabouts are described by Fyfe et al. (2015) as ‘moral ambiguity’ (p.76). There is a constant ethical balance for investigators to account for between protecting the missing person’s privacy and their duty of care to prevent individuals from coming to harm.

Part of the police service’s job is to determine how likely it is that the missing person has or will come to harm and prioritise their case accordingly. At each stage in the process of reporting and investigating missing persons cases, a number of decisions are made in establishing the level of risk involved in a case (Foy, 2006, Fyfe et al., 2014, Malloch and Burgess, 2011, Newiss, 2005, Newiss et al., 1999). How concerning a case is determined to be relates to investigative postulations about why a person may be missing and where they may be (Fyfe et al., 2015). The
table that follows explores the potential reasons why a person may be missing using the framework of a continuum of motivations (between decided to go missing and forced to go missing) as provided by Biehal et al. (2003). It reflects the range of reasons people may have for going missing, and may be informative about the levels of risk and the nature of the risks they face while they are missing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intentionality</th>
<th>Decided</th>
<th>Drifted</th>
<th>Unintentional Absence</th>
<th>Forced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples of missing adults (Biehal et al., 2003)</td>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Rebellion, escape (e.g. violence, debt), suicide</td>
<td>Dementia, mental illness</td>
<td>Victim of crime (e.g. homicide, abduction, sex trafficking), joined cult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of missing children (Finkelhor, 1996)</td>
<td>Runaways, Delinquent Behaviour</td>
<td>Injury-related, Lost, Care-giver Mix-ups</td>
<td>‘Kicked out’ of home, Abductions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This taxonomy has some limitations. For instance, if someone has intentionally left home to escape abuse, it may be somewhat simplistic to say that they ‘decided’ to run away – they may have subjectively felt forced to do so. More generally, the reasons why someone may have gone missing may not be easy to discern from the facts of the case, nor always easily articulated by the missing person themselves. Nonetheless, the continuum is instructive in that it captures the diversity of motivations and experiences among the missing population. A short review of news items surrounding recent and high-profile missing cases in Australia can provide solid examples of each component of the continuum while also, in some cases, problematising clear taxonomies. Examples of cases are in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decided</th>
<th>Drifted</th>
<th>Unintentional Absence</th>
<th>Forced</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah Elmir was a 17-year-old from Sydney who was declared missing at the end of June 2014. He told his parents</td>
<td>Cornelia Rau absconded from Manly Hospital in NSW on 17/03/2003, where she was being treated for mental</td>
<td>Steven Van Lonkhuyzen and his two sons, Timothy (aged five) and Ethan (aged seven) were declared missing on a</td>
<td>Jaidyn Leskie was one year old when he disappeared from the house of his mother’s boyfriend (Greg Domaszewicz) near</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that he was going to go fishing, but he instead went to Syria to fight with terrorist organisation, Islamic State. He appeared in an anti-America propagandist video for the group. Nobody knew of his whereabouts until the video emerged on 21/10/2014 (Welch and Rubinsztein-Dunlop, 2014).

| Illness. It was the day before she was due for release. She was spotted in Queensland alone on 29/03/2003 and police were called. Although she is an Australian citizen, she told police that she was a German tourist and provided them with a false name. She was detained under the Migration Act for ten months at a jail in Brisbane and then at Baxter detention centre (Manne, 2005). | Drive between Brisbane and Cairns when they failed to turn up at their destination on 16/12/2014. Police conducted searches over an area of several hundred thousand square kilometres. A cattleman, Tom Wagner, joined the search effort on his quad motorcycle and found the trio, whose car had been bogged in a national park (Whop, 2014). | Moe, VIC on 15/06/1997. A missing persons search was conducted and Leskie's body was found on 01/01/1998. Domaszewicz was charged with murder but was found not guilty in December 1998. Although more evidence that may further implicate Domaszewicz has been found, it has not been brought to trial because of double-jeopardy laws (Moor, 2014). |

Elements of each case make categorisation difficult. For instance, one could argue that Abdullah Elmir, as a minor, lacked the capacity to decide to go missing and was instead brainwashed by Islamic State (i.e. it could be akin to joining a cult, which we may conceptualise as a ‘forced’ disappearance). It is also possible to see the case of Cornelia Rau as abduction by authorities, given that they had no legal reason to detain her, despite her confusion regarding her identity. There may also have been an element of decision on Rau’s behalf, as it seemed as though she wanted to be deported to Germany, which is why she lied about her identity and nationality. Her case could therefore also be understood as an attempted runaway. The other cases are clearer to categorise, though missing cases generally, by their mysterious nature, may harbour a range of possibilities. When a person is absent, it may be difficult to ascertain whether they decided to leave, were a victim of crime, if they are lost, or if they are missing for a different reason completely. What emerges from these cases is a need to understand each individual in their context in order to draw out fully-formed understandings of the cause of their absence.
Another group of missing persons, which I explore in my creative work, relates to unaccompanied minors. In Europe, according to Europol figures, there are over 10,000 unaccompanied minors who have come to the continent to seek asylum. Some have come without parents, some of their parents have become lost or have died on the precarious journey to Europe (Missing Children Europe, 2015). They count as missing persons as the nation responsible for their welfare does not know their whereabouts. Some unaccompanied minors will have decided to go missing in order to complete their migration plan (for instance, they may have been registered at an asylum centre in Italy but want to travel to Germany because they have a family member living there) or because they feel uncomfortable, or threatened at the asylum centre they have been placed in. Others may not have gone missing on their own initiative – there is evidence that human traffickers and other criminal syndicates may be targeting young asylum seekers who are away from their parents (Missing Children Europe, 2016: 10).

Parr et al. (2015) interviewed a group of adults who had previously chosen to go missing and document what they did during their disappearance. They found that people stay within their locale and tend to travel by foot (p. 195). They also tend to focus on evading recognition and/or police (p. 198). Although some people who go missing sleep rough, or do not have stable accommodation, the authors describe the experience as being distinct from the experience of homelessness. This is because missing persons tend to be isolated and prefer not to congregate in groups. They observed no sense of community among missing persons (p. 194). Many of the interviewees reported that they initially felt calm when they first disappeared, but often that sense of calm was short-lived (pp. 196-197). Regular rhythms – such as sleeping and eating – may also be disrupted. The person is in a relatively familiar context, but their mode of relating to it may become ‘arrhythmic’ (p. 199). The authors argue that people who are missing within a geographical area have a paradoxical presence and absence. They inhabit similar geographical space, but in unusual ways for them; and the missing persons themselves may not feel fully present either, given their non-habitual daily lives.

There may be both advantages and disadvantages of being missing. Some of the advantages previously missing persons have reported include making a fresh start, finding clarity, finding a better understanding of what’s causing dissatisfaction within one’s life, and gaining independence (Biehal et al., 2003: 26-28). The negative consequences of going missing include losing family contacts, isolation, difficulties of providing for oneself, and exposure to risk (Biehal et al., 2014: 28). These risks are most thoroughly documented in cases of younger people who have run away or been thrown out of home. Figures from the UK from 2011 show that 11% of young people (under the age of 16) were harmed when they were away from home. Further, 18% had slept rough or had stayed with someone they didn’t know overnight, 12% had stolen while they were away, and 9% had begged for money and/or food (Rees, 2011: 16). The dangers are further
compounded for unaccompanied migrants – these children are vulnerable to becoming victims of crime or being forced into crime regardless of whether they go missing of their own volition or not. Missing Children Europe (2016) reports that being kidnapped or exploited, forcibly being involved with drug smuggling, being forced into marriage, or becoming victim of organ harvesting are among the risks faced by such children (p. 26-27).

According to the UK Missing Persons Bureau (2016), the vast majority (96%) of missing persons return home safely (p. 20). Most (74%) are found within 24 hours (p. 23). Yet, a person’s return home does not necessarily indicate that those factors causing their disappearance have been addressed or mitigated. Approximately a third of missing persons incidents in the UK in 2014/15 were repeat incidents – that is, the person had gone missing before. Younger people who go missing are more likely than adults to do so on multiple occasions – slightly over half of those under eighteen who go missing have done so more than once (p. 20). This statistical finding relates to the work of Parr and Stevenson (2013) in documenting the voices of people who have previously gone missing. One participant in the study said of her experience of returning, ‘They didn’t ask me lots of difficult questions, they just sat back and talked about normal things… Being listed as a missing person is something I don’t think people know how to talk about when you return’ (p. 9). The authors write, ‘the stories tell us that returning is a difficult and confusing emotional event, for which no one has sufficient resources available to tackle properly’ (p. 30).

In a journal article that brings additional analysis to this same data set, Holmes (2017) argues that when a missing individual returns home, there is ‘a key opportunity for vulnerable adults to access appropriate assessment and support—not only from the police but also from a range of health and social care support services—in order to prevent future missing incidents and promote their health and well-being’ (p. 6). This opportunity is often missed. Holmes points to the high correlation between missing persons and mental health issues, as well as the recurring theme throughout the interviews that going missing can be a means to ‘escape’ difficult circumstances, to procure the necessary time and space to get distance from those circumstances, and to seek quiet contemplation (p. 13). Further, some individuals went missing directly in response to symptoms of mental illness such as paranoia and suicidality (p. 15-16). Holmes suggests that a person’s return would be a logical and desirable point of possible intervention and addressing the distress that caused the missing incident could spark the changes necessary for the person to be able to cope with their symptoms and stressors in their life without going missing.

Aims

Given the statistics above, and the complex reasons why people go missing, I wanted to explore how a nonfiction writer such as myself could give voice to the complexities of missing person cases. I did this through my creative work which provides a nonfictional reflection upon what
‘missing’ means. I offer a perspective through the eyes of missing persons, those who have a missing loved one, and/or those working as part of the missing persons sector and how they deal with the complexities and ambiguities of missing person cases. By writing creatively, I aim to explore more fully the intricacies of the lives of each of these groups, framing myself as co-constructor of their stories.

As a critical accompaniment to my creative work, this exegesis has different, yet related aims. I establish these aims through the exegesis’s three parts. Firstly, in Part I, “Background Material for my Creative Work”, I explore a range of scholarly literature and popular texts related to missing persons. I set out the background research which informed my creative work in terms of important concepts, offering a greater understanding of what creative work has already been written on the subject and how both critical and creative analyses offer a greater understanding of the issue.

In Part II, “Findings of my Creative Practice”, I examine the ways people bring meaning to situations involving absence using the theoretical frameworks of Practice Theory and narratology. The aim of this research is to understand how stories which lack closure or resolution are told and what significance the stories have both in their content and structure in terms of challenging those limited, habitual modes of discourse with problematic patterns of attention and inattention on missing persons, such as those identified by Wayland (2015) (as discussed above) as well as by a range of other research (e.g. Biehal et al., 2003: 1-2, 48-49, Hargrove and Haman, 2005, Jeanis and Powers, 2016, Stillman, 2007) and by my interviewees themselves.

In Part III, “Reflections on Creative Practice”, I interrogate the form I have adopted – creative nonfiction – positing it as an important way in which to offer insights on experiences regarding absence that can be both challenging and accessible. I offer a different account of research through a practice-based research methodology, asserting its distinct advantages in the context of academic research.

The research questions for Parts II and III of the exegesis relate to the nature of absence and how absence can be understood by affected individuals, as well as to concerns about the nature of storytelling and Arts research. My primary research questions in these sections are as follows:

- How do people make sense of and live with mysterious circumstances and stories which lack a resolution?
- How might the stories of people with lived experience of ‘missingness’ complicate dominant narratives about missing persons?
- What are key aspects of using creative nonfiction as a methodological framework?
What are ways in which creative nonfiction research can offer important academic contributions?

Research Design

Ethics Approval
Human Ethics Approval (number HE15/446) for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Wollongong on 20/01/2016 for a twelve-month period. Documents pertaining to my ethics application, approval, and process can be found as appendices.

Participants
I interviewed nine people (over eight interviews) for this research. Below I list the names those interviewed and briefly outline their situation in relation to missing persons. Further details can be found on each of these participants in the creative piece. The reader may wish to refer back to the following list as they read subsequent chapters of this exegesis which relate directly to their stories, particularly Chapter Four:

Sarah Godwin – Lives in a village in Surrey, England. Her teenaged son went missing in New Zealand over 25 years ago while the family was based there. The case is unresolved.

Charlie Hedges – Lives in Milton Keyes, England. He is a former police officer who has taken particular interest in missing persons cases. He has subsequent experience consulting on and educating those in law enforcement professions about missing persons cases.

Brandy Bonner – Lives in Kansas City, US. She ran away from an abusive home during her adolescence, over twenty years ago.

Griet Ivens – Lives in Brussels, Belgium. Works as a case manager at Child Focus, a national organisation which provides support, advice, liaison, and prevention pertaining to missing children (as well as other problems affecting children such as child exploitation). Griet translated and added her thoughts during my interview with Salma, but was also interviewed separately.

“Salma” (pseudonym) – Lives in a small town in Belgium, outside of Brussels. Her ex-husband (who I refer to as “Adam”) abducted her son (who I refer to as “Ayoub”) and took him to Portugal. Her son is now safe and living with her.

Mina Jaf – Lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. She is a refugee and advocates on refugee issues. She was able to comment on the relationship between mass displacement and missing persons and is currently setting up an NGO to advise asylum seekers of their rights and available resources (the provision of this support may indirectly reduce the number of missing migrants in Europe).
Gail Rego – Lives in Brussels, Belgium. She is the Communications Officer for Missing Children Europe which provides research, policy guidance, and advice on missing children. The organisation also oversees its national members in most European states, which deal more directly with cases of individual missing children. (Interviewed with Mette).

Mette Drivsholm – Lives in Brussels, Belgium. She works as a project officer for Missing Children Europe, specialising in understanding the issues faced by children who run away from home. (Interviewed with Gail).

Loren O’Keefe – Lives in Melbourne, Australia. She is the founder of and runs the Missing Persons Advocacy Network which provides practical resources and advice for those who have a missing loved one. Her brother had also been missing for almost five years before he was found to be deceased.

In approaching the creative piece, I wanted a relatively small group of participants – between three to ten people – so as to lend significant space for each story to be told in detail. As I discuss in Chapter 5, creative nonfiction tends to prioritise sensory detail in the construction of ‘scenes’ as part of the narrative. Too many participants would reduce the opportunities to ensure that the narratives were vivid and evocative. Given the particulars of the formal ethical requirements of this research (detailed in the “Recruitment and Selection” section), participants were recruited because they were referred to my study by a missing persons/refugee organisation and agreed to take part. There was no particular sampling strategy, and potential participants were alerted to my study via their referral only. After the eight interviews above, I reflected that the stories provided to me were sufficient in diversity and scope to provide a credible account of missingness and thus opted not to enter into the process to recruit more participants. Further reflection on the scope of participants is provided in the “Immersion” section of Chapter 5.

Interviews
The interviews were unstructured and took approximately 1-2 hours. They were typically conducted in-person, at the person’s home or workplace, or at a café an individual selected. In two instances, interviews were conducted over Skype because of geographical distance. I focus on the nature and content of these interviews in Part II of this exegesis. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were conducted between March and November of 2016.

After the interviews, I contacted each participant to thank them for their time, to ask follow-up or clarifying questions, and to reiterate any commitments I had made to them (e.g. if they asked me to exclude something they had said from my research, I both agreed at the time, then confirmed that I would do so in writing), and checked if they were happy with the transcript (and in one case,
translatio

I also arranged a follow-up interview via Skype with one participant which lasted an hour.

**Recruitment and Selection**

Participants who were not professionally engaged in the missing persons sector were recruited indirectly with the assistance and advice of non-profit agencies related to missing persons and/or refugees. I emailed a range of agencies found via a Google search, some did not respond, some responded but said they would be unable to help, some connected me with other agencies, some connected me with individuals, and some provided interviews themselves. As part of the process, non-professional potential participants were asked by someone other than me if they would like to be part of the study and stated that they were not under any obligation to take part. If they said no, I would not have known that they were contacted. Only if they said yes would direct communication between us commence. The process was relatively slow and over eleven months yielded only nine participants, but nonetheless it mitigated the risk of coercion. Avoiding a coercive recruitment process was particularly important given that personal stories regarding missing persons have sensitive content. For this study, there was no sampling strategy, indeed, the process of recruitment was, at times, quite distant from me for the aforementioned ethical reasons.

It was an ethical condition of selection that participants with lived experience of being missing or having a missing loved one would discuss cases that were either old (i.e. the person went missing five or more years ago) and/or had been resolved (i.e. the person had been found). This stipulation was made in order to mitigate the emotional hardship of participation. All willing potential participants met the criteria and were selected for interview.

Recruitment was multi-phasic and ad hoc. I embarked upon my first interviews before having a finalised idea of who the other participants would be. This was necessary because the recruitment process was very slow, however it usefully provided me with time to reflect on each story before encountering a new one, and to consider what organisations to contact, and, indeed, if recruiting further participants would be sufficiently beneficial for the study to outweigh the potential risks of participation.

**Informed Consent**

I provided participants with an information sheet and a consent form (samples are available as appendices) for them to read and sign. The information provided included details on the kinds of questions I would likely ask, the potential advantages and disadvantages of participation, their ability to withdraw information or withdraw from the research entirely without repercussions, and advice on finding support if their participation proved to be distressing. I asked for separate kinds of consent – to the use of recordings, the use of their image, as well as the use of their interview
transcript (although I have not made images or audio recordings publicly available at the time of writing).

Interview Data and Use
I transcribed each interview as soon as possible after it took place. Copies of the transcription and of the interview tape were made available to the relevant participant for their records and in case they wanted to review what they had said and withdraw material. I began writing the creative work in July of 2016, approximately three months after the first interview took place. I left time in between the initial interview and writing up passages related to that particular interview in order for me to contextualise each interview with other data I had collected as well as to allow the ideas expressed to percolate. I opted not to code the interviews (this decision is discussed in Part III), but instead to view the interview as a holistic story (however, some aspects of each story were excluded in order to create a more focused piece).

Exegesis Structure
In addition to my pure research approaches of reviewing academic literature as well as grey literature from missing persons organisations and government bodies and conducting and analysing interviews, the structure of my exegesis was influenced by Hamilton’s (2011) advice for approaching exegetical research. In accordance with Hamilton’s recommendations, I include in my exegesis detail about other creative works with a similar focus to mine, a discussion of key concepts, theoretical frameworks, methodological frameworks and findings. I integrate both the context in which my research exists as well as reflection on its purpose in generating new insights. The ‘polyvocal’ (p. 343) nature of my exegesis is such that while each chapter is interrelated, quite disparate topics are under discussion (e.g. creative texts, materials about missing persons, social theory, creative nonfiction). As such, I have opted to include a reference list at the end of each chapter to keep related source materials together.

As described above, Part I of my exegesis comprises the background material for my creative work. For the first chapter, “Precedents of Practice”, I undertook a scoping review (the specifics of my method is stipulated in the chapter itself) of other creative texts about missing persons with an emphasis on recent, English texts in a diverse range of genres and modalities (including books, podcasts, television shows, and games). There are so many texts that are about or feature missing persons that it is beyond the scope of this project to provide an exhaustive, or systemic review of them. The chapter still importantly outlines the themes that have emerged in these texts and sets out the places I have drawn influence from as well as what my project uniquely contributes to the literature. The second chapter, “Key Concepts” introduces and provides a systemic literature review of the main terms associated with missing persons that are relevant for my project,
including ‘missingness’ (and within that wider topic, ‘ambiguous loss’) and ‘newsworthiness’ (details of the review method can, again, be found in the chapter itself).

Part II provides an analysis of the outcomes of my creative work. The third chapter, “Theoretical Frameworks” discusses the theoretical lenses of Practice Theory, liminality, and narratology. Chapter Four, “Beyond the Disappearance: Alternative Narratives of Missingness” describes how the narratives provided by my interviewees under these aforementioned theoretical lenses can be seen to disrupt mainstream narratives about missing persons, thus ‘breaking the story’.

Part III of the exegesis proposes how creative nonfiction can play a key role in understanding missingness, particularly in terms of how people come to make meaning from an ambiguous situation and how their stories can be thoughtfully represented. It draws on insights from my creative work as well as research on the genre, pointing to potential future benefits and research questions that might offer new knowledge on topics such as missing persons. Chapter Five, “Creative Nonfiction as Methodology” investigates creative nonfiction as a form of practice-based research, describing the principles of the form and analysing how those principles are upheld and/or complicated through practice. Chapter Six, “Creative nonfiction in a scholarly context” illuminates how my creative work drew on interdisciplinary research methods, and discusses the value of creative nonfiction in terms of its ability to complement other forms of research, situate the agency of individuals as storytellers within their social context, provide benefits to the communities under research, and play a role in scholarly outreach.

I conclude by summarising the research that has been undertaken and foreshadow potential questions for future research that have been identified through different sections of this thesis.

References


Part I: Background Material for my Creative Work
Chapter 1

Precedents of Practice

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, a missing man comes home after being lost at sea. Homer’s story is an ancient example of the myriad texts on the topic of absence, yet, despite the fact that absence is a common trope of Western literature, very little critical attention has been paid to the way texts represent missing persons, or the themes that are borne out in these works. This chapter provides an account of the ways in which texts use the disappearance of a character as a rich basis to explore mysteries of absence, and of life. I contextualise these texts in relation to my own project, elaborating on the ways in which I draw on the findings of this literature as inspiration for my own work. I then establish how my creative work addresses gaps in the current offerings of texts about missing persons.

Peter Pierce (1999) provides a thorough survey of what he describes as an Australian preoccupation with the figure of ‘the lost child’ as represented in fiction, poetry, paintings, film, and media reports. Pierce traces this national obsession to larger anxieties about the Australian landscape – the dangerous, and (particularly during the colonial era) strange bush – and then later, colonial anxieties about the failings of institutions and the treachery of strangers. Pierce’s survey indicates that historical texts about missing children in Australia are also about the new country’s geographical, political, and social experiences. The saliency of Pierce’s work is its ability to reflect on wider contextual meanings of absence. Since Pierce’s observations, scant research has been conducted on missing persons as a preoccupation in literature.

I undertook a scoping review of texts related to disappearance which incorporated elements of my unique reading life and spontaneous encounters with texts. The issue with conducting a literature review of texts related to disappearances in any systemic way is that there are so many of them. As I reflected in Chapter 1 of my creative piece, it was difficult to go about my leisurely life without encountering further texts. When I spoke to people about my research topic, I was constantly recommended a range of books or advised to watch certain television shows or films or listen to particular podcasts. Whenever I have perused a bookshop, or examined synopses of shows on Netflix, I have consistently found new texts to explore. Another challenging aspect of conducting this review is that I encountered many texts about disappearances throughout my life that I have not necessarily thought of as texts about disappearances. This review includes texts I first read/watched as a child (such as *Alice in Wonderland*) or adolescent (such as *Catcher in the Rye*), and it took some time for me to identify that disappearance was part of those narratives. Disappearance is pervasive in popular culture. This fact makes it relatively easy to source texts, but difficult to provide a full account of them.
For this literature review, I brainstormed what texts I had already read which pertain to disappearance. This brainstorming process continued between late-2014 and late-2017 (when I began to finalise this exegesis) as I took time to remember my own reading history and my many encounters with the topic. I was also recommended a range of texts to read by others and organically found relevant texts. I searched for other texts using Google and Goodreads (where some users had compiled lists of texts about missing persons). The purpose of a scoping review is to understand, synthesise, and begin to categorise texts of a wide-ranging and heterogenous nature. It should be understood as preliminary and non-exhaustive in nature. This particular review should also be viewed as idiosyncratic – representing my particular engagement in the topic, and reflecting my own tastes, as well as my knowledge of, and exposure to popular culture. The review focuses in part on canonical, well-known texts related to disappearances. I have chosen to have this focus because these texts will more likely be representative of popular understandings of absence than more obscure texts. It also only features English texts (or, in some cases, texts that have been translated into English) because English is the only language I am fluent in. With the exception of some canonical texts, the review emphasises contemporary works produced in the late-twentieth century to the present day. It purposefully includes a range of texts – books, podcasts, audio-visual material, and games – in order to reflect the range of media that serve to propagate ideas about missing persons. As I engaged with the texts, I produced observational notes. Through the process, I noticed links between certain texts and gradually produced a taxonomy of texts (reproduced as headings and sub-headings in this chapter) that reflected their themes and preoccupations.

In examining a range of texts depicting missing persons, I found that aside from culturally-specific anxieties and obsessions surrounding the mystery of disappearance, other themes also emerge. Absence is a particularly rich site for metaphor. When somebody is absent, you cannot ask them to clarify their situation, or offer their perspective of it. While this is frustrating, it also has creative ramifications. The imagination is free to project meaning in place of the absent person. This can take the form of speculating about what happened to the person, but there are also less literal manifestations of meaning-making. The texts I review in this exegesis use missing persons as a lens to explore social and political problems; the nature of coming of age; psychological angst; ambiguous loss; other kinds of mysteries such as the supernatural, secrets, and death; and the myriad of perspectives produced in relation to an event by a group of individuals. I provide a survey of sixty-four texts which concern themselves with missing persons – both fictional and nonfictional, and in forms such as books, television, podcasts, video games, poetry, and theatre. The review will detail the meanings these texts canvass.
Missing as a puzzle
A number of the texts I examine offer a literal overview of the topic of missing persons. They recount details of cases (whether fictional or nonfictional), and work towards investigating and solving the case. The stories uphold the genre conventions of mystery, crime, or true crime. Although this chapter focuses on non-literal stories on the topic of missing persons, I will give a brief overview of these texts in order to provide a counterpoint to more metaphorical accounts of absence.

Investigative Stories
Fiction such as the US television series *Without a Trace* (CBS Entertainment, 2004) and *Missing Persons* (American Broadcasting Company, 1993) are programs that depict a new police investigation each episode. Other texts focus on a single case over one or multiple seasons such as the UK series *The Missing* (Company Pictures, 2014) or the French series *The Disappearance* (or *Disparue*) (Quad Télévision, 2015). Narrative video games likewise put the viewer/game player in the position of an investigator (whether it is as a police investigator, a journalist, or an otherwise interested party) who must solve a missing persons case. These include *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015) or *Sara is Missing* (Kaigan Games, 2016). In these examples, participants are compelled to analyse the details as new clues unfold. This interactivity offers a participant a feeling of satisfaction, or resolution, when they solve the case.

Unsolved Mysteries
Nonfictional texts that detail cases in literal ways generally do not resolve quite so neatly. They commonly feature cases that are unusual in nature and/or have remained unsolved for many years. *Missing You* (2012) by Justine Ford explores a number of unsolved cases based in Australia; *Missing: Ireland’s Disappeared* (2003) by Barry Cummins focuses on Irish cases, mostly involving suspected homicides with young, female victims; and *Clueless in New England* (2011) by Michael C Dooling examines a number of cases of young women disappearing in the wilderness of the New England region of the US. US podcast, *The Vanished* (Jones, 2016 - Present) likewise centres each episode on different a case. These texts emphasise the sheer number of possibilities in terms of case outcomes; and, in turn, highlight how difficult it is for authorities and families to piece together a resolution. Where fictional crime texts may provide audiences with a satisfying sense of closure, nonfictional texts cannot. Instead they depict dangerous realities for likely victims of crime and the heartbreaking failure to find answers. They tend not to venture beyond details of the case/s under discussion.

Missing and social issues
Risk factors which render a person more likely to go missing (such as race, age, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, disability, nationality, mental illness, and family structure) are
well-established in academic literature. These affect the likelihood of a person going missing and of being found (e.g. Kiepal et al., 2012, Robertson and Demosthenous, 2004, James et al., 2008, Thompson, 2014). In creative texts, social determinants of absence are less likely to be elaborated upon, a gap that I address in my creative piece by referring to them explicitly throughout. Yet, social and cultural issues are evoked by a range of texts about absence. These narratives have a wider social value beyond telling an individual’s story. They can make audiences consider the risks of absence, and lead them to questions about the role of law enforcement and governments. They can make them consider their own culture and how it may contribute to the prevalence of absence.

**Child Vulnerability**

For instance, nonfiction books such as *Twilight of Innocence* (2005) by James Jessen Badal and *After Etan* (2009) by Lisa R Cohen both detail cases of child abductions in the US and discuss cultural and perceptual shifts that have occurred as a result of high-profile missing children’s cases, which are frightening but statistically rare (Shelton et al., 2016). The authors explain that as a result of media coverage, children are now more likely to be educated on the potential harms of strangers, and are also more likely to be monitored by their parents than they were when the abductions they detail happened (the first occurred in 1951, the other in 1979). These absent children highlight the physical danger of being a child, and for the respective authors, have marked a tangible shift in the way we see the relative vulnerability of children. Similar themes are evoked in the *99% Invisible* podcast episode, “Milk Carton Kids” (Brown, 2015) which explores some of the stories about the US campaign to feature photographs and information about missing children on the sides of milk cartons. The show explores both how this campaign raised awareness of the reality of child abduction, but also how it scared children by detailing a frightening reality on a ubiquitous product. As with high profile missing children cases, the milk cartons challenged the idea that children were safe. Ultimately, the campaign was not successful.

Despite over five billion milk cartons being printed with missing children pictures on them, only one child was found alive as a result of the campaign. All these texts point to the macro-scale ambivalences around the awareness of child safety. Is the distress caused by constantly acknowledging an unlikely risk of danger worth it if it keeps more children safe?

The podcast, *In The Dark* (Baran, 2016), also explores broader social considerations in missing persons cases. The podcast interrogates a range of police failures in investigating the abduction and murder of child, Jacob Wetterling, in rural Minnesota in 1989. The shock of the crime and its effect on the wider community in terms of being aware of ‘stranger danger’ led to the establishment of sex-offender registries within the US. Over the series, the podcast also reflects on shortcomings in the police investigation of the case, relevant bureaucratic failures, and reactionary shifts that occurred in the wake of the atrocity.
The Nature of Our Society

The UK podcast, MISSING (Weaver, 2015-2016), also provides a meta-investigation of missing persons cases in order to answer the question, ‘how do people go missing without a trace?’ The host, Tim Weaver, puts this question to a number of people involved with tracing criminals and/or experts in tracing and explores how individuals are persistently subject to surveillance through mobile phone location services, CCTV, and other forms of technology. The mystery of missing persons becomes a mode of framing discussions about privacy. Andrew O’Hagan similarly considers modern culture in The Missing (2004), a book that amalgamates memoir with journalistic coverage of missing persons cases in the UK. Through the text, O’Hagan meditates on what compels people to go missing, and what break-downs might make individuals more likely to go missing in modern society. While Weaver sees absence as a near-impossible anomaly in a surveillance-saturated society, O’Hagan conversely argues that absence is a modern phenomenon, fuelled by increasing social alienation.

All these texts show that missing persons are relevant to a broad audience because they relate to communal anxieties about children, safety, surveillance and security, and alienation.

Adventurous and lost children

Disappearance as Adventure

Some of the most beloved canonical children’s stories involve children leaving home. Unsupervised by parents or other adults, running away is part of the young protagonists’ journey towards an exhilarating independence. These narratives often evoke supernatural themes as a meme in this process. Examples of such texts include Enid Blyton’s The Magic Faraway Tree (2013 [1943]) where a group of children find themselves in distant worlds through the powers of a tree; JM Barrie’s Peter Pan and Wendy (2016 [1911]), where children are flown to the mythical island of Neverland; and CS Lewis’s The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (2017 [1950]) where a magic cupboard takes children to the surreal world of Narnia. These adventures may be dangerous in parts, but ultimately the departure from one’s regular life is depicted as delightful. There is also always the promise of return.

Disappearance as Scary

While these representations are among the most cherished childhood stories, there are also texts that portray going missing as an ambivalent or even terrifying situation. The lost child suffers the downsides of independence – disorder, disorientation, and helplessness. Such a lost child is depicted in Lewis Carrol’s Alice in Wonderland (2009 [1865]). Alice’s curiosity leads her to stray to bizarre lands where her identity and the realities of logic are no longer available to her. While the story is delightful, Alice is consistently confused and frustrated by her inability to comprehend Wonderland, or easily get home. A darker – and true – representation of the lost child is also
depicted in *Lion* (2016 [2013]), a contemporary memoir by Saroo Brierley. He describes his experience of accidentally embarking on a long train journey as a five-year-old from his home in the west of India to Kolkata after undertaking an adventure with his older brother. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, Brierley doesn’t understand the rules of his new world, how to get help, and most importantly, how to get home. He’s later adopted by an Australian couple where he finds a comfortable life, but in some sense, Brierley remains lost until, at the age of thirty, he uses Google maps to trace his original family. These texts are concerned with the lived experience of confusion and frenzy. They also capture an *ad hoc* form of coping. While the child in each story is victim to difficult circumstances, they also display ingenuity and adaptability to survive in worlds they do not fully understand.

These texts about adventurous or lost children provide insights into what it’s like to not quite understand the rules of the world; and the perils associated with breaking free from structures built by parents, teachers, and other adults. Whether the story is exciting or terrifying, going missing is used as a metaphor for being independent, growing up, and attempting to understand a new context with new conventions without adult protection.

**Missing as grappling**

In some cases, an individual may go missing to cope with personal and interpersonal dysfunction, or to escape situations they find intolerable (Bonny et al., 2016). Likewise, texts about missing persons provide a means through which this dysfunction – or the reasons behind the escape – can be explored. The act of going missing itself has varying degrees of centrality in these texts, but for all, the act of running away is a watershed experience which causes characters to grapple with problems connecting to others, their identity, and purpose in life, difficult emotions and/or circumstances. Such stories were common in the pre-Freudian social novels of the Victorians, for example, Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (2006 [1838]) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (2000 [1847]). In these texts, disappearance is transformational. Not only is the runaway transformed but their absence causes those left behind to reflect on and change their behaviour. Such texts use transformation via disappearance as a device for a utopian personal and social resolution. Modern texts tend to be less optimistic about the potentialities of running away, though often characters have the vague apprehension that their disappearance will carry transformative power – indeed, sometimes it does.

**Relationship Issues**

Relationship breakdown, particularly in the family setting, remains a common reason for individuals to run away. One UK study notes that breakdown in family relationships was the most cited reason for individuals to go missing deliberately (Biehal et al., 2003: 15). US author, Maya Angelou, describes her own escape from a difficult home in her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged
Bird Sings (2009 [1969]) which was prompted by her father’s girlfriend’s verbal and physical abuse. Similarly, Emma Cline’s US novel The Girls (2016) provides a fictional account of a young woman leaving home. While the protagonist, Evie, has a loving family, she feels inadequately supported by them. She deals with the kinds of problems that increase the chance of a young person going missing – family tension, friendship troubles, and a lack of wellbeing (Rees, 2011). She is vulnerable to the lure of a cult.

While both Angelou’s memoir and Cline’s novel centre on young women who have been unfairly treated and who lack power to address their situations constructively, both offer a complex understanding of victimhood. For Angelou, in running away she finds a small group of homeless young people who have an autonomous community where money and resources are shared, and everyone is offered protection. Although the community is surprisingly pleasant, Angelou eventually decides to move back in with her mother with little fanfare and on her own terms – she is able to renegotiate and transform her living conditions. For Evie, joining a cult is an active decision, not as a result of brainwashing, but in order to fill a social need. She cares much less about the cult and its charismatic leader than about the other girls involved – she longs for their acceptance. Her rejection of home is shown as an ironic way to find social ties, albeit in an ineffectual way. Both stories speak to the act of going missing as an inelegant mode of problem solving in relationships.

**Dissatisfaction**

In some fictional texts, running away is seen as an attractive method of grappling with dissatisfaction and existential difficulties, with mixed success. In US author, Ottessa Moshfegh’s Eileen (2016), the adult character longs to run away from her menial job and from caring for her difficult father. At points, she even ‘practises’ running away to work up her courage to do so. Her dream is not realised until she becomes involved in violent criminal activity and must leave in order to avoid arrest. It could be argued that Eileen undertook the criminal activity to ensure that she would leave, in which case her rationale for leaving is perhaps more nebulous than simply avoiding arrest – she is dissatisfied with her life and running away after hurting others becomes a mode of redressing wider dissatisfaction. The story is told retrospectively and suggests that the transformation Eileen had hoped for did take place in the long-term.

Eileen’s ability to escape dissatisfaction through disappearance contrasts with other texts where transformation does not occur. The teenage character of Holden Caulfield in JD Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye (1994 [1951]) is in equal parts resentful of conformity and afraid of his parents’ response to his expulsion from boarding school, and so aimlessly spends days in New York City. Nothing resolves, he is simply marking time. Nobody is Ever Missing by US author Catherine Lacey (2014) similarly traces a vague and difficult to articulate dissatisfaction. Elyria, a young
woman who has established a marriage and a career, suddenly leaves her home to fly to New Zealand. She does not fully understand why she is leaving, though her sister’s death and her unsatisfactory marriage are contributing factors. She thinks, ‘I was being pushed by currents, by unseen things, memories and imaginations and fears swirled together – this was one of those things you figure out years later’ (p. 80). Elyria’s absence, as in the other absences described in this section, provides the author with an opportunity to imagine the dark places from which a motivation to go missing would arise. The absence becomes a symbol for these poorly defined yet all-encompassing and seemingly unresolvable personal issues.

More progress is made toward transformation – but still with a cost – through disappearance in US television series, *Mad Men* (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2015). A young man steals the identity of a fellow Korean War soldier – Don Draper, who died in combat at a point just when he was due home – in order to avoid further combat. The man’s true family is told that he has died while he instead forges a life and career as Don. Faking his death and identity allows for reinvention: he becomes socially mobile through his advertising work in New York City and distances himself from his tortured childhood. The transformation is superficial though. In these years, “Don” paradoxically struggles with finding satisfaction in life as someone who has built his existence on lies. Going missing is important for redressing his difficult circumstances, but it is not a perfect solution. It leads to a lifelong grappling with relationships, honesty, and emotional turmoil.

**Mental Illness**

Sometimes, dissatisfaction is defined through the lens of mental illness. US author, Monica Starkman’s novel *The End of Miracles* (2016) explicitly explores mental illness as a cause of going missing. This is valuable given estimations from a UK study that as many as 80% of missing persons may have a mental illness (Gibb and Woolnough, 2007: 1). The protagonist, Margo, absconds from inpatient treatment after being hospitalised for depression and grief following a miscarriage. Starkman uses clinical terminology to solidify the vaguer aspects of distress. While missing, Margo abducts a baby, showing the interpersonal impact of her emotions and her absence. Suicide is another common reason for people to go missing (Biehal et al., 2003: 4-5), which is directly explored in Sylvia Plath’s (2014 [1963]), *The Bell Jar*. When Esther tries to take her own life, she is hidden in her mother’s house – missing for several days – before being found and taken to hospital. She receives psychiatric treatment after the incident. In both these books, each characters’ absence points to their extreme distress, and is configured as a symptom of an illness.

**Ambiguous loss**

The imprecise, unpredictable nature of absence often leads to astonishment and confusion experienced by those left behind such as family members and friends of missing persons. As will
be described in further detail in the next chapter, this impact is called ‘ambiguous loss’ and a range of texts explore this aspect of missing persons cases. Here, a person’s absence leads to an unsettling and disturbing uncertainty.

Responsibility

In video game, *Limbo* (Playdead, 2015) a game player is offered an abstract representation of the ongoing emotional impact of having a missing loved one. The user plays a young boy whose sister is missing and must traverse a dangerous landscape in order to find her. The atmospheric graphics (the game is monochromatic with dangers lurking in indiscernible shadows) work to explore the essential emotions of fear and worry. As well, the game is fundamentally driven by feelings of responsibility toward the missing, and the need to search – even to one’s own detriment.

A nonfiction example is offered by US journalist, David Kushner in his memoir *Alligator Candy* (2016). In 1973, Kushner’s teenaged brother, Jonathan, went missing while riding his bike from the local convenience store (he was soon found to be a victim of homicide). Kushner’s last memory of his brother is asking him to pick up a packet of gum, but because of differing accounts and the time that has passed since the event (Kushner was four when his brother went missing), he isn’t sure if that was the sole purpose of his trip. Kushner explores the guilt of potentially setting in motion a series of events that led to his brother going missing. Although the substance of the book is about a family coping with the long-term aftermath of a violent and senseless death of a son, because Jonathan was missing for a short stretch of time, it also depicts hope and a lack of hope around potentially finding a loved one, the trappings of inaccurate memories and rumours, and the ongoing anxiety and dread Kushner experiences even as an adult when he’s unsure as to where his family members are. The pain of this first ambiguous loss lives on in other manifestations whenever ambiguous or worrying circumstances take shape.

Lingering Connections and Making Conclusions

Two nonfiction podcasts provide two different representations of ambiguous loss: one produced by *This American Life* (Meek, 2016) and one by ABC Radio National (Moodie, 2016). The *This American Life* segment discusses a telephone booth in Japan which is used to talk to relatives who went missing in the 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster. The telephone is not connected to any line, but is used by people looking to forge connections with their missing loved ones. It illustrates how some family members of missing persons long to keep communicating with them and continue their relationship with them. The missing persons are shown to be intangibly present, real, and not forgotten. The Radio National podcast conveys a different type of relationship between a missing person and those left behind. It covers the case of Rachel Funari, who went missing off the coast of Bruny Island in Tasmania. Drawing extensively from interviews with Rachel’s family members, the podcast details how important ‘closure’ is for some relatives of
missing persons – in this case, the relatives have decided not to hold out hope that Rachel may still be alive in order to move forward with their own lives. Instead, through testimonies and anecdotes, it aims to make sense of who Rachel was. The podcasts are also of note in their differing depictions of ambiguous loss: the telephone in Japan represents lingering ties, while Rachel’s family’s story embraces a sense of a clear ending. Comparing them points to the different shapes that narratives can take in the wake of ambiguity, and recognises variations in the experience of ambiguity.

The Ambiguity of Investigation

Other nonfictional texts also grapple with ambiguous loss and missing persons. An Australian text, *Searching for Tony* (1988), written by Brian Jones, is a story of a family’s attempt to find their loved one (Jones is Tony’s brother) which focuses on aspects of the investigation such as building hypotheses, acting on leads (many of which are false), and experiencing delays and frustrations. Similarly, US text, *Without a Trace* (2001) is co-authored by Greg Aunapu, a journalist, and Susan Billig, the mother of Amy, a girl who disappeared at age sixteen and whose case is the focus of the book. For decades, Billig is shown to have persistently followed a range of leads, befriending suspicious characters, travelling across the US, and putting most of her financial resources into her quest to find her daughter. Podcasts such as US production *Missing Maura Murray* (Pilleri and Reenstierna, 2015 - Present), the Australian podcast *Searching for Rachel Antonio* (Murray, 2016), and Canadian series *Somebody Knows Something* (Ridgen, 2016) complicate the portrayal of a missing person as a puzzle. Although they all painstakingly detail the lead up to an individual going missing, the respective podcasts’ inclusion of voices of those who knew the missing person adds the emotional dimension of ambiguous loss to accounts of cases. Here, the disappearance itself becomes background to its painful and mystifying aftermath.

Asking if You Truly Knew a Missing Loved One

Two fictional texts that likewise provide a detailed account of what it is like to have a family member go missing are *The Astrologer’s Daughter* (2014) by Australian author, Rebecca Lim and *Sister, Missing* (2014) by US author, Jeff Ambrose. The former text remains ambiguous about what happened to the protagonist’s mother. The protagonist says, ‘You want to know how it turns out, right? Well, so do I but I’m resisting the urge to look’ (p. 315). The latter, however, does divulge the ‘ending’ of what happened to the protagonist’s missing sister but both protagonists are nonetheless forced to face the fact that they did not know as much about their missing loved one as they thought they did. This realisation is wrapped up with feelings of guilt as it is possible that if they were more informed about the activities of their respective loved ones, they may have been able to prevent them from going missing.
Guilt and a lack of closure in response to ambiguous loss is also explored in “Somebody’s Baby”, a short story which appears in US writer, Diane Cook’s collection, *Man V. Nature* (2015). The story depicts a dystopian future where children go missing as a matter of course and families decide to keep having babies until they stop being taken (usually by the third child). When protagonist, Linda, finds that her second child has been stolen she berates herself – this is her second loss. She wonders how she could have looked after her children more thoroughly. She decides to try and find her children. She is successful, but the story does not end happily. Cook shows instead that Linda’s loss is much broader than the moment she lost her child, and getting her older child back in particular – a child who was abducted so long ago she does not recognise her – does not lead to closure. Cook writes, ‘Though she had her children back, she still felt grief for what could have been, for what would never be’ (p. 70). The ambiguous loss becomes more than an orientation towards rectifying absence, Cook also explores the impossibility of getting back the lost time you could have had with a loved one.

**Responsibility, Guilt, and Mistakes**

Ambiguous loss – and different manifestations of guilt – play roles in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1992 [1955]) and in Haruki Murakami’s *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage* (2014). In both fictional texts, the losses the protagonists suffer implicates them. In *Lolita*, the role Humbert Humbert plays in compelling his under aged step-daughter to escape from his care is clear – he has been sexually abusing her. In his pursuit of her, Humbert is not able to contact authorities from fear that his inappropriate relationship with her will be called into question. Thus, the two secrets run parallel – Lolita’s whereabouts and Humbert’s illicit activity. While Humbert does not seem to show remorse at this stage of the novel (it is not until Lolita is seventeen that he realises he has destroyed her childhood), his own guilt is central in his inability to bring Lolita back. In Murakami’s work, Tsukuru’s friend suddenly becomes uncontactable. The novel is ambiguous as to whether Tsukuru behaved inappropriately towards his friend in a dream or in reality, Tsukuru is confused about his actions, and feels a deep sense of guilt. Tsukuru concludes that he has deep deficiencies that caused his friend to leave, but he doesn’t know what those deficiencies are. He is left wondering about what unknown aspects of himself are so abhorrent as to cause loss in this as well as in other relationships in his life. The ambiguity is in the question of where the friend is as well as what was done to make him leave.

*The Wife of Martin Guerre* (2013 [1941]) also deals with a range of ambiguities in addition to the central ambiguous loss. US author Janet Lewis provides a fictional account of absence in the sixteenth century in Toulouse, France. In the story, Martin Guerre, the abusive husband of Bertrande, one day disappears. Bertrande is upset and wonders about Martin’s whereabouts but the extent of her ambiguous loss is mitigated by her dislike of him. Much later, a man comes to the village, claiming that he is Martin Guerre. Bertrande is not sure of the man’s identity but he
is kind towards her and she begins to believe him, despite lingering doubts. Bertrande’s mistake is brought to light when the real Martin returns. This is more devastating than the initial disappearance because, for Bertrande, the imposter is the kind of person she wishes her husband really was. Ultimately, when the false Martin is put to death, Bertrande suffers the additional loss of someone she loved on top of the ambiguities of Martin’s absence and the imposter’s identity. She must also face the real Martin’s wrath for her perceived disloyalty in the face of ambiguity.

These texts are vastly removed from the depiction of missing persons cases as a puzzle to solve, even though they sometimes do delve into matters of evidence and clues and speculation as to what may have happened to the missing person. Rather, they explore what it’s like to live in the shadow of a loved one’s absence. Physical absence can be generalised to considerations about the inevitable human struggle of risk and uncertainty. In these texts, family members and friends are concerned by the fact that they don’t know what the missing person was thinking, whether they were hurt, whether they’ll return, and whether they’re to blame for the absence. In these texts, the absent person is both literally a lost loved one as well as a reminder of the limits of our knowledge of others.

**Missing and other mysteries**

Epistemological limitations can extend beyond the discomfort of ambiguous loss and into other kinds of unknowns. Sometimes the unknowns relate to why the person went missing, and sometimes they are juxtaposed for the sake of demonstrating the similarities between an unresolved missing persons case and mysteries surrounding the supernatural, betrayal, secrets, and death.

*The Supernatural*

Joan Lindsay’s (2009 [1967]) classic Australian novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, is an example of ambiguity arising from incomprehensible forces. Lindsay details a curious, fictional case from 1900 where three schoolgirls and a teacher disappear while on a school picnic to Hanging Rock in Victoria. Although the idea of some kind of supernatural force causing the disappearances is only hinted at as a possibility, Lindsay creates a tone of eeriness and the suggestion reads prominently. ‘*Picnic at Hanging Rock* speaks to the liminal space in which missing sits’, alongside the possibility of a supernatural cause of the disappearances, those missing are shown to have a continued, almost ghostly presence themselves, as ‘a continuing hope remains for their potential return, however miraculous’ (Wayland et al., 2016: 328). A more modern account of absence, the Netflix series, *Stranger Things* (Duffer and Duffer, 2016) has a similar eerie quality. A boy goes missing in a small American town and in the last place he was seen a different child is found. The mystery seems to involve both supernatural forces and government conspiracy. Both supernatural and government forces are also explored in the dreamlike video game, *Virginia* (505
Games, 2016) where the user is cast as an FBI agent, simultaneously working on a missing persons investigation and an investigation into her colleague. The game posits a number of possible outcomes but it’s impossible to know which one is ‘true’ because the main character constantly finds herself in the midst of vivid dreams or other altered states of consciousness. US serialised fiction podcast *Alice Isn’t Dead* (Fink, 2017) equally plays with themes of the unknowable and the supernatural. The series is narrated by Alice’s wife, who explains that she had assumed that Alice had died, because it is impossible for her to fathom why Alice would have voluntarily left. The narrator, however, then has a number of bizarre encounters, for instance, she sees Alice on every news broadcast over multiple television channels. She takes a road trip to search for Alice and things become stranger and scarier. She drives through a town which isn’t marked on the map that won’t let her leave; every time she stops she sees a disgusting, threatening figure who she labels ‘the Thistle-man’. The mystery of the missing person is wrapped up in doubts about the nature of reality. In another story-driven video game, *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) the player uses time travel to find clues about the whereabouts of a missing girl and as a means of investigating a spate of unusual events. Additionally, some texts about absence have characters who are psychics and can assist on investigations, such as the *1800-WHERE-R-YOU* series (Cabot, 2007) and *Leaving Time* (Picoult, 2014). The use of dreams, the supernatural, and of psychic or other magical powers gets to the heart of limitations surrounding sensible knowledge and human perception and point to a perennial state of ambiguity and doubt. These texts speak to points in life generally where rational explanations are lacking.

**Betrayal and Other Secrets**

Often fictional texts on absence implicate other kinds of hidden realities and secrets. Romantic affairs – which come to light after a person has gone missing – are explored in texts such as Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), Gwendolen Gross’s *When She Was Gone* (2012), Jodi Picoult’s *Leaving Time* (2014), and Holly Brown’s *Don’t Try to Find Me* (2014). In *Gone Girl*, other kinds of secrets are likewise conflated with absence. In the book, after Amy disappears, it’s revealed that her husband, Nick, didn’t really know or understand her – and nor did the reader up until that point – and that she secretly hated him and was plotting an elaborate revenge. Also, in Maria Semple’s (2012), *Where Did You Go, Bernadette?* Bernadette, the missing person, carefully conceals her heightened madness, her bizarre expenditures, and her growing inability to cope with life in suburban Seattle. These secrets are only revealed at the start of investigations. In these texts secrets of various kinds are directly juxtaposed with absence.

**Death**

Another mystery explored in fictional texts about absence is death itself. US author Jodi Picoult’s *Leaving Time* (2014) depicts a daughter’s investigation of a mother’s disappearance. The daughter gets the assistance of other investigators and they seem to make some progress on solving the
case until it is revealed that they are themselves dead and the ‘missing’ mother is alive and well, merely in a different place. A similar twist occurs in Lauren Oliver’s Vanishing Girls (2015), where a girl investigating her sister’s disappearance is revealed to be in denial about the fact that her sister was never missing at all, but rather had died. It makes sense that authors conflate absence and death given that both are experienced as losses, and both are fundamentally mysterious.

These texts about absence show that the topic is fertile ground to explore surprising, shocking, or unknowable facets of reality. Authors draw comparisons between absence and other epistemological limitations.

The multiple perspectives of missing
Some texts explore absence from multiple points of view. In such texts, the perspective of an absent person can be directly compared with the perspectives of their family members. Often these texts highlight the multiple views that arise from the same scenario and undermine the notion of objective ‘truth’. Audiences are privy to the ways in which family members fail to relate, but the family members themselves are not necessarily aware of the fact that there has been such a failure. In these texts, absence is used to reflect on the gaps of understanding that arise in relationships generally, even where nobody is deliberately concealing the truth.

A key example of such a text is Homer’s epic poem, The Odyssey (1992 [c. 8thC BCE]), which tracks the journey of Odysseus as he takes ten years to come home to Ithaca after his victory in the Trojan War (which likewise lasted ten years). The text depicts both the convoluted hardships of Odysseus as well as the difficulties faced by his family in these years, and these multiple perspectives work in tandem to show the full impact of a person’s absence. Odysseus’s wife and son have had a difficult time living with irritating suitors who are only at their house because of Odysseus’s absence. This is not a harm Odysseus intended to inflict – he had no idea that his journey would be so long. Similar themes of shipwreck and both being a missing person and missing a loved one can be found in Shakespeare’s oeuvre in plays such as Twelfth Night (1995 [1602]) where twins Viola and Sebastian are separated at sea and both fear each other’s deaths, and The Tempest (1994 [1611]) in which Prince Alonso, son to the King of Naples, is presumed to be lost at sea but is instead entranced in love. In these plays, audiences can compare the activities (and perspectives driving those activities) of a missing person with the distress of those left behind.

This comparison is likewise made by Mark Twain in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (2006 [1876]). Tom, a young boy, has left home in pursuit of adventure, but his fun is directly contrasted with his family’s worry. Concluding that Tom has died, they arrange his funeral. Tom is curious about what his own funeral would be like and returns home, unaware of the fact that he’s causing
his grieving family to suffer. Twain shows that actions that may seem fun can have deleterious interpersonal impacts.

More modern examples of multiple perspective stories can be found in the US cartoon, *The Simpsons*. In the episode “Bart vs. Thanksgiving” (Silverman, 1990), ten-year-old Bart runs away from home after being punished for fighting with his sister, Lisa. He feels that his punishment was unwarranted, while she is upset because Bart accidentally threw her artwork in the fire during the fight and ruined it. The episode shifts perspectives between the family at home who realise Bart is missing and become worried, and Bart, who makes efforts to survive alone. Eventually, Bart wanders back home out of remorse but he’s also fearful that if he were to apologise, it would amount to a concession of guilt for a wider variety of family problems. The episode depicts the fraught process of deciding to come back home as well as the family’s worry about a missing child and their response to the child’s return. There are different understandings of the same fight, different views of what a ‘reasonable’ penalty constitutes, and different views on what an apology means. Upon Bart’s return, he and Lisa use the opportunity to discuss their perspectives and resolve the incident.

In Celeste Ng likewise explores a multitude of perspectives within families in *Everything I Never Told You* (2016). The Lee family has suffered through two disappearances. In the first instance, the mother went missing. She had aspired to be a doctor but was stifled by gender roles in the US in the 1960s. Later, she left her family in pursuit of her medical degree before realising that she was pregnant and returning home voluntarily. While her motivations are clearly laid out in the book, the family does not discuss the situation and the other members are confused and distraught by her absence. All members come to blame themselves for the disappearance – even though she returns, and even though the true cause is far more complex than the fault of a single person – and come to live with long-term guilt. Later, the middle child of the family, Lydia, disappears. While it’s quickly found that Lydia has drowned, it isn’t clear why. Some point to her quiet, outcast nature and speculate that she took her own life. Others – her elder brother in particular – wonder if she has been murdered. The parts of the narrative told from her perspective reveal the cause of her going missing, and her death. Again though, the remaining family members are confused and can only speculate about what they may have done wrong, or what was going through Lydia’s mind. Here, the multiple perspectives are never reconciled through absence. If anything, the absences heighten the Lee family’s inability to understand each other.

**Contextualising precedents in relation to my creative work**

So far, this chapter has established that while some texts take a literal approach to absence as a mystery, crime, or true crime story, there are many other approaches that lend non-literal or metaphorical readings of absence. I have discussed texts that examine the broad social/political
contexts in which absences exist, child absence as a metaphor for ambivalent takes on coming-of-age, absence as a means to explore characters’ inner distress, ambiguous loss in relation to absence, the ways absence can symbolise or be juxtaposed with other epistemological limitations, and how absences can reveal difficulties in communicating with and/or understanding others’ perspectives. Here, a multifaceted set of meanings in a range of genres can arise from the topic of absence.

In framing my project, it has been useful for me to draw on these rich and multifaceted understandings of what missingness means. I have been inspired to look past literal stories of missing persons and toward providing experiential accounts which illuminate the existence of social issues, and can provide opportunities for a general audience to reflect on philosophical and psychological questions surrounding ambiguous circumstances. While disappearance is not an issue that affects everyone, these texts have broad appeal because of their invocation of universal themes. I was particularly keen to draw on texts which depict the issue of absence from multiple perspectives and write about how each figure in a missing persons case confronts different, but related, problems.

Additionally, in my creative work – particularly in the introductory sequence – I have reflected on missingness as a reoccurring theme that clearly sparks readers’ interests, but which I view to be at odds with the level of knowledge the general population has on the topic of missing persons. While the theme sparks curiosity, issues surrounding missing persons in real life are often not discussed at all or are rife with stereotypes (more discussion on absence as a neglected topic in public discourse can be found in the next chapter of this exegesis). My creative work launches from this paradox.

Despite the fact that existing texts have been an inspirational source, my review has revealed some gaps that my creative work has been designed to address. I note here that because of the wide-ranging volume of texts that exist that are either invoke missing persons or are directly about missing persons, it is impossible to remark upon all texts, as well as to identify and discuss all their tendencies. As such, the gaps I have identified should be viewed as tentative in nature, as it is beyond the scope of my project to have undertaken a more systemic approach to this literature review. That said, as the literature review was broad in nature, the gaps I have uncovered are credible, if not exhaustive. The first gap I have identified is that while I have found that fictional works about missing persons more readily reflect upon the universal meanings that grow in the context of absence – such as the nature of secrets, truly understanding another person, grappling with personal problems, and clashes of subjectivities – I have tended to find nonfiction texts lacking in this way. Either they fall in the category of ‘missing as a puzzle’ and are interested in detailing cases as a work of true crime, or they investigate the impact of missing persons on the
lives of those left behind. Alternatively, such as in cases of nonfiction books of abducted children, they may focus on the impact of those cases on social views of child safety or issues around the methods used to investigate missing persons cases. These are all valuable lines of inquiry; however, I believe that a nonfictional creative work that sees absence as a lens through which we may be able to delve into philosophical and psychological questions concerning life more generally – as I have crafted my own creative work to be – would provide a unique offering. I have turned my creative gaze towards matters such as coping with ambiguity, the unexpected fluctuations of life, the role of narrative, empathy, and the importance of subjective accounts. The fact that it is nonfiction is important because it grounds those discussions in actual stories, cases, research, and statistics and allows readers to understand the real-world impact of absence.

The main exception to the literal tendencies I have identified among nonfiction texts on absence is Andrew O’Hagan’s *The Missing*. His work is interested in what missing persons come to mean to the population in general, especially in regard to the rising problems of social alienation. He also draws on his personal memories of hearing stories of missing persons as a child, and the curious way in which absence is evocative. However, the project O’Hagan has undertaken is quite distinct from mine. Firstly, we’re interested in different themes – I focus deeply on ambiguity and other philosophical/psychological questions, while his discussions are more geared to what kinds of societies facilitate pervasive levels of absence. While I likewise take a sociological interest in missing persons, I do so using the lens of intersectional disadvantage and geopolitical tension, which is distinct from current textual offerings.

Reviewing texts about missing persons was altogether a fruitful undertaking in analysing the varied ways in which missing persons and disappearances are textually portrayed and in reflecting on how I could offer something different and valuable in my own creative work. It was further a noteworthy discovery to realise the dearth of textual analysis of absence as a theme, particularly given the population-wide prevalence of the phenomenon. This literature review goes some way towards providing an account of central themes explored in such texts, however, it is non-exhaustive in nature and I would suggest that future work in extending a literature survey of these texts would add to a more solid understanding of the ways they convey meaning from a space of absence. Ultimately, my review process assured me that missing persons is a rich topic for exploration and that there are a number of ways my interests and research could contribute to the existing textual landscape.

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Chapter 2

Key Concepts

This chapter defines and examines the literature around concepts integral to my work: missingness (including the concept of ‘ambiguous loss’), and newsworthiness. ‘Missingness’ refers to the social complexities inherent in missing persons cases. The second section of this chapter, on ‘newsworthiness’, points to specific shortfalls in the coverage of missing persons cases as well as briefly indicating how these shortfalls may be addressed in the context of storytelling. In particular, discourse on missing persons neglects the sociality of cases, or the reality of ‘missingness’.

The key concepts identified in this chapter developed from a systemic literature review. I used the key terms “missing person”, “missing people”, “ambiguous loss”, “newsworthiness”, “missing persons AND media”, “missing white ‘girl OR woman’ syndrome”. I searched the following databases/library catalogues: Scopus, University of Wollongong library, the State Library of New South Wales, the National Library of Australia, Academia.edu, and Google Scholar. After conducting initial searches at the start of my research in late 2014, I set alerts so that I would be informed of emerging research as it became available. I conducted another search in late-2017. I located further relevant literature through investigating reference lists of sources as well as reading media reports that I happened upon on an ad hoc basis (e.g. they were sent to me by a supervisor or friend, or I saw them through my own perusal of news). The search was not geographically limited and excluded literature pertaining to forensic science and the identification of remains. All the literature used was in English. A total of 118 references were retained, which are a mix of peer reviewed literature, grey literature, and media items. Not all of these references will be listed in the chapter as not all closely relate to the focus of this review.

My inclusion criteria was: peer-reviewed literature pertaining to missing persons (excluding technical forensic science papers); reports about missing persons produced by government and non-profit agencies; media reports about missing persons sourced through an ad hoc basis that were relevant to the themes of newsworthiness and ambiguous loss; landmark publications pertaining to ambiguous loss (such as Boss, 1999); definitional, peer-reviewed literature pertaining to newsworthiness; and media publications directly pertaining to newsworthiness, likewise sourced on an ad hoc basis. All key academic research was sourced in a systemic way, ensuring that the review was based in a thorough investigation of relevant materials. At the same time, non-academic, supplementary literature was brought to my attention in a more fluid, ad hoc way as the research proceeded.
Missingness

Throughout this exegesis I use the term ‘missingness’ to acknowledge the reality that being missing is not a simple, physical state. Who is seen as missing, who becomes missing, and what impact absence has are social and political questions also.

Missing persons are defined as missing in respect to concerns regarding their physical absence (Biehal et al., 2003, Edkins, 2011, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit et al., 2003, Fyfe et al., 2014, Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2002, James et al., 2008, Swanton et al., 1988). While this definition appears to be straightforward, it is contingent on a number of complex assumptions. To be missing one must have: a) people who will notice their absence; and b) a regular location or set of locations in which others are accustomed to seeing them so that their absence can be noticed. Not everyone achieves this. Every so often news audiences are privy to the stories of individuals who have died in their homes without ever being reported missing or even being discovered for decades. Other people may ‘drift’ between different locations and lack the strong social ties necessary for others to monitor their whereabouts or cultivate concern for their welfare (Biehal et al., 2003: 40). As Edkins (2011) writes, ‘people are not missing in the abstract. People are only missing in relation to those who know them and are concerned for their wellbeing and want to know their whereabouts’ (p. 13).

Moreover, some people who are defined as missing do not identify with the designation ‘missing person’. In a study conducted by Parr and Stevenson (2013), a participant – a woman whose brother was missing – mentioned this complexity. She said, ‘I always felt my brother would be horrified to know that he’s been reported missing for a start, because he probably won’t consider himself missing. He’ll consider “right, I’ve had enough of there, I’m off”’ (p. 21). A missing person may consider themselves to be travelling, or moving, or embarking on a new life. They cannot be ‘missing’ to themselves if they know where they are. Furthermore, as most adults maintain the legal ‘right’ to go missing, investigators are required to balance the concerns of those left behind with the missing person’s privacy (Fyfe et al., 2015: 76), a fraught determination that must be made with regard to the missing person’s social context.

The observation that being missing is a social designation is encapsulated by the term, ‘missingness’. It was first used by Sedlak et al. (1990) to suggest that who is reported and therefore counted as missing and for what reason they are missing is contextual (p. 4). They observe that caregivers’ concern for an absent child is variable, rendering the link between a person’s absence and that person being seen as ‘missing’ inconsistent. For example, where a child

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1 This section is an adapted version of the following journal article: Stewart, E. 2018. Missingness: The Social Realities of Physical Absence. Illness, Crisis & Loss, Forthcoming. Available: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1054137318755386
is absent as a result of being kicked out of home by their parents, those parents may not report their absence (p. 6). The term has been used by a range of scholars (e.g. Clark et al., 2009, Glassock, 2012, Edkins, 2011, Wayland, 2015) to refer broadly to the sociality of missing persons cases – the missing person’s physical absence is merely one element of what it is to be missing, or to have a missing loved one. Disappearances also have relational, emotional, and role-based consequences. In this section I will firstly discuss the ways in which a person’s absence has immense consequences on the lives of those left behind, as elucidated through the psychological concept of ‘ambiguous loss’. Then, I will describe how going missing (voluntarily or otherwise) entails a renegotiation of social ties. Finally, I will detail how the broader political context affects the likelihood of disappearance among marginal groups, and how missing persons are rendered as meaningful (or ignored entirely) in accordance with the broader political landscape.

**Ambiguous Loss**

An understanding of the relational qualities of presence and absence can be enriched by philosophical investigations pertaining to the relational quality of selfhood. For Hegel (1977), the key to achieving personhood is to be recognised as a person by another. Individuals, he argues, attain a complex interiority by virtue of others relating to them as individuals with subjectivity. Our individual consciousness comes to arise from relationships. More recently, Butler (2004), has likewise explored selfhood as relational. To Butler, individuals operate within their social sphere, each mutually and vulnerably connected and interconnected – she asks, ‘Who “am” I without you?’ (p. 22). When a person experiences the absence of another (Butler refers specifically to absence caused by death, but her insight could equally be applied to the absence of a missing person), they do not simply move on after a grieving process. Rather, the loss is an active, ongoing renegotiation of who the self is without the presence of someone who has played (and indeed, may still continue to play in their absence) an important role in one’s life.

Other people are crucial to one’s own personhood. When a person is missing, the loss experienced by those left behind entails the loss of the role that person played; and potentially a consequent wound to one’s conception of oneself. The colloquial phrase ‘to be there’ for someone does not simply denote physical presence. ‘Being there’ is also a matter of providing less tangible support and comfort. Payne (1995) argues that missing persons are people whose absence results in an absence of social responsibilities they once carried out. Edkins (2011) also conceptualises missingness as fundamentally relational, and is a state that highlights the relational aspect of personhood. ‘The person cannot be pinned down: the person is missing. It is in a sense that very “missingness” that makes the person irreplaceable’ (p. ix). Here, when a loved one goes missing, there are two wounds – one is the worry about their physical safety, and the second concerns the collapse of intangible resources found in the other, and perhaps even the consequent collapse of the self.
One form that the hurt can take is ‘ambiguous loss’, a term coined by Boss (1999) to describe circumstances where it is not clear when a loved one has gone away forever (such as in death) or will return again someday. The impact of ambiguous loss can be pervasive on all areas of life, particularly where a loved one has been missing long-term (Parr et al., 2015b). Common emotions associated with ambiguous loss are onerous in nature, and listed on the table below. The loss of a person – particularly where the loss cannot be reconciled because the person could still come back – can unleash a torrent of discomfort as the person experiencing the loss can neither work to redefine who they are without the missing loved one, nor can they be the person they are when their missing loved one is ‘there’.

As well as being related to expectations around a loved one’s return, ambiguous loss is also based on not understanding why someone has gone missing. Often, disappearances lack clear warning signs (Davies, 2013, Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2002). Having these outstanding questions about where a person is and why they left can be devastating. Indeed, Boss (1999) says that ‘ambiguous loss is the most stressful loss people can face’ (p. 20).

Boss’s statement is based on her own anecdotal, clinical experience with clients who have faced ambiguous loss, although it has not been systemically verified. There has been some evidence that the homicidally bereaved are more likely to experience both prolonged grief disorder (at a rate of 39.77%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (19.96%) than relatives of long-term missing persons (for whom the rates of PGD and PTSD are 25.44% and 13.71% respectively) (Lenferink et al., 2017). However, the two groups of participants included in the study are not directly comparable for a number of reasons, the most significant being that the homicidallybereaved group had lost their loved one on average 6.9 years before the study, while the relatives of missing persons group had lost their loved one on average 15.5 years earlier. The rate of distress is also relatively high for both groups, and the study was provisional in nature. Regardless of whether ambiguous loss is not the most stressful form of loss, it is clearly a painful experience. Some people left behind comment that the notion or revelation that the missing person has died is easier to live with than the ambiguity of their absence (Harari, 2013: 16, Moodie, 2016). A context of ambiguity is not conducive to the comfort of ‘closure’ (Boss, 1999, Boss and Carnes, 2012, Davies, 2013, Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2002).

There have been a range of studies about the specific impacts of ambiguous loss upon those who are ‘left behind’. As these are elucidated through my creative work, I have provided a brief summary of the extent of impacts in the table below. This table was rendered through my review (see details of my literature review method above) of academic literature, reports from government and non-profit agencies, and media reports. Whenever a source I encountered specified some of the impacts that arose for those left behind, I noted it. I drew connections
between literature items that expounded on similar themes, and I eventually came to categorise those themes as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Emotions associated with ambiguous loss include: intense sadness, powerlessness, guilt, hypervigilance, anger, stress and anxiety, confusion, depression, frustration, and disbelief (Clark et al., 2009, Davies, 2013, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit et al., 2003, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit and Attorney General’s Department of NSW, 2005).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>As experiencing a loved one go missing can be stressful, the physical impacts of stress can be present. Concerns such as appetite changes, fatigue, migraine, palpitations, sleep disturbance and nausea may be present. In the long-term, stress can trigger illness and reduce the efficacy of the immune system. Additionally, habits individuals use to cope with difficult emotional circumstances (such as overeating, or drug use) may put an individual at risk for long-term physical problems (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit et al., 2003: 17-18).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Attempting to find a missing person can be an expensive, time-consuming process (particularly if travel is involved or if those left behind make use of professional services such as a private investigator). There may also be associated legal costs, and a loss of earnings as search efforts interfere with paid employment (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit et al., 2003: 19).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>For friends and families of missing persons, some important events and occasions go un-celebrated or take on a bittersweet tone as they are a reminder that the missing person isn’t there (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit and Attorney General’s Department of NSW, 2005). According to Hogben (2006), this tendency can become broader, into the realm of ‘suspended animation’ (p. 338). Families and friends of missing persons may decide to postpone important life decisions (such as moving to a new house) in order to accommodate the potential future comfort of the missing person. ‘This stasis occurs because family members are waiting for some action (the return of or some news of the missing person’s whereabouts)’ (p. 338).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistical:</td>
<td>Families negotiate with police and other authorities to try and locate the missing person. The literature reveals that there are mixed experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating</td>
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within the policing system. Some issues in Australia, explored by the television programme, *Insight* (SBS, 2013), include:

- People being erroneously told that they need to wait 24 hours before reporting a missing person (this is a myth – people should report a person as missing when they are first concerned about the absence).
- Difficulties in getting different state and territory jurisdictions to share information about missing persons.
- People having information pertaining to the whereabouts of their loved one withheld from them (the programme, for instance, included a family who were not given CCTV footage police had obtained of their relative).

It can also be frustrating for friends and family members of missing persons when police pursue a line of investigation they do not agree with (for instance, police acting on the presumption that a person has committed suicide when the family thinks they became lost or trapped) (Parr and Stevenson, 2014). Similar frustrations to these and those covered by *Insight* are also detailed by Moore (2011) in her investigative nonfiction missing persons case studies, from her perspective as a former policer officer.

Studies point to a degree of ambivalence around the way police handle missing persons cases. Some families are happy with the attention and care they get, others feel dissatisfied with police inefficiency (Clark, 2011: 36). Woolnough et al. (2015) observe that families generally have a more positive relationship with police where police have been communicating with them clearly and often (p. 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Logistical:</strong> Searching</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those left behind often search for the missing person themselves, usually (but not always) parallel to a police investigation. There are a large variety of potential search methods: physically searching for someone, searching the missing persons home and belongings, door knocking, visiting places the missing person usually frequents, attempting to contact the missing person, appealing to the public for information (e.g. posters, social media pages, reaching out the media), contacting various organisations (e.g. hospitals, airlines, banks) in case they have information pertaining to the person’s activities or whereabouts, enlisting in the help of charities or non-profit organisations, and many more (Woolnough et al., 2015: 5, Moore, 2011). Searching can become a pervasive experience. Some of those left...</td>
</tr>
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</table>
behind find themselves scanning every location just in case their loved one may be there. They may feel guilty about not doing this (Parr et al., 2015b: 73).

| Marginalisation | Those left behind sometimes feel marginalised by authorities, and the wider community. Some report feeling that there is a lack of conversation about missingness and feel pressured by others to move on. Frustration is a natural result (Clark et al., 2009, Davies, 2013, Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2002).

Further, within families, there are problems around conceptualising who has experienced the loss. For instance, often it is the parents of the missing person who are understood as being most in need of assistance and support and the needs of the siblings are more likely to go neglected (Clark et al., 2009, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit and Attorney General's Department of NSW, 2005).

| Informational Struggles | Having a missing loved one can lead to a number of complexities concerning information. Clark (2011) says that sometimes family members of missing persons find out things about that person as a result of the investigation into the case. Sometimes this information can be confronting. For instance, it may pertain to drug use, or mental illness (p. 38).

Likewise, when loved ones of a missing person appeal to the public for information, they must decide how much to reveal. They have the dual concerns of protecting the person’s privacy as well as delivering the information needed so the person may be found (Wayland, 2015: 282).

The nature of the search for a missing person for some of those left behind may invoke the concept of ‘no stone being left unturned’ – that is, the internalised need to ensure every possible avenue for searching had been exhausted. The process of thoroughly searching may involve ‘turning private lives outward’ in addressing the media and open up intimate details to public scrutiny (Wayland, 2015: 215-216). It can also make it difficult to find time to relax, or do anything other than searching. Family members and friends of missing persons are in a unique situation because, unlike when a loved one dies, there may be a raft of procedures they can enact which could eventuate in finding the person (Parr et al., 2015b: 70). The glimmer of hope gives rise to a sense of responsibility which may be exhausting. Even after thorough, initial searches may have taken place, those left behind may find themselves ‘just looking’ for their missing loved one in all the places they visit as part of their daily lives – the person may be perennially on their mind (Parr et al., 2015b: 72). Some people report feeling guilty in times when they are not actively searching,
figuring that while they were having fun, they may have been able to find the person (Parr et al., 2015b: 73). Even when a period of hypervigilance and pressure to constantly search gives way to the apprehension that active searching is no longer helpful, the very nature of the loss is uncertain and restless.

Despite the obvious difficulties and impacts that being left behind by a missing person entails, there is a range of research on the potential for positivity in the context of ambiguous loss. Hope, for instance, is an integral part of living with ambiguity. Though Hogben (2006) details the deleterious impacts missingness has on the conception of time, the worried ‘suspended animation’ of putting ‘life on hold’ until a person returns is ultimately a hopeful posture which engages with the possibility of a person’s return (p. 333). Several authors also understand hope as an integral part of being left behind (Clark et al., 2009, Davies, 2013, Hogben, 2006, Wayland, 2014, Wayland, 2015, Wayland et al., 2016). Narratives emerging from an ambiguous, hopeful space can be particularly powerful. Such narratives can galvanise search efforts and/or directly speak to the experience of ambiguous loss and the re-construction of selfhood in its wake. Clark et al. (2009) briefly explore how speculation about the whereabouts of the study participants’ missing siblings could be ‘debilitating’, causing ‘uncertainty’, it also constructed possibilities for investigation such as potential places to search (p. 273). Boss (1999) suggests that ‘storytelling in making sense of our losses’ (p. 130) can provide a path towards learning to live with ambiguous circumstances. For Edkins (2011), the pull to understand what happened to a missing person is ‘insatiable’, relating to the notion that ‘to complete their story’ goes towards the narrative construction of selfhood. As such, postulating different possibilities could go towards affirming a sense of self which is weakened by the reality of a loved one’s absence.

In her doctoral work on the course of hope for family members living with a person’s long-term absence, Wayland (2015) tracks how the orientation of hope may change over time. At first, families may hope for the safe return for their loved one, but then on their own timeline, the feeling of hope may be directed at other outcomes, such as the hope for a resolution; the hope that the person is safe, somewhere out there; or that the person is at rest and did not unduly suffer (p.214). There may also be a hope for oneself in learning to live with ambiguity. Wayland notes that gaining this latter form of hope can be difficult to attain. She observes, ‘The grief reactions and the rawness of the language used by participants did not appear to have been dulled over time. The participants of this study still spoke as if they were in the early days of their loss, even though (for some) countless years had passed since they last saw the missing person’ (p. 215).

Yet ultimately, ‘healing’, while also living with ambiguous loss, is possible. While each person experiencing ambiguous loss seem to have idiosyncratic paths towards coping, some suggestions forward include learning to live one’s life while continuing to honour the missing person
(Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit and Attorney General's Department of NSW, 2005) in reflecting on the opportunities for ‘change and movement’ within the context of ambiguous loss (Wayland, 2005: 12), and through the gradual acceptance of one’s ambiguous reality (Boss and Carnes, 2012: 460). The fact that this process of healing can be incredibly slow and painful attests to the importance of the relationship between the missing person and those left behind.

**Missing and Social Ties**

Just as a person’s absence has a deep impact on those with whom they share social ties, social ties (or a lack thereof) may fuel a person’s absence. A person may go missing specifically to sever social roles; or their act may be facilitated by weak or precarious social ties. With her doctoral thesis, Weitzman (1970) provides the first reference to a taxonomy of missing persons I identified in my literature review. Here, she categorises types of missing persons framed by the social circumstances under which an individual has left home. The taxonomy is limited in scope in that she does not study the myriad circumstances in which a person could disappear, however it bears mention because of the way she usefully frames disappearance around the destruction of social roles. She identifies first those missing who go missing deliberately, people who wish to embark on a new life (some of whom fake their own death) in order to destroy their ‘anchorages of social identity’ (p. 1). This group is concerned with the relational pressures they feel – perhaps as a provider, or as an unwilling spouse or caregiver – and go missing in order to avoid the reiterative performance of social roles they find overwhelming or unpleasant. There are further ‘situational disappearances’, people who feel compelled to leave home in order to avoid social relationships which are harmful. This group is concerned with escaping abuse and harassment and can see few options other than disappearance to redefine their social situation. There are also ‘drifters’, people who do not intend to go missing, but who gradually lose contact with others and become absent through their lack of strong social ties.

The taxonomies of missingness have been further nuanced in more recent literature. For Payne (1995), missing persons and the social conditions under which they became missing can be described under the categories ‘runaways’, ‘pushaways’, ‘fallaways’, ‘throwaways’, and ‘takeaways’. ‘Runaways’ are people who leave under their own volition, perhaps for the purpose of rebellion against or rejection of their social context (p. 337). ‘Pushaways’ are also people who leave voluntarily, but some social or coercive force may have compelled them to do so, an example being someone facing domestic violence. ‘Fallaways’ are another name for those with weak social ties who ‘drift’. ‘Throwaways’ are people who are forced out of their environment, such as a teenager being ‘thrown out’ of home (p. 337). Finally, ‘takeaways’ are those missing persons whose social ties have been taken from them involuntarily, such as through abduction. Although there is a huge variety of circumstances under which individuals go missing, they do so
in the context of relationships and either wanting to renegotiate their social ties, being stricken of social ties, or (perhaps inadvertently) neglecting social ties.

**The politics of missing**

Political considerations are also relevant in understanding the social causes of absence. Being systemically marginalised within a society can contribute to the risks of going missing. There is, for instance, a high correlation between people who go missing and people with mental health concerns. The UK Missing Persons Bureau (2016) found that mental health problems were a key driver of absences, with depression, anxiety, and similar issues accounting for 21% of missing persons cases in 2014/5 and the intention to commit suicide accounting for 33%. Up to 80% of those who go missing in the UK are known to have a mental health problem (Gibb and Woolnough, 2007: 1). The correlation between disappearance and mental health issues points to a lack of social support for those living with mental illness (Holmes, 2017).

Other social issues are intertwined with missingness. Kiepal et al. (2012) compared Canadian missing persons data with census data and found ‘that disadvantaged youth, women, Aboriginal people, people who are not in the labour force, unemployed people, and homeless people are all overrepresented among people reported missing’ (p. 137). If individuals met multiple criteria of disadvantage, their likelihood of going missing was even higher. The authors argued that going missing may be symptomatic of social exclusion. Likewise, UK-based studies on children who run away show that those with disabilities, learning difficulties, people with African or Caribbean heritage were more likely to run away than the general child population (Rees, 2011: 13). Robertson and Demosthenous (2004) have also found that in Australia, young Aboriginal women (particularly between the ages of 12 and 15) face a higher risk of going missing than the average population, alongside the higher risk of long-term social disadvantage and of suicide (p. 18). The authors argue that structural inequalities alongside racist bullying and exposure to domestic violence without adequate social supports explains the disproportionate rate of absence among young Aboriginal women (pp. 28-29). The concept of ‘missingness’ incorporates this understanding that political contexts can influence an individual’s likelihood of going missing. A person’s physical absence is informed by the social conditions they have been exposed to.

Political contexts can also confer meaning to existing cases. I explore this notion thoroughly in my creative work and so I will only briefly summarise some evidence to this point here. Juhl (2015), for instance, describes how accusations of missing persons cases being treated differently in accordance to the ethnic background of the missing person in Bosnian politics has come to be a tactic to destabilise national politics. Here, missing persons can be politicised for the specific ends of interest groups. Likewise, Sant Cassia (2006) explores how the legacy of those who were missing as a result of conflict in the 1970s is treated very differently by groups advocating for a
single-state Cyprus and those who want two, divided states. For the former group, the missing persons symbolise an unknown ending which holds the potential for forgiveness and reunification. For the latter group, the missing are memorialised as dead, a symbol of the fact that the groups have been too hurt to be able to put their conflict behind them. These discussions show that missing persons can come to be meaningful on a collective level, and can serve ideological purposes. Again, the physical absence of a person takes on additional social meanings, and the designation of someone as missing may invoke these complex realities.

Newsworthiness
Mainstream discourse has little time for the expanded view of the significance of absence as denoted by the term ‘missingness’. Many – although not all – missing persons cases are deemed newsworthy, but only particular types of cases gain attention, and those cases that do gain attention limit the ways in which the realities of missingness can be vocalised. ‘Newsworthiness’ is a term that’s clearly attached to the concept of news and the news media, but here I will also use it more broadly in relation to how the issue gets discussed and scrutinised in conversation and other storytelling opportunities.

The concept of ‘newsworthiness’ is relevant to a discussion on missingness, though the definitional literature I refer to here is not provided through the lens of ‘missing’. A story becomes newsworthy if it has at least some of the following features: it’s about a new event, the event is significant (perhaps because it affects many people), the event occurred within close proximity to the potential audience, the event affected someone of prominence, if the event was odd or out-of-the-ordinary, the event has relevant consequences for the audience, it involves a scandal (which generates ‘moral interest’), and/or the event captures human interest (if, for instance, it sparks particular emotions in the audience) (Mudd, 2014). Here, newsworthy stories are understood as stories that make the news because they meet audience interests in predictable ways.

Yet, Shoemaker (2006) defines ‘newsworthiness’ by contrasting it with ‘news’. News is a common-sense term, both a ‘social construct’ and a ‘commodity’ that’s delivered through a myriad of means, from the corporatized media to ‘person to person’ interactions (p. 106). Newsworthiness, however, is ‘a mental judgement’ about the importance of stories. Shoemaker has found that those stories that people believe to be most newsworthy do not always manifest prominently in news reports (p. 110). Under Shoemaker’s definition, a story can be worthy of being in the news (or ‘newsworthy’) without ever making the news. Although Shoemaker discusses this idea theoretically, the doubleness of these different definitions of newsworthiness – both as stories that make the news and as important stories that potentially do not make the news – can be applied to the situation of missingness.
Missing persons stories fit both definitions of newsworthiness in different ways on a case-by-case basis. Achieving newsworthiness is very important for a missing persons case because it assists in the process of searching. Media organisations often publicise missing persons cases in order to raise awareness of those cases and encourage the public to advise the authorities if they see the missing person (Henderson et al., 2000: 26). Nonetheless, there are considerable deficits in portraying missingness – the complex sociality of missing persons cases is often neglected in news.

For example, the media may put undue emphasis on cases that are unusual in nature. Biehal et al. (2003) point out that the media tends to give disproportionately high coverage to incidents of children being abducted by strangers – which is a concerning but rare event – as well as fascinating cases of people who become lost while undergoing amnesia (a condition known as ‘dissociative fugue’) which is even more uncommon (p. 1). Consequently, the media ‘may serve to narrow debates about what it means to be missing’. If absence is conflated with child abduction, then it is possible that viewers will not recognise other, perhaps less concerning, forms of missing. They argue that ‘it is important that publicity… encompasses the full spectrum of missing cases’ (p. 49).

Another phenomenon concerning the limited representation of missing persons cases is known as ‘the missing white girl syndrome’ or ‘the missing white woman syndrome’ (I use the former phrase in my creative work because it is introduced in the context of missing children). The label is used to describe the disproportionate coverage allotted to missing, young, white, girls and women over other groups. Stillman (2007) argues that certain bodies – which are gendered and racialized – are ‘denied visibility in the public sphere’ (p. 493). Young, white women glean ‘empathy’ in mainstream media while others are configured as ‘disposable’ or ‘unworthy’ (p. 500). Other types of disparities exist as well – Jeanis and Powers (2016) find a statistical overrepresentation of coverage of missing persons stories in Louisiana, US which involve someone young, female, with a high socioeconomic status, as well as people who are white (p. 5). Another statistical study, conducted by Sommers (2016), analysed four high-circulation US newspapers and found a similar tendency: compared to the gender and racial break-down of actual missing persons cases in a geographical area, cases involving black people are underrepresented in news coverage, and cases involving girls or women are overrepresented. The study noted that not only is there a disparity in which cases get covered at all, there are also differences in the amount of coverage a case will get, which is likewise consistent with the tendencies of the ‘missing white girl syndrome’. As per my discussion on missingness, absences among people of particular demographics reflects patterns of marginalisation, but rarely does the media acknowledge this aspect of missingness. In fact, the unequal coverage is yet another reflection of social marginalisation.
There are many possible reasons for representation inequities, including the fact that white journalists are overrepresented in newsrooms and that more affluent families tend to be better connected and more capable of finding coverage (Hargrove and Haman, 2005). The disparity can also be attributed to the audience’s ability to relate to stories – it’s easier to think ‘that could happen to my daughter’ (for instance) if a missing child on the news looks like the viewer’s daughter (Suleyman, 2016). Unconscious bias about who constitutes a ‘victim’ or what cases are concerning may also come into play. According to Christie (1986), ‘the perfect victim’ is a person who is completely innocent – usually female, someone with little physical strength, someone involved in ‘respectable’ activities (for example, walking in safe areas in broad daylight) who is randomly attacked by a strong, bad stranger (p. 19). Maynard (2012) points out that as a result of racism, it may be difficult for viewers to see missing, black children as worthy victims because they may assume that ‘probably it wasn’t an innocent vanishing. Probably something from the pathology of that community played a role.’ Tragedy, then, is unevenly recognised and unevenly covered as news.

Various social stereotypes may also be reinforced in news about missing persons. Malloch and Burgess (2011) argue, for instance, that teenaged runaways are often perceived as delinquent when often young people run away from home because of complex issues in their life such as abuse, escaping a parent’s alcohol or drug use, and considerable difficulties at school (p. 62). Such stereotypes show up in media reports as well as among police and the attitudes of the general public. Stereotypes regarding socioeconomic class and missing persons was also explored by Jones (2011) in his book about class in the UK, Chavs. He compares the case of Madeleine McCann – a very well-publicised case of a young, middle class missing girl – with the case of Shannon Mathews, who was likewise a missing white girl but came from a poor background. Both were given media coverage but their respective outpourings of grief were very different. A reward of £2.6 million was offered for information about Madeleine – a sum which comprised of donated money from the likes of JK Rowling, Richard Branson, and the Murdoch Press – while Shannon’s reward was only £50,000 (p. 14). Unlike Madeleine, Shannon was eventually found – she had been abducted by her own mother so that she could pocket the reward money. Jones argues that when this became known, public discourse came to be highly critical of working-class communities, using this highly unusual event to stereotype a group of people, rather than showing concern for the girl.

Aside from issues concerning representation, the role the media play in the lives of those left behind can be fraught. The media may seek specific images and stories which may not capture what those left behind would like to impart, or give a holistic sense of what those left behind are going through. In her work with families of missing persons, Davies (2013) says that media representations of concerning missing children cases tends to involve footage of those left behind
looking distraught. Any possible leads – regardless of how credible they are – are treated with urgency. There may be considerable speculation as to what may have happened to the missing person (p. 119). Judgements may be made about the child’s home environment and the characters of their caregivers (p. 120). This process can be very overwhelming. Wayland (2015) found in her study that those left behind in general have fairly positive interactions with the media (p. 87), but there were considerable downsides to media attention. It can be traumatic to revisit the memory of the disappearance (p. 89) and further, ‘the participants noted that they had rarely had the opportunity to tell their story outside of narrow, agenda-driven space. These spaces – such as those occupied by law enforcement or in grabs to the media – prioritise the sharing of the investigation rather than the pain of ambiguity’ (p. 142). There is little reporting on what it’s like to live with the spectre of missingness.

Telling one’s story of missingness – whether to a friend or a television camera – may also be problematised for a subset of those left behind. One’s relationship to the missing person may be under-recognised. Clark et al. (2009) argue that, for example, the sibling relationship is one of the most ‘enduring’ over the lifespan, and yet very little is known about the effect of ambiguous loss on siblings (pp. 268-269). Siblings of missing persons have reported that often people outside of the family unit tended to ignore their need for support and instead focus on the parents (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit and Attorney General’s Department of NSW, 2005: np). Newsworthiness may also only be achieved within particular timeframes. Wayland (2015) found that among family members of long-term missing persons, there tended to be dismay at the point in time when the media, police, or those in their personal networks began to lose interest in the case. Some were asked if their continuing concern amounted to an ‘obsession’ (p. 221). Over time, individuals begin to suppress their thoughts on being left behind. ‘Fewer questions are asked, media enquiries are minimised and where hope shifts to realism rather than optimism’ (p. 257). At this point, Wayland observes, hope becomes a ‘private narrative’ (p. 257). Davies (2013) found that some of those left behind are simply expected to ‘get over it’ and can be frustrated by the lack of understanding about their predicament (p. 119). Under such social conditions, certain aspects of the experience of having a missing loved one become unspeakable, despite their worthiness in understanding the impact of absence.

The inarticulate nature of experiences surrounding missingness is something I reflect on in my creative piece – talking about missing persons necessarily means evoking clumsy vocabularies and grammar. My thinking in pointing this out is influenced by Wierzbicka (1997) who argues that where concepts are salient within a culture, a robust vocabulary evolves to describe them. As missing persons is not under a great deal of nuanced discussion in popular culture, the terminologies available are limited. Parr et al. (2015a) observed that formerly missing individuals who participated in their study found it difficult to translate the experience of having been missing
to loved ones once they returned home (p. 202). For those undergoing ambiguous loss, there are also no socially recognised ways of processing the unique grief they face that the bereaved can access, for instance through a funeral (Glassock, 2012: 47, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit et al., 2003: 22, Boss, 1999: 8). As a result of these problems associated with talking about missingness, or marking missingness, many of those left behind or who have been missing feel isolated.

Complicating and extending narratives regarding missing persons and missingness would fall under a project that Solnit (2016) calls ‘breaking the story’. While the phrase is often used to denote the process of being the first to uncover the truth of an event, Solnit has a different meaning in mind. She argues that ‘breaking the story’ can also entail telling the truth in order to challenge the status quo. It can be ‘breaking’ the old, accepted stories about a topic, and replacing them with something more accurate. ‘The writer’s job is not to look through the window someone else built, but to step outside, to question the framework, or dismantle the house and free what’s inside, all in service of making visible what was locked out of the view,’ she writes. Through meticulous research and close listening, storytellers have the opportunity to bridge the gap between what stories are important and what stories are told.

Although ‘the media’ is often criticised for its institutional shortcomings, ‘the media’ is not a straightforward arbiter of newsworthiness. It is possible for individual journalists to make the type of stand Solnit calls for through their work. As Deuze and Witschge (2017) point out, journalists do not always have the support of large media institutions to define what is news. The profession is becoming increasingly scattered and decentralised (p. 7). Journalists are not necessarily glued to one particular news organisation. In fact, market forces undermine patterns of traditional employment and pro-entrepreneurial attitudes within the media environment actively encourage individualised, freelance, and/or ‘patchwork’ career paths (p. 11). Journalism also increasingly relies on connectivity and a range of technologies which means that the work is not necessitated by an organisational structure, simply a wifi connection (p. 9). The multifaceted, dispersed nature of journalism allows the authors to define news through practice – what stories are told become news because journalists tell it, it is not a monolithic artefact (p. 13). Here, decisions that journalists make every day about what and how to cover stories is itself constitutive of what journalism is and what it can do. This is an important conclusion because it means that what counts as newsworthy is in flux. It is always possible for storytellers to change the boundaries of what’s portrayed as important.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the social complexities of missing persons cases that I categorise under the concept of ‘missingness’. These complex accounts often remain subterranean. The full
demographic range of missing persons is not adequately represented through narratives. Stories – whether they be reportage or quotidian conversation – around the consequences of cases (e.g. the realities of ambiguous loss) are likewise neglected. However, there are opportunities to redress these shortfalls through storytelling practice. As I have found through my own interviews, and will further detail in Part II, narratives provided by those with lived experience of missingness detail the importance of these stories, working towards re-defining them as ‘newsworthy’.

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Part II: Findings of my Creative Practice
Chapter 3
Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I expand on the theoretical frameworks of Practice Theory (particularly through the lens of liminality), and narratology which, in turn, form the basis of my interpretation of my research interviews and creative practice. This chapter outlines my theoretical approach specifically, and I will briefly explain my methodological approach to this interpretation (which is further expanded on in Part III). The findings are articulated in Chapter Four, where I argue that through our conversations, my interviewees complicated dominant narratives about missing persons. They broadened discussions of disappearances into larger frameworks of life stories within a social and political context; questioned the disproportionate coverage of some missing persons cases over others; challenged stereotypes about missing persons; and allowed their stories to stand unresolved. The interpretive lenses examined below provide a theoretical basis in understanding my interviewees’ narrative achievements. I argue that the ambiguous – or liminal – nature of their experiences lends itself to telling challenging stories, and is a strong basis in which personal and social realities can be freshly expounded upon.

Practice Theory

Each individual interacts with social structures of ‘fields’ and ‘capital’. Bourdieu (1986) defines these terms as part of the framework of Practice Theory. Within a society there are a multitude of fields: there is the medical field, the academic field, a workplace, a friendship group, and so on. In each field, specific things hold value – valued things are termed ‘capital’. Here, the term ‘capital’ is used in a broad sense – financial wealth may be valued in some fields (‘economic capital’), but other types of capital – such as social, cultural, and linguistic capital – can also be designated as valuable, depending on the field.

Where social structures (field and capital) are external to a person, the habitus is an embodied internalisation of those external structures as a disposition. A person comes to value those things valued within their social fields. Yet, the habitus is not just dispositions created through society and culture, it is also produced by one’s background, inculcation, personal history, and other interactions, which may relate to social structure, but varies between individuals. In turn, the habitus forms the basis of perception and appreciation of subsequent experience (Bourdieu, 2006). While the habitus can lead people to reproduce social structure or operate within the norms of their social fields through attempts to accumulate those kinds of capital deemed valuable within these fields, it also allows for structural change through agency. Here, the habitus is dialectical. ‘Habitus is not fate… it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures [emphasis original]’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133). The habitus is both a
predisposition towards certain practices as shaped by social structures as well as a force which enables people to reshape social structures.

How people generate meaning when they tell stories is an example of the habitus in play. When a person tells a story, they evoke language and grammatical structures that are conventional and intelligible within the field the story is told (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet, as De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008) point out, narrative conventions do not lock individuals into repetitive story tropes. Through practice, narratives can evolve. While ‘practice captures habituality and regularity in discourse’ through linguistic conventions, it also adapts to novel situations, questions, requests for clarification, challenges, and for spontaneity. ‘Thus, it allows for an oscillation between relatively stable, prefabricated, typified aspects of communication and emergent, in-process aspects’ (p. 383). This site of both recognising conventions and maintaining the agility to break them is where Practice Theory locates agency.

Interactions between an individual, their field, and capital can be seamless – individuals can interact relatively harmoniously within their social life and within defined social structures. However, there are many instances where an individual’s passage through daily life will be stalled or uncomfortable. There are times where individuals may not feel well-understood, or where they feel a social disconnect. The experience of liminality is one example of this.

_Liminality_

Liminality, as conceptualised by Victor Turner (1969), is a state ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’. It is a state of ambiguity, of limbo, of being on a threshold, or of going through a rite-of-passage; it can be unsettling and alienating (Johnston, 2011: 368).

Missing persons may inhabit a liminal space. When a person goes missing, they become absent from their usual geographic spaces and their daily routines cease. While there is a significant shift in one’s daily life and activities, there is nonetheless an in-between quality of life after going missing. The person still retains their same body, memories, and formative experiences. The people from their ‘old’ life may be concerned for them. Weitzman (1970) describes the efforts of some people who go missing to disguise themselves – altering their clothes and hair, and choosing to wear sunglasses to evade recognition (p. 230) – as well as efforts to deny their names and biographies completely (p. 204). Regardless, the linkages between past and present are never fully broken, and thus those in a state of missingness are on the threshold of both. This is also true of missing persons who long to go back home. They are in a new geographical space, but their position is liminal as they orient themselves toward the possibility of going back.
The experience of being left behind by a missing person is likewise liminal. Several scholars have linked the experience of liminality with that of ‘ambiguous loss’ (Kelly, 2008, Johnston, 2011, Wayland, 2014). As Boss (1999) formulates, the state of not knowing whether or not a lost person will return is a state of extreme ambiguity. Individuals lack rituals – such as a funeral – which socially mark loss. As reflected in the previous chapter, there may not be a sense of closure. Indeed, as Parr et al. (2015) point out, if those left behind produce a narrative that forms a conclusion of what happened to their loved one, they must live with the possibility that one day the missing person may come back, and in so doing ‘speak back’ to the concept of closure (p.74).

James et al. (2008) also characterise the missing persons sector generally as ‘ambiguous’ (p. 10). For instance, missing persons investigators must work with a range of hypotheses as to the location of the missing person and their potential risk of coming to harm. Usually they must make educated guesses about how the investigation should be conducted, often relying on very little information. Case workers are subject to these same limitations. Organisations looking to build awareness of cases must deal with a lack of reliable data about missing persons. Generally, missing persons cases are underreported (Missing Children Europe, 2016), which makes it difficult to obtain funding levels commensurate with the scope of the issue. In these ways the sector is liminal, operating in between authority and ignorance, between purposeful activity and wild guesses.

Agency from a Liminal Space

Under the framework of Practice Theory, when a person encounters liminality, their experiences are not always intelligible to others. Grief in the context of ambiguous loss, for example, cannot be validated socially through rituals such as funerals. Such grief evades the myth of a ‘demarcated end’ (Boss and Carnes, 2012: 459). While individuals may struggle with the lack of external recognition of their grief, those in a liminal space are also well-placed to describe their situation and thereby challenge accepted conceptualisations of grief within their social field. The possibility that new kinds of stories could emerge points to the agentic properties of the habitus. As Askland (2007) argues from her ethnographic work with a group of East Timorese asylum seekers who moved to Australia, those experiencing liminality can claim their agency despite the fact that liminality may also be associated with victimhood and marginalisation. While the study participants were glad to have found safety in Australia, they saw their residency as tenuous and lived in fear of being sent back to their country of origin where they would face persecution or violence. Australia also did not quite feel like home – they experienced cultural shock and lacked the financial resources to feel comfortable. Many said that they were in ‘crisis’ (p. 240). Yet, they engaged with their new cultural context, learning about the society, and building their English proficiency (p. 240-241). With this knowledge, they reflected on their situation, put their experiences into a narrative, and took action to lobby the Australian government to better support
asylum seekers through advocacy measures such as letter-writing, media campaigns, and protests (p. 240). Here, personal stories of liminality – when rendered meaningful through common structures of language and cultural referents – have the capacity to challenge existing political practices. Liminality, then, becomes an opportunity to express one’s agency.

In relation to newsworthiness, those narratives that offer an alternative to dominant discourses would be an example of an agent responding and working to redefine knowledge and habitual modes of representation. It may likewise be an example of ‘breaking the story’ as per Solnit’s (2016) characterisation, discussed in the previous chapter. That is, stories told by people in liminal circumstances can hold the power to challenge or redefine dominant news narratives by articulating the realities of their experiences.

**Narratology**

In ambiguous circumstances, narrative is a mode through which humans make sense of things. Narrative is the use of language to order, understand, and make coherent one’s past, present and future (Ochs and Capps, 2002: 2). Sarbin (1986) proposes ‘the narratory principle: that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures’ (p. 8). He details a simple experiment which demonstrates this tendency towards storytelling. An observer sees two rectangles in motion, one is labelled ‘A’ and the other is labelled ‘B’. If rectangle A stopped after moving toward B, and then B moved, ‘the observer would say that B “got out of the way” of A’ (pp. 12-13). The experiment emphasised the narrative nature of even depersonalised, robotic events when interpreted by an individual. Sarbin takes participants’ tendency towards making narratives as evidence of its pervasiveness as a means to structure our experiences, and lives.

Whether the necessity of narrative on shaping individual lives and identities is evidenced empirically is subject to debate. In general, it seems that it is ‘extremely common’ for individuals to fashion a ‘narrative arc’ which makes sense of their life experiences, though these narratives can evolve and can be diverse as to their level of accuracy, complexity, as well as the message the narrative imparts (Beck, 2016). There may be variation around whether a person is pulled towards storying their life at all. For example, writer, Galen Strawson (2015) claims that he has never constructed such a narrative, and that doing so would be a flawed process which magnifies some events and abridges or even deletes others. The moral implications of forcing a story where none exists may be ethically fraught, and may not be necessary to learn valuable lessons about the self. Psychology researchers Baerger and McAdams (1999) contrarily find that there is a correlation between a lack of coherent life story and a lack of wellbeing, but there are also distinct disadvantages in terms of wellbeing in constructing life stories that are ‘unsatisfying, oppressive, or [an] incoherent story that carries no messages of hope, faith, triumph, or redemption’, or
alternatively, in having another person construct a narrative on one’s behalf (p. 75). Moreover, the very act of making a narrative about one’s life – particularly in searching for meaning, connection, and understanding in the wake of trauma – can be psychologically difficult. Linley and Joseph (2011) have found that while the presence of meaning gained through a coherent life story was associated with greater wellbeing, the actual process of searching for meaning was associated with distress. Having a life story could be a positive force in individuals’ lives, however, being in the midst of constructing one is challenging. Thus, the role that narratives play in the lives of individuals is unclear, but in general, most people seem to form life stories which, in turn, have a range of psychological impacts depending on the content of those stories.

Narratology is a theoretical framework that treats narrative as a fundamental mode of exchange and creating meaning. It is defined by Bal (1997) as ‘the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artefacts that “tell a story”’ (p.3). An interview can be considered a cultural artefact – as Sarkar (2012) writes, ‘a story is… never just told; it is always told to someone, within a discursive context and already existing structures of meaning’ (p. 586). While speech can be a spontaneous product of an immediate relationship, it also exists as a text with enduring referents and meanings that are made in specific social and historical contexts. Narratology attends to features of texts such as the ordering of events (chronological or otherwise), rhythm, and potential power structures at play in the giving/receiving of narrative. These elements contribute to a description of text, ‘but above all, the concepts help to increase understanding by encouraging readers to articulate what they understand, or think they understand, when reading or “processing” a narrative artefact’ (Bal, 1997: 4).

Narratology can take into account multiple levels of storytelling: from the mechanics of language and grammar, the structural arc of the story, and the context in which that story is being told. However, my focus is to investigate the structural aspects of the interviews. I ask: What pre-existing beliefs do the stories challenge? And what structural aspects of the stories (alongside each story’s content) effectively level the challenges? I have chosen to focus on structure in particular because the interviewees stated (sometimes multiple times) that they were aware of the power of their story in building awareness of missingness, redressing widely held myths, and/or in giving words to experiences which have tended not to be voiced in mainstream conversations as well as in the media.

In investigating structure, I focus on the ways in which an individual chooses their narrative out of their raw experience. Narrative and experience can, at times, have a distant relationship. In her essay, “The Common Reader”, Woolf (2015 [1923]) argues that storytellers are pressured to ensure their narrative meets the conventions of genre and form. ‘The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to
provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour.' But, she asks, ‘Is life like this? Must novels be like this?’ (p. 3). Narrative coherence, she argues, is creatively burdensome as well as grossly inaccurate. ‘Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end’ (p. 4).

Nonfictional stories are subject to the same artifice as novels. White (1987) writes that ‘value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.’ We further have the unrealistic expectation that a true story – White’s interest is historical stories – achieve wholeness. He instead argues that history has no beginning and no end, or is alternatively a series of different beginnings without conclusions (p. 24). Fulford (1999) likewise argues that journalistic narratives are often under pressure to be neat and have a clear message and conclusion, despite that ‘The world is not a place of beginnings and endings and middles, a place of coherence – and when narrative arranges the world in that way in order to tell a story and reach out to an audience, narrative lies.’

The lies that are propagated when the storyteller is pressured to neatly structure and resolve their story may have a range of personal and political implications. Comedian, Hannah Gadsby expounds upon these implications in her show, Nanette (2018). Gadsby explains that in order to create a comedy routine, she draws from things that have happened in real life. Part of this process involves fashioning real events in a form appropriate for comedy, a form she describes as building “tension” by setting up a joke and then offering “relief” (or resolution) with a punchline. Gadsby explains that in one of her earlier shows she had told a story of being a young, lesbian woman waiting for the bus in her small, country town. She had been talking to another young woman when the boyfriend of that woman mistook Gadsby for a gay man. He began to aggressively yell at Gadsby and call her names. Confusingly, he seemed to also believe that Gadsby was hitting on his girlfriend. Gadsby leverages this confusion for laughs, pointing out that if she were a gay man, she would not be hitting on a woman, but it is nonetheless a particularly tense set-up: it is clear that the younger iteration of Gadsby could have been in real danger, and the level of homophobia depicted in the story is uncomfortable for the audience. This tension is brought into relief when Gadsby recounts that the woman told her boyfriend that Gadsby was also a woman and that he was being ridiculous. Gadsby imitates the young man’s sheepish response, apologising, saying that he would never hit a woman, and then leaving. In her previous comedy shows, this anecdote ends here. The story conforms to a comedic structure, the audience laughs. However, as Gadsby says in Nanette, the real story did not end there. In reality, after the man left, he came back. He
told her that, upon reflection, he now understood that she was a lesbian woman and therefore okay to hit. He beat her mercilessly. After that, she went home. Gadsby explains that she did not press charges because she felt a great deal of shame around her sexuality, she felt she deserved it. Gadsby points out that the structure of comedy does not truly allow for this kind of story structure, or for her to even be able to give voice to this horrendous experience. The ultimate tension is never drawn into relief, there is no happy or funny ending. As such, the story either has to be heavily edited to render it funny, or it cannot be included. Yet, in telling the real version in *Nanette*, she finds space for the important realities of homophobia, of the physical danger homophobia imposes on individuals, the shame of internalised homophobia, and of Gadsby’s years of silence around naming these social ills precisely because they fail to fit the conventional narrative structure of comedy.

As in *Nanette*, the interviewees in my research found space to allow their story to take on an ambiguous form without the pressure to bring tension into relief. The interviews undertaken for this research may be artificial in the manner Fulford describes, in the sense that they render chaotic components of life as sensible and sequential. However, given the liminal nature of the stories, the storytellers did not impose conclusions or closure upon unresolved cases, which is itself a challenge to conventional narrative structure. Stories about missingness may be naturally less inclined towards artifice. The existence of missing persons – particularly in the long-term – themselves speak back to the narrative convention of concluding a story. If a person continues to be missing, ambiguity persists. Necessarily, it is not clear what facts will be relevant to solving the case, so what is important to the story and what aspects have bearing on the conclusion remains undefined. Of course, this is not to say that stories about missing persons require an ending in order to be told. As I reflected in my creative piece, for example, every few weeks, if not days, I read new news stories about Madeleine McCann’s case, though she has been missing since 2007. Her case finds much widespread fascination, perhaps partly because of conditions of newsworthiness discussed in the previous chapter (she is a young, white girl with middle-class parents) and perhaps because the unresolved nature of the story compels audiences to take notice. Fulford (1999) also identifies exemptions to the journalistic rule ‘don’t leave the audience wondering’ in the Book of Job, which he argues continues to draw audiences because it leaves open the mystery of the creation of humanity, and the mystery of its future fate (pp. 8-9). As I discuss in the introduction to my creative piece, missing persons stories are compelling because of their ability to evoke unanswerable questions around risk, mystery, the unsolvable, and similar themes that provoke both anxiety and interest.

Yet, interest in these ‘exceptional’ stories that lack the neatness of dominant narratives is afforded in specific ways, as I explored in my discussion on ‘newsworthiness’ in the previous chapter. Madeleine McCann’s case notwithstanding, there are often time limits on the acceptability of
unfinished stories. Certain characters are more sympathetically attended to than others; and rare and fascinating cases garner more enduring coverage than more mundane absences. As I explore further in the next chapter, there is still substantial room for those with experience of missingness to speak back to the tendencies of media coverage and conversations through their narratives. Narratives can likewise be structured to counter more dominant discourses and stereotypes about certain groups of missing persons. In places, it is the unresolved structure of the narrative itself that can challenge to the status quo: such stories remind listeners that life is not necessarily neat. Such stories also posit that resolution is not a requirement for its contents to be of significance.

Further, the story may make the implicit structural assertion of the speaker’s expertise and the value of the story they impart. The message is: ‘what I have to say as a person with lived experience is important’. In his study of chronic illness narratives, Frank (1995) explores how an individual can imbue themselves with power through their story. Having a ‘wound’ – such as being ill (or in the case of this project, having experience of missingness) – is key to the storyteller’s identity. The ‘wound’ does not render the storyteller a ‘victim’, rather it lends them expertise and holds with it ‘narrative power’ (p. xi). Storytelling can be part of a deliberate effort to overcome being silenced – such as being silenced by the shock of trauma – or being silenced in a more systemic way – the silence that comes as a result of nobody listening, or the silence that comes as a result of not having adequate words to describe the experience (p. xii). Frank argues that stories which can aid in recovery (perhaps not from an illness itself, but from the resultant loss of voice) are ones where the person can describe their ‘unique’ experience and speak back to ‘official’ (e.g. medical, or bureaucratic) accounts of their situation (p. 12). Frank notices that there are many kinds of stories people may tell about their lives and about what role illness played within it. Some of these stories hold that there is something to be utilised from the experience of suffering. What the use of the story is can vary: it may have to do with getting a greater understanding of the self (p. 129); it may be used to inspire oneself or others (p. 133); or it may be used as ‘testimony to a truth that is generally unrecognized or supressed’ which essentially turns personal experience of an adverse event into a moral challenge (p. 137). Those who have suffered, and/or inhabit a liminal space within their culture, potentially have valuable lessons to offer through their stories.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical frameworks I have used to investigate the stories relayed to me about missingness. The stories were collected and analysed as part of my practice-based research, meaning that, as I researched and wrote the creative work, the themes I investigate organically arose from the creative work itself, the interviews and research I conducted, and from my own research interest in storytelling structure (which I reflected upon in the Introduction to this exegesis). As I detail in Chapter 6, while my methodology was also heavily influenced by
Narrative Analysis, I viewed my methodology as ultimately a creative one that was practice-based and iterative in nature – I reflect on my view of what constitutes this methodology in Chapter 5. After drafting the creative work, I reflected on what the material (supplemented with interview material I did not include in the final piece) could offer in terms of insights into storytelling structure and alternative, complex, and true narratives in relation to missingness. I then revisited the transcripts and collected quotes, ideas, and anecdotes that encapsulated these insights. I further detail information in Part III on methodology, however, it is nonetheless important to briefly detail the process I undertook in order to contextualise the research as it is presented in the following chapter.

The next chapter uses the theoretical basis established here (as well as, implicitly, the methodological frameworks discussed in Part III) to discuss findings my research has made in regard to the experience of missingness and related subterranean narratives.

References
Chapter 4

Beyond the Disappearance: Alternative Narratives of Missingness

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- How do people make sense of and live with mysterious circumstances and stories which lack a resolution?
- How might the stories of people with lived experience of missingness complicate dominant narratives about missing persons?

As discussed in my analysis of the term ‘newsworthiness’ in relation to missing persons in Chapter Two, absence is represented in public space in specific and constricted ways. News about missing persons tends to focus on conditions around the disappearance itself and postulations about the potential whereabouts of the missing person. When coupled with calls to action (such as the provision of phone numbers to ring if a viewer/reader has information about the missing person), this coverage forms a valuable service. Yet, it is an incomplete portrayal of investigative processes, as well as what it is to be a person affected by missingness. It affords less space to discuss the lives that have been in motion before the disappearance, as well as the complexities of the long-term aftermath. Moreover, certain cases are privileged above others in coverage on the grounds of gender, age, class, and race. Many aspects of the experience of missingness also remain difficult to articulate as a result of pressure to ‘move on’ and a lack of legitimisation of ambiguous loss as a form of grief.

In this chapter, I argue that my interviewees came to make sense of their mysterious circumstances by challenging the common modes in which absence is portrayed in the media and in interpersonal contexts. As discussed in the Introduction, disappearances are relatively common, and anyone could be affected by them. Being affected by disappearance therefore is not unto itself a challenge to the status quo. Rather, the narratives of those affected by disappearance constitute a challenge to the status quo in the sense that they provide an alternative narrative to those widely propagated about missing persons. They level these challenges by invoking the concept of ‘missingness’ (although without using this word) and thus expand upon the issues surrounding absence through interpreting the multifaceted social aspects of a person’s disappearance and the impacts of that disappearance. Such stories can articulate the potential causal/contextual factors of a person’s absence, contest social attitudes about certain groups of missing persons, and speak to the long-term ramifications of absence. Often these stories do not neatly resolve, and so they also level a broader structural challenge to narrative in advocating for a social environment where ambiguity is acceptable. Again, it is a common experience to live with uncertainty, but the challenge provided by my interviewees is to actually come to discuss this uncertainty. The stories also assert the experiential expertise of the storyteller – implicitly, lived experience is conceptualised as a
source of keen insight, and thus the storyteller can comfortably level these aforementioned challenges. From the space of liminality (or in giving voice to experiences of liminality), the interviewees were empowered to – with reflection and agency – ‘break’ the habitual patterns of social discourse on missing persons. They articulated alternative narratives about missing persons, using an alternative narrative structure against closure, which ironically reflects a common state of being (i.e. living with uncertainty).

My discussion will firstly focus on the way that the stories complicate existing narratives about missingness by reframing them as having a ‘before’ period which requires acknowledgement in order to reach a better understanding of why disappearances occur. These narratives point to structural risk factors or other aspects of the missing person’s life which could be highly predictive that a disappearance is likely to occur. I will then discuss aspects of the disappearance itself that are likewise neglected in mainstream discourse – the fact that media coverage is unequal between cases, and tends toward unhelpful speculation, and the fact that family members and friends of those missing are likely to take on a huge burden in managing search efforts as well as the affairs of the missing person. Finally, I will discuss the complexities related to the long-term experience of missingness that interviewees spoke of, including ongoing problems with communication, coping methods, and telling stories that do not resolve and/or have a deconstructionist pattern of meaning-making over time.

**Before the Disappearance**

In all the interviews I undertook where a specific missing persons case was under discussion, I got the strong sense (which I reflected on in the creative work) that it makes very little sense to talk about a disappearance without understanding the conditions in the person’s life before the disappearance. Interviewees referred to individual circumstances that affect their risk of going missing such as mental illness, abuse, and family relationships, as well as to aspects of their structural contexts such as culture, geography, geopolitics, gender, race, and other factors that impact life outcomes on a macro-scale. What became apparent was that the body of a missing person, while absent, takes on multiple levels of meaning – individual, social, and political – in a manner reminiscent of ‘The Mindful Body’ described by Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987). Going missing is an individual act of leaving home (which may or may not be voluntary). Simultaneously, a disappearance is a social act, as put forth in the previous chapter in the discussion of ‘missingness’ – it entails a renegotiation of social roles and relationships with devastating consequences for those in one’s social circle. It is also a political act. While it may not be intended as a protest or a comment on one’s political conditions, there are often concerns of this nature which may increase a person’s risk of going missing.
In my interview with her, Sarah Godwin deeply contextualised the disappearance of her son, Quentin. She spoke to me about the culture of West Auckland, in New Zealand; as well as the realities of mental health knowledge and stigma in the early 1990s, all of which, she argued, are integral to understanding his case. She described Quentin’s peers as being particularly tough, she called them ‘problem people, problem children’ and suggested that they enforced a form of masculinity which normalised risk-taking and problematised help-seeking and vulnerability, which posed difficulties for Quentin, who she characterised as ‘sensitive’. His circumstances were made even harder when he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder after an episode of mania. In this period, his behaviours became riskier, and staff at his school were worried that he might get into a dangerous situation such as a fight. Quentin received treatment, but perhaps lacked a strong base of friends from whom he could receive support. In fact, he felt so heavily stigmatised by his school peers that he moved schools before commencing his final year. Sarah says:

*When he had the manic episode it really shook his confidence socially – because he was weird, you know. The kids had seen him as being weird.*

The resulting social isolation Quentin experienced allowed him time for reflection and for family, however he remained vulnerable. Sarah feels that the family did not adequately understand the course of bipolar disorder, and the potential for Quentin to become depressed.

*Looking back, I think we should’ve had ... more guidance about what the illness meant long-term. Because my picture of it was, you know, okay, he’s got over the manic episode. Yes, he might have to take lithium or some other medication for the rest of his life but, you know, that’s it, we’ve done it... I was a bit naïve, or a bit ignorant.*

In the interview, I expressed the opinion that Sarah and her family could not be blamed for the lack of education the family received. While Sarah’s statements were tinged with regret, she agreed. She cited the work of public figures such as Stephen Fry, a celebrity who has produced two documentaries about bipolar disorder – a diagnosis he also has – as a promising sign of change, both in terms of building awareness of mental illness as well as addressing the issue of missing persons. She drew a connection between the reduction of mental illness stigma with a likely reduction in the rate of disappearance.

Through explaining the contextual factors Quentin experienced, Sarah presented his disappearance simultaneously as a decision he made, and an event that occurred in relation to a complex cultural milieu of stigmatising attitudes, a preponderance of toughness, and shortfalls in psychoeducation. In this sense, ‘Why did he go missing?’ is not simply a question of retracing
what he may have been thinking at the time of disappearance, but also of understanding factors external to him which influenced his risk of going missing.

Other interviewees likewise reflected on life before the disappearance. Brandy Bonner, who ran away from home around as a teenager to escape her abusive parents, elaborated on her family dynamics as well as her community which failed to either identify or address her living conditions. She conveyed that in such circumstances, running away was necessary for her own safety. For Salma – whose son, Ayoub, was abducted by her ex-husband, Adam – the legal structure of child custody arrangements and the geography of the European Union comprise important structural details in her story. Both the law and geography made it relatively easy for Adam to take their son all the way from Belgium to Portugal. Their marriage difficulties, as Salma reflected, were also partially informed by cultural differences, particularly Adam’s fear of his son becoming a ‘real Muslim’ (which, as I addressed in the creative piece, was a fear that Salma understood only vaguely) and his ability to assert cultural dominance as the native European of the two. These cultural and relational components to the story likely informed Adam’s individual decision to take Ayoub, as well as Ayoub’s vulnerability to being taken. Here, absence is not just a sudden, random decision of an unknown individual, but rather a decision that was supported by existing cultural and legal frameworks in the context of existing relationships.

As a refugee, Mina Jaf’s story is complex and international in scope, involving multiple missing incidents. It is contextualised by the current geopolitical situation in which over 65 million people are experiencing displacement as a result of ongoing persecution, conflict and/or violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). In our interview, Mina explained to me how this displacement lends itself to disappearance. For instance, displacement can cause people to undertake dangerous journeys in which individuals risk getting lost. Indeed, she worked with a woman who was separated from her son when they were running down a street in Istanbul. She also knew people who were sent back to their home country, having failed to qualify for refugee status in Europe. After falling out of contact with them, she eventually managed to trace them and realised that after they went missing, they had been killed. In these cases, missing persons is a predictable occurrence given the current situation of geopolitical tension, the forced mass movement of people, and government decisions to send people back into dangerous situations.

There is also a systemic lack of protection for people who have sought refuge in Europe in places such as reception centres and refugee camps. In Mina’s experience, and in her work, gender is an important structural consideration when it comes to factors which may inform the high rate of missing, unaccompanied child refugees in Europe. The living standards and crowded nature of some accommodation arrangements mean that there are sometimes insufficient protections in the form of lit corridors, access to private bathroom facilities, and access to rooms with locks
(European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). In these circumstances, some people decide to escape their accommodation in order to avoid potential assault. In other cases, people looking to exploit children specifically target refugee camps. She said:

> It’s so unbelievable, you don’t want to believe that. But you see it right in front of you people from outside coming, taking girls, and telling you, ‘I’m going to offer her a shower.’ But they never come back. And you see it right in front of you.

Even where asylum seekers make the decision to leave their provided accommodation for other reasons – for instance, to meet family members in different parts of Europe – the individual decision itself, Mina explained, is complicated by a lack of communication and understanding about what the purpose of a refugee centre is and what the rights of asylum seekers are. She suggested that it is possible that fewer people – especially unaccompanied migrants – would go missing if they received adequate information about what to expect in their circumstances. The information needs to be delivered in languages the asylum seekers understand, and in culturally appropriate ways. This may include delivering information in women-only spaces so that matters such as sexual violence can be more candidly discussed. In her experience, these common-sense principles are not widely applied throughout centres in Europe. She described to me her vision for the NGO she is in the midst of establishing:

> I think it’s really important to ask them what they need... Just to ask them, I think, will be enough... It would be female-to-female because most of the time, the women feel more comfortable with having a conversation with another woman. They can get the right information about the asylum procedure, what rights they have, and how they can access services in case they’ve been facing sexual violence or abuse... It’s very basic!

People working in the missing persons sector as investigators or as part of a non-profit are clear about the need to take a wide view about what causes people to go missing. Charlie Hedges, a UK-based missing persons investigations expert (formerly a police officer, now working in consultancy) refers to difficulties – such as bullying, abuse, exploitation, and many other potential experiences – missing persons, especially teenagers, may be going through which indicate that the person may be suffering harm well before they go missing:

> Missing [is] an indicator of something more serious... what they’re not doing is looking at the harm behind the behaviour, because the behaviour is just like a headache you’ve got, it’s not telling you whether you’ve just sort of bumped your head or whether you’ve got a brain tumour.
Mette Drivsholm, who works as a project officer for the NGO Missing Children Europe, likewise commented that the missing children hotlines around Europe painted a picture of the reasons that children go missing:

The overwhelmingly predominant reasons why these children ran away were: arguments, poor relationships, and boundary issues at home. And lack of understanding and support from the adults who were supposed to take care of them. The second sort of cluster was violence, abuse, neglect towards the young person both in homes and institutions. And then the third was being in trouble. Alcohol and drug abuse and problems with the law... these are the problems we need to address if we want to address the runaway problem because... you don’t run away unless there is a problem.

Despite these structural aspects of cases, and many more that are revealed by quantitative data (included in Chapter Two), often, stories about missing persons are delineated in the language of individual cases. In my Precedents of Practice chapter, I explored how creative texts can broach the layers of context associated with missingness. Yet, they did not examine the myriad political factors affecting the prevalence of missing persons (exceptions to this were in discussions of policy responses to cases of missing children and examinations of patterns of surveillance and alienation that may affect the likelihood of absences). They focus instead on the mystifying experience of disappearing, or of re-tracing a disappearance, or of preoccupations and themes that extend from a person’s absence. These are all important themes, but there has been neglect in considering what social issues may increase the likelihood of a person’s disappearance. I also noted in Chapter Two that in media coverage of missing persons, high-profile cases tend to be anomalous in their nature and disproportionately focus on certain types of ‘victims’ who have no motivation to go missing at all because they’ve likely been abducted (Jeanis and Powers, 2016: 9, Christie, 1986: 18-19). A narrative of shock – the idea that someone has vanished without a trace for no discernible reason – emanates. Often, as Davies (2013) observes, shock is appropriate because in many cases those left behind have little warning of their loved one’s impending disappearance (p. 117). Yet, if social factors are not considered in understandings of who goes missing, then the phenomenon’s prevalence is more easily perceived as unpredictable. This is problematic because, as all interviewees relayed to me in various ways, missingness is not itself the problem, it is a symptom of difficult circumstances. A person going missing can be shocking, of course. It can also be predictable in some cases.

Indeed, Salma’s son, Ayoub explicitly warned his mother and his school teacher that he would be abducted, telling Salma ‘we [as in, he and his father, Adam] are going to live in Portugal.’ This was a warning that Salma took very seriously:
Adam said, ‘No, that’s not true. I don’t know where Ayoub gets this from, it’s not true.’ ... But I know what my son tells me is true. He is not somebody who makes up stories like that. I know that what my son says is true.

Salma was so concerned that she successfully sought a court order to make it illegal for either parent to take their son out of Belgium. The court order did not stop the abduction from happening, but these details around the disappearance go towards Salma’s reasoning that instances of abduction could be preventable if the legal instruments used for prevention were more effective. She also speaks to the value of heeding warning signs (or in this case, a clearly articulated warning).

Another mode of predicting a person’s likelihood of going missing is if they have been missing before. Over half of those under the age of eighteen who go missing in the UK each year have had multiple missing incidents (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2016: 20). Some of my interviewees reflected on this. Charlie, for instance, has worked on a case where the missing person in question had gone missing over one hundred times. He explains that often these cases are dismissed by authorities as low risk because of their predictability – the logic is that if they have gone missing and come home before, then in all likelihood it will amount to an uneventful incident again – but in fact repeat incidences of missing is a warning sign of heightened risk:

There’s always been the view and a lot of people still hold that view, if you’ve been missing, you know, thirty times, then, okay, on the thirty-first occasion you’re bound to come back as you always have done. Okay, you might do, but the more you go missing – particularly as a child – the more extreme your behaviour is likely to become.

As Charlie explained, people who have repeatedly gone missing are more likely to be exposed to risks such as substance abuse, begging, homelessness, and exploitation. These risks lead to serious harm, and/or may extend the period of time the person is missing. Moreover, the fact that a person repeatedly goes missing may also indicate that there are risks within the home or at school that jeopardise their safety such as ongoing conflict, bullying, or abuse. These risk factors have not been addressed as a result of previous absences. In such cases, home may be the riskiest place to be. Here, going missing becomes unsurprising, or even habitual for some individuals.

These stories challenge and complicate the idea that missing persons cases exist in isolation, or are invariably mysterious in terms of cause. As well, listening to the ways in which interviewees situated their stories showed me that it is a disservice to understand missing persons cases based on the details and the shock of the disappearance itself. As I reflected in my creative work:
I ask people for missing persons stories and I get autobiographies and cultural histories. The incident never stands alone.

There are complex realities behind many disappearances and by disputing the ways in which cases are often understood, the interviewees often made reference to structural issues which could potentially reduce the prevalence of missing persons, as well as give voice to the full extent of their experiences and the contexts they have emerged from. These themes emerge as ways in which people make sense of mysterious circumstances: these circumstances do not exist in a vacuum, but have addressable causal factors, as per the social nature of missingness. The points made through interviews to this end complicated representations of missing persons cases as random or shocking and shed important insights on possible modes of prevention.

The Disappearance

When the media covers a disappearance, it helpfully appeals to members of the public for information, and the cost of this coverage is often borne by media outlets themselves (Henderson and Henderson, 1998: 26). However, existing coverage and conversation does not necessarily capture the diversity of missing persons cases, nor their complexities. It does not capture the difficulty some families encounter in using the media to facilitate their search, nor the complexities of speculation, and nor the extent of the work that family members and friends of those missing must undergo to manage the search and the missing person’s affairs.

Loren O’Keefe, who runs the Australian NGO, Missing Persons Advocacy Network, and who has had personal experience as a family member of a missing person, reflected on some of the problems with equality in terms of attracting media attention. She said that it was relatively easy for her brother, Dan’s case to get media attention because he was young, attractive, white, and middle-class. She was struck with a sense of injustice when, in her capacity as a non-profit worker for families of missing persons, she sought media coverage for a case of a slightly older, Muslim man. Although she found that his local community were passionate about sharing the details of the case, and although the case did eventually garner mainstream attention, she said:

\[
\text{It’s terrible. But we can’t deny that’s the way it is. And so, we are very aware of that and certainly with Dan from the beginning, we had so many women and gay men as well actually, making jokes about how if they find him they’d give him a kiss. You know, ‘oh he’s such a hottie, if I see him, you know, I’ll have him’. Jokes like that made it very difficult in the beginning because I’d never seen him like that, he’s just my brother. But once that’s in public space, you hear those jokes and see how people do tend to get more involved with people who are more appealing in different aspects. I mean, Dan was easy on the eyes and that’s what helped him get more media attention than others.}
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Both Mette and Gail Rego (who also works at Missing Children Europe) – whom I interviewed together – noticed similar tendencies in reporting about missing children:

**Gail:** Very often we see that the media only focus on a specific type or kind of child. Obviously generally anything that can create furore and a buzz, something that can really be dramatic... And usually they tend to focus on younger children, they tend to focus on white children. That view of that angelic child who has been taken by a stranger, because that’s what’s really going to push headlines or sell papers... Oftentimes when you’ve read about these kinds of disappearances, these criminal abductions, you’ll see this description that they give you – you know, she used to be in the school choir, she got A-grades all the time. They try to paint a very pure picture of this child who was taken. But what we see is over fifty per cent [of missing children] are runaways. And of course, these children are not the perfect models or the perfect angels because they’re coming from homes that obviously have issues. Their family has problems within that home. If the child has been abused or is in a situation where they were beaten repeatedly or where their parents had been taking drugs are abusing alcohol, obviously, you’re going to see the effects of this on the grades of the child, and the performance of the child, and the attitude of the child. So, to expect and only give focus on these very simplistic, pure black-and-white cases is unfair and completely against what we actually see in terms of the truth of missing children.

**Mette:** ...They do come from a more vulnerable not-so-idyllic background. I mean, because there is always a reason why you – if you’re feeling good, if your family life is harmonious and balanced... why run away, right? So, there is always more to this story than just the running away incident.

As noted above, several interviewees spoke about the hardships of getting audiences to recognise that teenagers who run away from home may be encountering a range of problems. Runaway teenagers are stereotypically conceptualised as delinquent minors or otherwise unsympathetic examples of missing persons, rather than someone who may be at risk of harm – both at home and while they are missing. In my creative piece, I examined reportage from 2015 around ‘the game of 72’. A range of media outlets had reported on a ‘trend’ where teenagers dared each other to leave home for three days for the pure thrill of doing so. This story was false, but was nonetheless reported on in a tone of moral outrage before journalists undertook even basic fact-checking procedures. This coverage is one example of the power of stereotypes about missing teenagers and the idea that they are not at risk of harm – absence is a sign of selfishness or
impulsiveness. In this study, interviewees directly spoke back to these stereotypes. Brandy’s story, in particular, demonstrated that running away can be a vital act of finding safety from abuse and that stories such as hers are worthy of public concern.

Another problem with media reportage which was commented upon by Salma, Griet, Mette, and Gail was that a disproportionate amount of media coverage focuses on missing children who have been abducted by strangers, when in fact most abducted children are taken by someone they know (Shelton et al., 2016). Aside from affecting a disproportionate sense of risk in parents of young children, it also silences the much more common phenomenon of parental abduction. These interviewees used their stories to clarify this reality.

Loren spoke of social media as a potential mode of democratising media coverage so as to raise awareness for a more diverse array of missing persons’ stories. Because anyone can create a Facebook page for their missing loved one, families may be less reliant on mainstream media to publicise their cases. Loren pointed to instances where strong social media campaigns had yielded constructive outcomes for families. For instance, when she worked with the family of the aforementioned Muslim man, she found that through social media there was considerable grassroots concern for his wellbeing within his local community. Here, alternative media forms emerged as a useful way to revise the systemic power dynamics inherent in inequitable media coverage across different cases. It was beyond the scope of this research to detail further the level of democratization social media can achieve when it comes to representing different missing persons cases – further exploration of this topic would be useful to come to a better understanding of how grassroots campaigns such as these can redress the mainstream media’s tendency to marginalise some cases and obsess over others.

Interviewees also problematised the notion that missing persons cases should be purely handled by law enforcement experts. Griet Ivens, a case worker at Child Focus in Belgium, reflected that in her work, it is impossible to give parents of missing children very much information about likely outcomes. She indicated that it could be heartbreaking for parents to turn to experts in this way to only discover that the experts lacked the answers too. Each case ventures into unknown territory, despite the professional experience of case workers and investigators involved, and despite existing statistical data on missing persons which may help to quantify risk.

The parents ask questions like, ‘How long is he going to stay away?’ And, ‘Within what time do you find children?’ And ‘Why do they run away?’ Or ‘Why do they go missing?’ But we can’t give an answer to those questions...

Every case is different and every person’s different.
Additionally, despite the fact that high-risk missing persons cases can become a prioritised police matter, the association the general public make between policing and missing is in itself problematic, argues Loren, for a number of reasons. Firstly, she believes that conflating missing persons with police leads to an unjustified association between missing persons and crime:

We want to help [the general public] realise that this could happen to anyone. Not just baddies or victims of crime – this is much broader than that... I don’t want the public thinking that missing persons is a dark, scary, criminal topic. It’s not. People go missing for a number of reasons.

Further, as Loren reflected, and as the research reflects as well (e.g. Parr et al., 2015: 69) some assume that police undertake searches when, surprisingly, they may do very little searching depending on how the case is assessed. As Loren states:

You think the police are there to get out the heat-seeking cameras and get out the dog squad but that very rarely happens. And so, I think it’s important for us not to have that expectation.

Because missing persons is not a criminal matter and because the police may only provide limited assistance for families, Loren says that in her organisation, ‘We want this to be seen as a community issue.’ Reframing disappearance in this way could make a material difference in the lives of those left behind. For example, a site where regular individuals as well as private and public sectors could assist those left behind is in mitigating the bureaucratic burdens they face. Sarah and Loren are both involved in campaigning for simpler procedures to handle a missing person’s affairs in the UK and Australia respectively. These are mundane provisions, but as both Loren and Sarah reflected, they can be fraught to deal with. Provisions include streamlined policies and forms for making sure that the missing person’s bills are either paid or cancelled, organising a person’s rent/mortgage, settling or holding a person’s accounts so that if they do come back they are not met with overdue debts, and ensuring families left behind do not have to deal with the emotional exhaustion of debt notices, or will not be required to deal with debt collectors. Loren recounted that her parents have been receiving her brother’s parking fine notices for years while he was missing. Even after he was found to be deceased, the Sheriff’s Office refused to stop sending the letters:

The Sheriff’s Office said that the letters will keep coming but just ignore them. Like really? There’s no way you can stop them coming altogether?

Salma also faced bureaucratic hurdles in order to bring her son back to his home of Belgium, having to file paperwork under international law to get him back. While there were resources to help her with the procedure such as legal advice and support from Griet, this paperwork was an
essential part of addressing her son’s disappearance at this immediate stage. It subsequently took five months for her son to be legally ordered back home.

All of these insights are disruptive to dominant narratives that tend to be associated with missing persons cases. Missingness affects a large and diverse group of people. It also affects people whose lives may be less-than-ideal and who may not strike audiences as sympathetic, but whose disappearance may nonetheless be concerning. Moreover, managing the search for a missing person, managing the affairs of a missing person, and managing the media can be surprisingly fraught tasks for those left behind. In many circumstances, police do not offer a great deal of assistance. Resultantly, there can be considerable shortfalls in resources for searching for people and supporting those left behind. As Loren points out, perhaps if the general public were aware of this state of affairs – if more holistic and person-centred narratives about missing persons were propagated in the media and through conversations – missing persons could transition into a social issue for which everyone carries some degree of responsibility.

The Long-term Aftermath of Disappearance

Interviewees offered insights grounded in their experiences on long-term aspects of missingness. In this section I discuss issues with discussing the disappearance with peers or seeing media portrayals, the challenge of hoaxes, as well as modes of gleaning support and methods of coping. I then discuss findings on the narratives that emerge from the long-term liminality provoked by missingness.

For example, both Sarah and Loren commented that other people in their lives did not respond well to the fact that their loved one was missing. They described moments of awkwardness and wordlessness within some of their relationships. It can be difficult for people to know what to say to those whose loved one is missing. Peers may not understand the gravity of the loss, perhaps because the experience of long-term missing is so rarely spoken about. They may make rude remarks, ask invasive questions, or say nothing at all. These social problems can make relating to others very difficult for loved ones of those missing long-term. For Sarah, these experiences were so unbearable that it formed part of her decision to move from New Zealand to England:

When I was over there [New Zealand], you’d be out shopping, you’d be out with friends, you’d be out at school, you’d be doing anything, and people would say, ‘Have you got any news?’ ‘Have you heard anything about Q?’ all the time... When I came back here [England] to live, the village, I only knew a couple of people and nobody really knew what my story was... it meant I could function in the everyday world without having to be constantly asked about it.
Loren’s experience of uncomprehending people in her workplace after her brother’s disappearance made her question her relationship with them. She reflected, ‘even people I considered friends at work didn’t even look at me because it was too awkward.’

As someone who had run away from home in her teen years, Brandy also observed a wordlessness from the perspective of the missing person. She felt that the narratives of running away tended not to be told by people who have experienced it first-hand. Rather, the narratives are portrayed as overly dramatic, and salacious:

*We end up on those murder shows [laughs]. The missing persons shows, or Murder She Wrote, or one of those murder shows, where they’re solving a mystery. But they’re really not telling our story and if they are, that’s the only place you’re going to see it.*

In turn, where families do manage to get coverage or to create their own campaigns though social media, the hostility of the public to the issue can also be problematic. Some people left behind encounter hoaxes and other unsavoury interactions with strangers. These interactions can play on the existing doubts and concerns of those left behind and can be very upsetting. Loren told me:

*It’s really difficult to monitor and we’ve had trolls, of course, over the years. Very rarely, but... there are certain emails and comments that will stay with me forever. Really horrible, horrible things. You know, some that would... suggest that the reason why Dan hasn’t come home is because I made it so public and I have shamed him because everyone will know he’s got a mental illness... that kind of thing hurts because especially when you don’t know, it makes you think you’re doing it all wrong.*

*...I used to have a hotline phone on at all times. I’d sleep with it under my pillow. And I had a number of calls that I really believed could have been Dan. Some that were silent, they wouldn’t say anything. And they’d be on special days, like it happened on my birthday, my grandmother’s birthday, it happened on my sister’s birthday. And I was like, it’s obviously Dan and so that would give me renewed hope. And then there’d be days when I’d get calls from idiots. Idiots! That would say things like, ‘It’s me. Stop looking for me, I’m in Queensland, just leave me alone! I’m alright, just stop with the searching.’ And I knew, I knew in my head that that wasn’t Dan’s voice. But after that many years of not hearing Dan’s voice, it did make me wonder. And that’s a horrible – to doubt that is horrible... There are terrible people out there.*
Sarah has likewise had difficult experiences with the public when she received two (likely) hoax calls from a woman who alleged to be her son’s wife. Although Sarah hasn’t pursued any investigations into the calls, she still wonders if they could be important, even though it seems unlikely that they are. Although hoaxes are an unfortunate side-effect of gaining public attention for a case, the devastating reality of hoaxes are rarely discussed in the context of missing persons cases.

There can also be a positive side to interactions with the public in terms of social support. Both Loren and Sarah spoke about how useful Facebook and other social media tools have been not just in terms of disseminating information about missing loved ones and (for Loren) getting many people actively involved in the search, but also in being able to connect with other loved ones of long-term missing persons around the world. It is relatively rare for a missing person to remain missing after many years. The vast majority of missing persons cases are resolved within a week, the majority within a day (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2016). Nonetheless, it is an experience which affects people all over the world and online support groups could be a mode of bridging geographical distance. Because the internet allows for global connectivity, the pool of people a family member of a long-term missing person can connect to increases substantially. Both Sarah and Loren are members of small, private Facebook groups where they can seek support from people over different countries who have had similar experiences.

Although researchers note that those left behind often use social media as part of their search for a loved one, and that the value of social media is in knowing that there are others in the community that care about the case as well (Hattingh and Matthee, 2016, Wayland, 2015: 215-216), the fact that social media can provide a space for long-term family members and friends of missing loved ones to come together and discuss the unique stressors of their experiences has not been thoroughly examined. This may be an important ground for future research in understanding narratives of missingness that emerge when affected individuals have greater exposure to others who can relate to their experiences. Similar observations have been made about online support groups for rare illnesses – they create spaces where otherwise isolated people can find commonality (e.g. Cacioppo et al., 2016).

The existence of long-term missing persons cases provides a structural, narrative challenge to the way we tell stories. My academic interest in missing persons cases evolved from my own curiosity, as a writer, about the conventional story structure of beginning/middle/end, or stories which have a conflict followed by a resolution – story structures I was taught at a young age, upon learning how to tell stories. As Woolf (2015 [1923]) writes, life rarely falls into such neat sequences. And so, how does a nonfiction writer create a compelling story that does not have an ending? I have further reflections on creative practice in the next chapter, and indeed it is clear
that there are many examples in literature of stories (both nonfictional and fiction) which don’t abide by conventional structure, and do not impose order or resolution. The podcast *Serial* (Koenig, 2014), which I will discuss, is one example. Some listeners were annoyed with the unresolved nature of the crime story it told, and yet by evading a clear ending it achieved transparency and faithfully depicted the reality of the case it discussed in its complexities (Barnathan, 2014). Still, I notice in myself a natural pull towards attempting to ‘solve’ things, which I referred to in my creative work. On several occasions, I have caught myself wondering what investigations I could make in order to ‘find’ a missing person. Such is the pull towards finding narrative closure.

Yet, closure remains elusive. Even those who I interviewed whose cases had resolved (i.e. even if the missing person had been found) had reflections about ongoing liminality. ‘Liminal’ is an academic term and was never specifically used by interviewees, but synonyms such as ‘in-between’, ‘in limbo’, ‘ambiguous’, ‘confusion’, ‘not knowing’, ‘mysterious’, and so on were used in different interviews. Regardless of the words used to describe a liminal state, liminality – and complexities associated with it – was central to interviewees’ experiences of the long-term aftermath of a disappearance.

Sarah still lives without knowing what happened to her son, while Mina likewise points out that for refugees across the world (including her), there are many persistent unknowns about the whereabouts of loved ones who they are no longer able to see or contact as a result of displacement. Brandy lives with the ongoing impact of the trauma that led her to run away. She also has lingering questions about why she was treated the way she was treated by her parents and the members of her community who countered her abuse allegations with disbelief, and whether her step-father will ever really pay for his actions (he was convicted of child sexual abuse, but the penalty was minimal following a plea bargain). Salma lives with the threat that her ex-husband may abduct her son again (although she thinks it is unlikely), and with the fact that although her son seems happy now, not very much is known about the long-term impact of parental child abduction cases on the child (Greif, 2000). While Loren’s brother’s case has been resolved – after five years, it was discovered that Dan had taken his own life – she may never know what his final moments were like or the conditions of his death. She’s also still embedded in the ambiguous work of supporting other families of missing persons. She must also now re-conceptualise her place within the family members of missing persons community given that she is no longer technically living with a long-term missing relative.

Even without personal experiences of missingness, professionals in the industry likewise grapple with liminality. Investigators such as Charlie must work to locate people given imprecise information, relying on professional judgement and hypothesis testing, with the ever-present
potential of making an error. Case managers like Griet deal with families within a liminal space and must try to help and reassure them despite not having any answers themselves. Those working for charities and NGOs such as Gail and Mette deal with big gaps of knowledge in statistics and data on missing persons and uncertain funding arrangements. My analysis in this section will focus more on the personal experience of the long-term aftermath of disappearance rather than the professional experience, but it should be nonetheless noted that this is a sector which – by its nature – is chronically lacking and looking for answers.

The strength of stories does not rely on artificial structures such as ‘closure’, and remains present even in the face of fragmentation, or the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of meanings. In deconstructionist theory, meaning is not stable, it is reiterative, and – like the habitus – is dynamically responsive to feedback. As soon as meaning is grasped (if it is at all), it ‘slips away’ (Derrida, 1997: 31). Brandy’s story is deconstructionist in the sense that it has gone through a process of becoming. At first, she explained to me, she saw her experiences as constitutive of a shameful story. She told me that at one stage she had even destroyed old diaries because, as she said, ‘I could not believe how horrible my story was.’ Gradually, she learned to put new connotations on her experiences. Decades after the trauma took place, Brandy chooses to frame it in an affirming way. While the story’s ‘plot’ remains the same, her role in it changed dramatically, as she puts it from ‘victim’ to ‘victor’. Sarah’s experience was likewise relayed to me as an explicitly deconstructed narrative. It has no resolution, but it is deeply embedded in the realities of ongoing ambiguity and is therefore subject to fluidity:

Sarah: Even after all these years it still is a changing and unfolding scenario...

Erin: Mmm, so the book never really closes?

Sarah: It never closes, and even when there is this so-called closure, you know, like, I know, there’s an older woman in the charity that I’ve met in the past and her son, I think he was about 40-ish... when he went missing, and he’d be missing for a few years and then – this was in Scotland – a skeleton was found at the bottom of a fairly big cliff, not far from Edinburgh, where he lived. And it was his. It was proved to be his. She doesn’t know whether he jumped, or whether he was pushed, or how he got there. So even though she knows he’s dead, she doesn’t know why or how... So, for me the word ‘closure’ when it comes to the whole missing scenario is very over-used and, anybody that gets what you might call real closure is pretty lucky, and pretty rare.
The sense derived from Sarah’s understanding of her life story – and indeed, the experience of missingness – perhaps lacks optimism, but it is grounded. It is thoroughly informed by experience, knowledge, and her acceptance of the fact that she lives in a liminal space. As Frank (1995) observes in his research on the experience of chronic illness and the narratives that emerge from a similarly liminal space, these stories show that having a ‘wound’ is not to be conflated with victimhood – one can acknowledge hardship and use that very experience to contribute to research, or help others. Likewise, a story does not need to be forced into arbitrary, affirmative confines – a narrative with a happy ending, or even a narrative with an ending – in order for its telling to be empowering. Sarah’s narrative of endurance – despite its fluid state – is important because it speaks to a common experience and affirms her ongoing survival.

Despite the fact that those I interviewed told stories which were structurally at odds with the dominant mode of storytelling – i.e. there remained ambiguities – interviewees had tended to reach conclusions about themselves as a result of their experiences, whether it be about who they are, or about what they should do. Here, the interviewees demonstrated their agency as individuals capable of reflecting on and interpreting their unique situation. Their story had no neat ending, but that fact itself was not devastating. As I reflect on in the conclusion of my creative work, they have each found ways to cope with ambiguity, as well as to give voice to that experience of liminality. While each story may be painful, they are not evidence of ongoing misery. Nor are they stories of triumph either: they lack the finality of a hero’s finished journey, and there lingers the potential for change. I found from the stories a sense of coping with life’s unpredictable vicissitudes. The fact that liminality is embraced by interviewees models a path whereby audiences (whether this be media audiences or conversation partners) can learn to accept disconcerting story structures. This acceptance is necessary for missingness narratives to truly enter into the mainstream, and may impart strategies for audiences in encountering ambiguities in their own lives.

Several interviewees offered thoughts about the nature of their ongoing experience, and where they would surmise their position at the time of the interview. Most expressed a degree of ambivalence, both wanting to move forward, and feeling that doing so is challenging. For Loren, the stress of finding out her brother had died had had a considerable impact on her cognition, but she also felt busy, that her non-profit work was important and frenzied, and that there were many things to work towards in her immediate future:

“We’re at least fortunate that we get to bury Dan [sighs]. Many families go on living their entire lives not knowing. It’s weird, there’s lots of things to consider and every day is different. But I’m getting there. As a consequence of all the stress and intensity this year I’ve become quite forgetful [laughs]...
It is really full on and every day is different, like this morning I just started progressing to the next stage with a Tasmanian family that I’m working with. So, there are lots of projects going on left, right, and centre, so I just felt the need to jot things down because my brain is all over the place nowadays.

Salma was likewise thinking of the future, particularly about the difficult question of how to navigate important parenting questions with a man who had abducted her son. She felt challenged by the fact that her values (a boy needs a father) were in conflict with her reality. She was in the midst of considering what place Adam should and would want to have in their daily lives and in the decision-making process:

*It is important that Ayoub has both his parents and that we are both there for his education, and to make decisions. When a boy is older, like twelve, fourteen, they need a father... So that’s what I’m thinking about now, for the future. How do we make decisions about our son like normal parents? It’s hard.*

Brandy expressed concern over the impact of trauma, but also about gaining courage:

*Erin, if I were fully honest with you... I am still a very terrorized person... I am, I still experience a lot of terror all the time about a lot of different things... and I just have learned to – more recently, I’ve learned to run right into them... I much more easily conquer fears than most people because I’m used to being terrorized, so I can look at a terrorizing thought or situation, whatever, and be able to go straight into it, because I’ve done it before.*

Sarah acknowledged that each day could bring about new information about her son’s case. While the case may not preoccupy her all the time, it is something she feel that she cannot close:

*Even after all these years, it’s still a changing and unfolding scenario. There’s not many years that have gone by when something hasn’t come along as a rumour, or a possibility that we have to check up.*

Finally, Mina expressed hope and acceptance of her uncertainty about the future:

*I always get too close [to other people]. Because, you know there are some bad people you meet in your life, they shouldn’t let you doubt the other people who are out there? It’s the same here. Because my experience has been losing so many people, it does not mean I have to limit my love, it’s my personality*
These stories reveal that there are complex, dynamic, and diverse experiences around missingness. Each situation, each day, each new person met, and each decision made holds within them the potential for change and opportunity, as well as for setbacks, stress, and disappointment. The stories are neither fully optimistic, nor pessimistic; they converge on a sense of meaning but acknowledge that the meaning is subject to fluctuations. The stories are not simple and they trace a long period of time – from well-before the disappearance to, in some cases, decades after it. They highlight persistent problems in dealing with the aftermath of a disappearance, as well as the resilient search for solutions.

Narratives-without-endings invite the audience to learn to accept mysterious circumstances, though facing those realities can be troubling. The acceptance has a dual purpose in garnering better support and understanding for those who encounter missingness, and to impart insights about enduring ambiguity in general. Beyond that, the content of the stories highlights a range of concerns about missingness which have not previously been deemed ‘newsworthy’. Interviewees spoke about concerns such as structural causes of absence, the potential predictability of some disappearances, stereotypes surrounding some groups of missing persons, the surprising burden friends and family members of missing persons take on in searching, problems with media coverage, and problems with social communication.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

It is important to note that, as reflected in my Introduction, and later explored in Part III, these stories and views arose and were expressed in a specific interview situation with its own relational and power dynamics. Narratives were informed by my lines of questioning and presence as a researcher and, indeed, co-constructors of the narratives. For example, certain views may have been expressed because I asked for them, rather than because the interviewee who expressed them thought they were particularly important. Further, the aspects of narratives included here have been curated, quoted, paraphrased, and summarised by me. Although I believe that the content reflects some of the essential, intended messages the interviewee wished to impart, there should also be a sense that the testimonies represented here have undergone several layers of mediation to become the alternative narrative that I have presented here. This is not a limitation as much as it is an inevitability of interview-based research, and should serve as a reminder that what is presented in this chapter is one view of what may constitute alternative narratives of disappearance. Other alternatives can sit alongside this work.
It is important not to extrapolate the findings of this research too broadly. Although the interviewees had a range of backgrounds and covered multiple perspectives, my sample size of nine people is clearly insufficient to capture the diversity of experiences around missingness. It’s likely that further research into stories of missingness will uncover more issues and insights. Moreover, it is likely that those who are willing to be interviewed about missingness are likely to tell constructive stories than those who would not. As mentioned, the stories told to me were in one way or another a testament to the ability to cope despite highly ambiguous circumstances. Frank (1995) terms such stories ‘pedagog[ies] of suffering’ (p. 145), that is, stories that show the potential meaning-making value of difficult circumstances, even if that meaning is fragmented, unresolved, or deconstructed. However, he notes, wounds can bring about other kinds of stories. Some storytellers may, for instance, look at the traumatic event as a temporary misfortune that they have to wait out before normal life is restored again. Others may contend that the traumatic event is evidence that life is fundamentally chaotic and that individuals are at the mercy of random fate (p. 115). I have spoken to people who have carefully considered what their story is and what meaning it conveys, but I would not necessarily expect that all people with experience of missingness would relate to it with the same commitment and resilience. The type of story told may also vary depending how long ago the disappearance was, or on other factors in a storyteller’s life. Investigating other types of narratives about missingness and what factors affect the type of narrative told – and even how narratives of ‘wounded storytellers’ may change over time – would make for valuable future research.

Finally, there were some limitations in translating, and subsequently conveying and representing the voices of those who have experienced missingness. A few interviewees were not native English speakers. Most were nonetheless very competent English speakers and used English in their professional lives. We mostly understood each other with only an occasional need for clarification. My interview with Salma was undertaken in Flemish and translated by Griet, and then translated again from the interview recording. Translation compromised the flow of the conversation and our ability to build a relationship over our time together. While I was able to understand the content of the entire conversation, I had little appreciation for Salma’s idiosyncratic turns of phrase, her use of tone (I noted, for instance, that she took on a sarcastic or angry tone at certain points, nuances I did not realise at the time of the interview), and I did not always feel confident in trying to capture her voice through the use of quotations. Nonetheless, Salma’s story provides an important account about what it’s like to be a left-behind parent of an abducted child in a case that crossed borders, and that the international nature of the context in which we met and spoke powerfully reflects issues surrounding the global movement of people and challenges in coming to mutual understandings.
Conclusion

Interviewees used their liminality as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes, misunderstandings, and ignorance in regard to missingness through reflection and expertise formed of lived experience. The interviewees also told stories which did not conform to dominant narrative modes in that they lacked closure, demonstrating that liminality is endurable.

The interviewees spoke about how they cope with ambiguity, about shortfalls in the ability of the general population to broach the topic of missing persons, about the burdens of managing a search as well as a missing person’s affairs, about the pitfalls of shaping speculation around others’ professional expertise, and about various issues with media coverage including bias and hoaxes. They also emphasised that there is far more to a person’s disappearance than the literal act itself. The events leading up to a disappearance also warrant close investigation. It was emphasised that there are many potential causal factors behind missingness, related not just to the individual and their character, but also their social and political conditions. All interviewees felt strongly that risk factors could be better understood and better mitigated. Likewise, people may still require support and attention in the long aftermath after a disappearance – the act of going missing has no clear ending or beginning.

The next Part of this exegesis will discuss the usefulness of creative nonfiction as a method of collecting and analysing important stories such as these within an academic context.

References


Part III: Reflections on Creative Practice
Chapter 5
Creative Nonfiction as Methodology

Part III of this exegesis aims to address the following questions:

- What are key aspects of using creative nonfiction as a methodological framework?
- What are ways in which creative nonfiction research can offer important academic contributions?

My response to the first question forms the basis of this chapter. I outline how creative nonfiction as both a genre and a methodological framework generates key insights on a phenomenon. I define creative nonfiction (a term used interchangeably with literary nonfiction and narrative nonfiction) and outline some fundamental principles of the genre, including: veracity, aesthetics, ethics, immersion, vulnerability, speculation and reflection, and plurality. Chapter Six is concerned with the second of the research questions above.

Works of creative nonfiction tell true stories in an engaging manner, often utilising the literary techniques of fiction writing (Hesse, 2009, Gutkind and Fletcher, 2008, Perl and Schwartz, 2014). Contemporary creative nonfiction emerged from the New Journalism movement in the 1960s, in which American writers such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Gay Talese reported and wrote in immersive, unconventional styles (Boynton, 2005: xii). However, while these figures popularised this style of nonfiction writing, they were far from the first practitioners. Gutkind and Fletcher (2008) argue that writing that is identifiably ‘creative nonfiction’ existed long before a label has. They point to earlier twentieth century writers like James Baldwin, George Orwell, and Ernest Hemingway as seminal practitioners of creative nonfiction. Indeed, earlier examples of life writers, who will have informed the course of modern creative nonfiction include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and even much earlier writers such as Michel de Montaigne (whose Essais were written over 400 years ago) and St Augustine (who wrote his autobiographical work over 1500 years ago). In this chapter, I draw on a range of modern (twentieth and twenty-first century), predominantly US-based sources to map out the genre, including ‘how to’ books, scholarly work on creative nonfiction and adjacent fields such as journalism, and creative nonfiction texts themselves.

Creative nonfiction and journalism are distinct but related projects. Some works of creative nonfiction utilise reporting and other investigations also consistent with journalism. However, not all creative nonfiction projects include these processes and outlooks. Likewise, ‘literary journalism’ or ‘narrative journalism’ – that is, nonfiction works that utilise literary techniques and include an element of reportage – is a subset of creative nonfiction (Root, 2003: 248), though many works of journalism would not be categorised as such.
Another important link between journalism and creative nonfiction is that practitioners reflect on their activity and output to lend insights on their methods. As Bacon (1999) writes, ‘being a journalist in a university is to think about journalism - and to try to do the journalism that flows out of that thinking’ (p. 83). She calls for a research journalism in which practice and theory are engaged in an iterative cycle. Indeed, argues Nash (2013), journalism as a research discipline is both a mode of reflecting on the social place and impact of journalism as well as a method of gaining knowledge about and analysing a multiplicity of issues and phenomena. Outside of academia, Deuze and Witschge (2017) define journalism as fluid and based on the multifaceted and diverse output of journalists. It ‘requires an ontology of becoming rather than of being [emphasis original]’ (p. 12). Here, journalism is understood as a practice, and, as Nash (2016) argues, for that practice to be purposeful, it must ‘transparently and enthusiastically [engage] with its own methodological challenges’ (p. 32).

As with journalism, creative nonfiction lacks a formalised methodology as a result of its orientation towards practice. In place of clear guidelines as to what a practice must look like, practitioners require self-reflexivity to evaluate their work and frame future goals. Creative nonfiction can be conceptualised as a practice-based, or practice-led mode of inquiry both within and outside of academia. Practice-based and practice-led research are both terms used to describe research informed by creative practice. In practice-based research, the creative product is itself the basis of the author’s discursive contribution. In practice-led research, it is what the process of creating the work reveals about practice that is the primary contribution (Candy, 2006: 1).

Research that is practice-based or practice-led puts equal emphasis on ‘the artist-practitioner, the creative product and the critical process’ (Sullivan, 2009: 47). It is a reflexive process, whereby the creator is both ‘the researcher and the researched’ (p. 51). My work is practice-based in the sense that the creative work and interviews produced insights on the experience of missingness (as discussed in the previous chapter). It is also practice-led because – through this exegesis, especially this and the following chapters – I reflect on how the process of creating the work can shed useful insights on creative nonfiction itself.

I have argued that creative nonfiction is a form of knowledge generation that relies on praxis. Nonetheless, even if a practitioner of creative nonfiction may not have any explicitly articulated principles to frame their practice, through my own practice as well as through engaging with a range of sources, I have identified a number of principles of the genre. This discussion is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive but rather a set of propositions that reflect my own work and may provide useful considerations for myself or other practitioners going forward. These principles are: veracity, aesthetics, ethics, immersion, vulnerability, reflection and speculation, and plurality. I argue that practitioners grapple with questions on these themes and that creative nonfiction provides space for them to transparently explore their creative decisions. My focus will
be on literary journalism, but the following will still be relevant to varying extents to other sub-genres of creative non-fiction such as memoir, essays, and travel writing.

**Veracity**

It is paramount that a work of creative nonfiction is factually true as per the ‘nonfiction’ designation. However, what constitutes ‘truth’ is a contested question both theoretically and in practice. This sub-section will trace some debates about veracity in creative nonfiction, including how they apply to my creative work.

It is relatively straightforward to identify where veracity has been brazenly abandoned by writers. For example, James Frey, author of a bestselling ‘memoir’, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), described a number of events that never occurred, thus clearly undermining the status of his work as ‘nonfiction’. According to an investigation by US publication, *The Smoking Gun* (2006), falsehoods included (but are not limited to):

- A sequence in which Frey was purportedly incarcerated for hitting a police officer with his car while under the influence of drugs, with consequential violent interactions with other officers. Frey had indeed been arrested for a range of minor crimes, but was jailed for a total of five hours and was reportedly ‘cooperative’ with police. He had not hit anyone with his car.
- A description of serving a three-month prison sentence (for the aforementioned crime that never occurred).
- Frey’s description of his own root canal procedure without anaesthetic during his (non-existent) prison sentence.
- Claims that his (non-existent) imprisonment meant that Frey was unable to save his (also likely non-existent) girlfriend from suicide.
- A description of Frey’s involvement in a fatal train accident where Frey invents a close relationship with one of the victims. In reality, while Frey did attend the same school as the victim, he did not know her personally.

Writer, Stephen Glass was likewise discovered to have published falsehoods during his time at US magazine, *The New Republic*. He completely invented quotes as well as events and sources. In 1998, he falsified a profile of a teenaged computer hacker/entrepreneur. The story prompted another journalist to investigate the hacker. When he could not find any legitimate links to the young man’s business, an investigation was launched into Glass’s work. *The New Republic* found that over his employment there, at least twenty-seven of the forty-one articles he wrote for them were either completely fictional or included fabrications (Bissinger, 1998). In 2012, pop-psychology writer, Jonah Lehrer released a book called *Imagine: How Creativity Works*. In the
first chapter, which described Bob Dylan’s creative process, Lehrer fabricated a number of Dylan quotes in order to support his thesis on the nature of creativity (Ronson, 2016: 11-19). Lehrer consequently resigned from his job at The New Yorker and faced public criticism for contravening the principle of veracity in nonfiction writing (pp. 34-35).

One reason why veracity matters, according to Lehman (1997), is because both audience and writer are uniquely ‘implicated’ in nonfiction writing (p. 4). Each body depicted in a nonfiction text has a corresponding real body, which gives writers an ethical responsibility to the truthful representation of characters (p. 15). Here, there is an important distinction between fiction and nonfiction as nonfiction is to exist ‘over the edge’ (p. 15) of the text itself. That is, the realities depicted are not confined to the pages they are presented on – they include details of real people whose lives are currently being lived. As such, verifiability of claims are central to the status of a nonfictional text (Lounsberry, 1990: xiii-xiv).

While it is broadly uncontroversial that nonfiction texts should not lie, and that they should be oriented toward the truth, the middle ground between facts and falsehoods is not straightforward. According to Clark (2001), some writers rely on memory to tell a story or to recreate a scene – particularly in memoir, recounting events they did not realise at the time would make for material – even though memory tends to be unreliable. While this less-than-rigorous approach may jeopardise veracity, it may be unavoidable. More egregiously, some writers condense events and merge characters, and conflate time. There was, for example, an ensuing scandal in 1980 when it was discovered that Washington Post writer, Janet Cooke had created a composite character in her Pulitzer Prize-winning reportage about an eight-year-old boy who was addicted to heroin. She presented this character as ‘a real boy’ and her interactions with him as actual interviews. While she based her character in real-life cases, the article was deemed misleading and the Prize was revoked (JournalismEthics@TXState, 2008). Some creative nonfiction writers also invent minor characters to serve a narrative purpose (Clark, 2001). Some practitioners ‘reconstruct scenes they did not see for themselves’ (Ricketson, 2014: 169). They use eyewitness reports and other documents as source material to vividly describe a sequence they had no direct access to – not even in memory. Some practitioners make use of ‘interior monologues’, they represent another’s thoughts and feelings within a text. Clearly, quoting a person, or otherwise representing sentiments a person reports having, is standard practice for nonfiction writers. Where veracity might become an issue is in instances where a writer imagines what someone thought and felt and represents their postulations as fact, although this technique seems rarely used among contemporary writers (Ricketson, 2014: 180).

Ricketson (2014) advises that practitioners considering making these kinds of departures from what is empirically available to them should think carefully about the value and purpose of the
proposed content, to ask whether it’s necessary at all, and if so, how to frame it – for instance, whether to divulge the fact that a passage is a reconstruction, a guess, a recollection in the narrative. They should also consider the level of evidence they have to render a faithful reconstruction of reality (p. 170). How a writer of creative nonfiction addresses concerns in veracity though is ultimately a contested question.

A compelling case study of what constitutes acceptable stretches of validity is Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (2008 [1965]). Capote depicts the 1959 murder of the Clutter family in Kansas and characterises the murderers. It is a seminal creative nonfiction text but as critics point out, it takes a range of liberties with truth. For instance:

- Capote makes use of interior monologues, particularly in describing the thoughts and feelings of the murderers. It is not clear how he derives his account of the characters’ interiority and to what extent these passages reflect his imagination rather than reality.
- Capote completely invented the final scene in the book, which was a conversation between a friend of Nancy Clutter (the daughter of the murdered family) and the detective on the case, Alvin Dewey. The scene gives rise to the sense that ‘life continues even amidst death’ by representing how the lives of the two people have changed since the murders and constructs an uplifting conclusion for the story (Clarke, 1988: 358-359).
- Capote graphically details the murders – along with many other scenes – that he did not witness using an omniscient point of view. He does not reveal that the scenes were reconstructed from the murderers’ recollections and documents associated with the case.
- Capote’s omniscient narration to describe scenes he did witness is also potentially problematic. By erasing himself from the book, he also erases any sense of how his presence may have changed the course of those events he was present for.
- Famously, Capote did not take notes or use recording equipment during interviews because he found them distracting and (as he boasted) he had a very accurate memory. Yet, as Keefe (2013) writes, some of those interviewed complained that their words were falsified or misrepresented.
- Capote may have cast the character of Dewey in a more positive light than what was borne out in the facts of the case. Dewey allowed Capote to see case documents and helped him organise interviews with townspeople who were otherwise reluctant to speak to him. It is possible that Capote was so grateful for the help that he inflated Dewey’s professional skills through the narrative. He said, for instance, that as soon as Dewey got the tip on one of the murderers’ identities he sent an investigator to them immediately. In reality, it took five days for him to do so (Keefe, 2013).
These problems have caused some critics to call for the book to be categorised as ‘fiction’ (Keefe, 2013). Yet, its high-quality prose renders it an enduring classic. Further, as Capote’s biographer, Clarke (1988) points out, Capote ‘was the first novelist of stature to chance his time, talent and reputation on such a long work of reportage, and to many of his peers, In Cold Blood was the pioneer that opened up a new territory.’ Many more nonfiction novels were written soon after by other authors (p. 360). It also remains an important text to provoke questions about veracity in creative practice, opening up a valuable conversation on what is acceptable.

Gutkind and Fletcher (2008) describe dual approaches to truth in creative nonfiction. One thread, based on a professional journalistic sensibility, incorporates rigorous standards of empirical truth. A different thread, found in academic works, has a more literary sensibility and may tell stories that could not uphold truth so rigorously because of factors of subjectivity and the fallibility of memory (p. 51). Frus (1994) goes a step further than those with a literary sensibility in arguing that ‘textual categories’ of fiction and nonfiction are ‘unstable’ because their meanings are ‘produced by the interaction between reader and text’. Readers lack mechanisms to ascertain external validation of what is presented as nonfiction because often it is the texts themselves that are our only key to previous events (p. 229). She claims that the narratives of fiction and nonfiction are ‘indistinguishable’ by virtue of the fact that ‘rhetorically, no state or condition is more imaginary than any other: all characters and personae are created; the world is constituted after the fact by texts’ (p. 11). Indeed, whether or not a text is received as true or false often has very little to do with the text itself but instead the context in which the text is provided. ‘The proper response is indicated by the type of story we think we are being told, and that decision in turn is influenced by factors such as our relationship with the storyteller, the social context, and the antecedent conversation’ (Heyne, 1987: 480). The author of nonfiction creates a world, even in circumstances where their created world has an external referent.

As a synthesis of the various philosophical positions regarding truth and its accessibility, Bloom (2003) posits that a writer may strive for an accurate reflection of their own feelings and impressions rather than representing universal facts (p. 277). Multiple versions of the truth can arise out of one event with a multiplicity of witnesses. An objective, singular account cannot exist, and thus the best a writer of nonfiction can do is to authentically render an account on ‘their understanding of both the literal and the larger Truth’ (p. 278). Joan Didion (2008) shows herself to be a proponent of this view in her essay, “On Keeping a Notebook”. She writes of the difficulty of reconstructing her notes from long ago (p. 131), the ease in which one can ‘deceive oneself’ (p. 132) about events that took place, and the tendency of others to correct her memories of events (p.134). As such, Didion proposes that the purpose of her notebook is to capture the truth of ‘how it felt to me’ (p.134). This is also an approach oral historian, Studs Terkel uses when encountering subjects. He says, ‘what I'm looking for is the truth for them [emphasis original]’, how a particular
person truly felt about an experience (Terkel and Parker, 2006: 125). A subjective account can still be a true account.

In practising creative nonfiction, I have had to decide what my own benchmark for ‘truth’ is. I chose to aim for subjective veracity (supplemented with fact-checking). While it has been relatively easy to verify the broad factual claims of interviewees (such as when and where events happened), I have no direct access to events they described. I have only been privy to their present-day interpretations and recollections. Throughout, I was aware that other interpretations or versions of these events likely exist but felt comfortable with the subjective accounts regardless. This acceptance of subjectivity reflects US journalist, Mike Pesca’s view of ‘earned opinions’ that he practices in the podcast he hosts, The Gist. In an interview with another journalist, Adam Ragusea (2014), he argues that the quest for journalistic balance can be compromising, ‘sometimes you wind up not saying anything real.’ Where a nonfiction practitioner and/or their interviewees have undergone careful reflection and research on a topic or can draw on personal experiences to lend insights to it, their subjectivity is ‘earned’ because it is grounded in a realistic, sincere interpretation of the situation with reference to verified facts. Moreover, Pesca adds that subjectivity can engage audiences, helping them to understand who the journalist is, and what conclusions their considerable work has led them to and why. These conclusions are informed, and therefore valuable, but they also do not take away transparency or from the audience’s own ability to make up their own mind.

I realise that capturing the truth of how missingness ‘felt to them’, and how travelling and conducting interviews and reflecting on their content ‘felt to me’ is not the only mode of veracity I could seek as a practitioner of creative nonfiction. I could have approached the task more journalistically, or more invasively. I chose not to for a number of reasons. Firstly, as a doctoral candidate, I identify more with writing from a university context, as laid out by Gutkind and Fletcher (2008) than as a journalist. In part, this is because my creative work is oriented toward how experiences feel, how stories work in a liminal space, and how readers can help. It is not necessarily about hard politics or crime reporting where meticulousness has immediate legal or political ramifications. In my creative work, I also feel that the individual narratives are powerful in their subjectivity in that they detail the impact of missingness on individual’s lives, pinpointing why the issue is important. In my work, I am also interested in discussing fundamentally subjective concepts such as ambiguity and coping.

A fascinating aspect of creative nonfiction texts are points where the texts themselves interrogate their own veracity. Singer and Walker (2013) write that creative nonfiction can be a philosophical exercise that examines ‘existentialism, ontology, and epistemology.’ Rather than simply providing a clear picture of what constitutes ‘fact’, ‘unconventional nonfiction tends to highlight
the slipperiness of representation. It raises fundamental questions about the nature of memory and storytelling, "reality" and "truth" (p. 5). Practitioners can be transparent with their struggle with the truth to good effect. As such, in my own work I was sure to be open about the reasons for my approach and the possible limitations.

Transparency in nonfiction can itself be engaging and add dimension to the story. Season one of the podcast Serial (2014), for instance, depicts journalist Sarah Koenig reinvestigating the murder of high school student, Hae Min Lee, which occurred in 1999. Lee’s ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed was found guilty of the murder. However, Koenig uncovers a range of problems with his case which point to a possible wrongful conviction. Over the course of twelve episodes, Koenig examines the evidence but ultimately concludes that she cannot know whether or not Syed is guilty surmising that, at the end, ‘we still don’t have [the facts] now’ (Episode 12). Throughout the series, Koenig emphasises the fallibility of memory (witnesses in the case had to recall to police what they were doing six weeks prior – a difficult feat) and often seems more comfortable with the concept of ‘reasonable doubt’ as opposed to steadfast guilt and innocence. Koenig’s style of narration is transparent. Not an authoritative account of truth, Serial creates a landscape of searching desperately for solid evidence. In effect, listeners are privy to an investigative process, not merely the results of that investigation. Barnathan (2014) writes that Koenig’s ‘openness’ paradoxically increases her ‘credibility’. ‘By casting the light on ourselves, exposing how we come to conclusions… we enhance our audience’s trust in our work.’ The acknowledgement of truth’s slipperiness in creative nonfiction is a key part of upholding veracity, which may be valuable to an audience – even if epistemological limitations were frustrating to listeners who were expecting a clearer conclusion.

In my creative work, I took inspiration from Koenig’s transparency. I reflected on my own experience in listening to Serial unfold and felt privileged to be privy to her doubt, her reasonings, and her musings. Like Barnathan, I felt that her transparency made her account more trustworthy, truthful, and interesting. I accordingly wanted to imbue my own work with a similar level of transparency. I did this through rhetorical means such as asking questions, forwarding arguments (particularly in Chapters 7 and 8 where I call for a humane approach to the way people think about missing persons who are missing because of their geopolitical situation) and through illustrating moments where I felt surprised or felt personally invested in others’ stories. I consistently portrayed the fact that I did not sit at an unbiased or disinterested vantage point. In Chapter 4, “Subjective Worlds”, I explicitly make clear that I’ve not sourced the stories of individuals implicated in the cases under discussion (such as individuals who are still missing, and people such as Adam, and Brandy’s parents). I discuss the ethics of not including those voices later in this chapter, but it was also important for my own transparency and truthfulness that I noted these
omissions. In so doing, I allowed space for further doubt, while not ultimately undermining the earned stories and positions of those I was able to speak to.

Regardless of experimentation and fluidity about what ‘truth’ may mean, it must be clear where the boundaries between what is empirically valid and matters of ‘opinion, meditation, analysis, judgement, fancy, interpretation’ lie (Gerard, 1996: 5). Being clear about the limitations of certainty works to express the truth of the author’s experience and memory of the event (even if such a perception is not objectively verified or even verifiable) while allowing for the rich possibilities of doubt.

**Aesthetics**

Sims (1984) writes that there is often a false dichotomy in people’s minds between what is factual and what is entertaining. Creative nonfiction is ideally both (p. 5). As a literary form, creative nonfiction has aesthetic commitments. It aims to be fascinating, evocative, and beautiful. Some sub-genres of creative nonfiction are highly invested in aesthetics, for instance the lyric essay, which centralises poetic features of the text (Purpura, 2007); and the braided essay, which juxtaposes and blends together disparate scenes and vignettes (Walker, 2017). Successful creative nonfiction texts go beyond their informational or analytical purpose to make the reading process enjoyable.

Gornick (2002) argues that one of the drivers of aesthetic quality in nonfiction (her focus is on personal narratives) is the persona adopted by the writer. It is important that they convince the reader of their reliability, because it is their movement toward ‘discovery’ and ‘wisdom’ that renders a work engaging (p. 14). Further, the persona should achieve some degree of distance from the story they are telling in order to best serve it. As Gornick reflects of her own experience of writing personal journalism, ‘I needed to pull back – way back – from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure [emphasis original]’ (p. 22). This ideal persona is not the writer themselves, rather it is an authentic aspect of the writer that is best placed to tell the story – ‘the narrator that a writer pulls out of his or her own agitated and boring self to organize a piece of experience’ (p. 25). Gornick uses the example of a doctor’s funeral in which many eulogies were told. In the most engaging eulogy, the speaker narrated their experiences from their perspective as the student of the doctor, which enabled them to weave a story of the doctor’s impact on them. ‘The speaker never lost sight of why she was speaking – or… of who was speaking. Of the various selves at her disposal (she was, after all, many people – a daughter, a lover, a bird-watcher, a New Yorker), she knew and didn’t forget that the only proper self to invoke was the one that had been apprenticed [emphasis original]’ (p. 6). The writer should be clear about who they are and what role they play when they tell the story in order to be engaging.
The question of persona was an important consideration in my creative piece. Structurally, my presence in the various scenes and conversations link the interviews together. Without my presence, the creative work would lack this layer of cohesion. At the same time, I did not want to get in the way of the story. I am there to listen, but the stories are not about me. I relied on a specific role – that of a facilitator of stories being relayed, and an observer of the scenes that unfolded as I travelled. I have space to express thoughts and emotions, and to talk about things I noticed, which enabled me to use my presence in order to contextualise or explain things to an audience. There is very little detail about me and my life, which I only elaborate on when relevant. This serves the story because the story – which is ultimately about missingness – requires very little of my specific identities in order to be told. Writers may choose to inject themselves more into the story (as does Anna Krien in Night Games, discussed below), or less, or even not at all (as in Capote’s In Cold Blood). In contrast to In Cold Blood, which is a highly constructed, author-mediated text, some practitioners, such as Svetlana Alexievich (also discussed below, in the “Vulnerability” section), absent themselves entirely to allow their interviewees’ stories to be told without disruption and minimal mediation through editing.

There are other aesthetic elements that characterise creative nonfiction, such as the use of ‘the scene’. Creative nonfiction authors tend not to report or summarise events that took place, rather, they tend to re-tell it through narrative. ‘The moment is reprised; it lives again, yet with subtle lights and shadings of the author’s vision.’ The scene may include dialogue, description, and metaphor (Lounsberry, 1990: xv). In his capacity as a writing instructor, Gutkind (2012) advises writers to use a mix of scene, summary and personal reflection to keep up narrative momentum. In his view, scenes should make up around 50-70% of a creative nonfiction text. There are alternative approaches to this advice. In some cases, such as in Alexievich’s work, the voices of interviewees may take precedence over their ability to evoke clear images and scenery. Here, it is entirely appropriate to abandon the primacy of scene in order to give voice to individuals. Regardless, whether through scene or though voice, often insights gained through experience are heavily featured in creative nonfiction because such insights are grounded in details of the scenery, or in the voice of subjects, and readers are able to ‘see’ or ‘hear’ the story unfold.

Further, as reflected in the definition of creative nonfiction as true stories told through the techniques of fiction, creative nonfiction incorporates aesthetic considerations such as plot, character, and voice (Vare, 2000: 18). These were all considerations for my creative project. In interviews, I was invested in understanding more than simply the facts being conveyed to me. I wanted to understand the interviewees as complex characters. Who are they? How did they feel at various points? I did not explicitly ask these questions – another aesthetic principle of writing is the rule, ‘show, don’t tell’, that is, a character should not have to explain themselves, who they are will naturally come through in subtle ways through their actions, their words, and their manner
As such, I listened to and looked for details that could shine through and add dimensionality to the work. Fleshing out characters is aesthetically important— it makes the reader more invested in the stories— but in my project it served a second purpose, illustrate the lived realities of individuals affected by missingness.

Gerard (1996) suggests that creative nonfiction should take in detail extraneous to the story such as the names of plants and animals, some titbits regarding history, how people talk, the quality of the fabrics of people’s clothes, anything to capture the audience into the highly-observed reality put in front of them (p. 15). These details essentially work to colour in the scene, emphasising the human element of the stories, thereby capturing the reader’s interest and reminding them that the characters have lives off the page. These techniques are well utilised by Anna Krien in her creative nonfiction book, Night Games (2014 [2013]). Krien follows a sexual assault case which, because the accused was a football player and associated with a number of Collingwood Football Club players, related to the general treatment of women in Australian sporting culture. Alongside Krien’s depictions of the trial and cataloguing of various crimes and questionable treatment of women, she dispenses friendlier moments. A conversation with her neighbour, two young boys attempting to play a prank, an evocative description of the barrister’s wigs and cloaks blowing in the wind, and reminiscences of life at an all-girls’ school. These dips add context to the story Krien is weaving, but they also serve to add colour and interest. I incorporated similar elements in my own work, such as by describing the natural landscape, interiors, body language, facial expressions, and so on. Where relevant, I also described how the interviewees looked, particularly in the case of Brandy, where I felt her outfit (including a large top hat that she wore like a crown) contributed to her characterisation.

Partly because of its aesthetic considerations, creative nonfiction is an engaging form. In the next chapter, I will detail the value of creative nonfiction as an outreach tool for scholars, but it bears mentioning at this point that its aesthetic techniques can transform the complex and the obtuse into an interesting story. For instance, an article that is over 8000 words long and concerns itself solely with elevator technology can be tremendously fascinating, as New Yorker writer, Nick Paumgarten (2008) demonstrates in “Up and then Down”.

Ethics

Ethical decisions in creative nonfiction practice are often made in reference to the treatment of sources. The treatment of interviewees and other sources is relevant given that being interviewed and reading about oneself can be an invasive, confronting experience. Here, I discuss how ethical boundaries can often be drawn through practice in relation to the project, its purpose, and its context.
Janet Malcolm (2011 [1989]) argues that to write on a human subject, a writer must ‘betray them without remorse’ (p. 2). She details a situation in which Joe McGinnis, a journalist, wrote a book about a murder case. McGinnis befriended the convicted murderer, Jeffrey MacDonald by continually reassuring him that he believed his story and that his book would help bring his version of events to light. McGinnis then proceeded to write a book which declared that MacDonald was unambiguously guilty and a psychopath. MacDonald sued McGinnis for the betrayal, arguing that he had breached a contract between them, and that he presented himself fraudulently. Although Malcolm characterises McGinnis’s betrayal as avoidable, ‘crude and gratuitous’ (p. 164), she argues that writing on a subject involves ethical quandaries. Vitality in writing springs from ‘the tension between the subject’s blind self-absorption and the journalist’s scepticism. Journalists who swallow the subject’s account whole and publish it are not journalists but publicists’ (p. 144). Malcolm suggests that the betrayal committed by a journalist is a necessary part of capturing the truth of a person, something more important than whether the subject likes the result.

In another work, The Silent Woman (2013 [1994]), Malcolm also discusses the ethical questions that arise as a result of subjectivity through reviewing a range of biographies that have been written about the deceased poet, Sylvia Plath. A multiplicity of accounts about Plath exist, ones that posit her as a victim of her husband, poet Ted Hughes (who was, at the time Malcolm was writing, still alive); and ones that characterise her as fundamentally unstable and unpleasant. Malcolm highlights the necessity of subjectivity in writing on such a charged topic. Even if they would prefer not to, she argues, writers choose sides. They must be motivated to write the story, and so must have some investment in it. The writer’s subjective interpretation of each character will be reflected in the resulting portrayal.

Malcolm’s works were informative for me going into my creative work. Before I began interviewing, I reflected on questions such as: What would I do if I felt my interviewee was wrong? Or self-deluded? Or lying? Or unfairly representing other people? I did not – and still do not – have clear answers to these questions, but they prompted me to examine my own subjectivity, my motivations, and my relationship to my interviewees. This was particularly important where my interviewees’ stories portrayed third parties in unflattering ways. Brandy’s parents and Salma’s ex-husband are, as examples, cast in negative lights. The idea of ‘getting the other side’ of the story would have been absurd and potentially dangerous given the contexts these women exist in. As Malcolm suggests is inevitable, I do take sides, in my case, the side of my interviewees. Yow (1997) suggests that researchers should be aware of their responses to interviewees and the ways in which they identify or agree with them and upon the emotional impact of their stories. One’s awareness of choosing sides allows a greater degree of transparency, and keeps the possibility of alternative interpretations open. My own attitudinal awareness helped
me to ensure that the interviewees’ judgements of individuals I did not interview were framed as subjective judgements, rather than as fact. I presented the interviewees’ ‘truth’ as they saw it, while acknowledging the limitations of doing so (my creative chapter “Subjective Worlds” broaches this complexity explicitly). In keeping open the possibility of alternative interpretations, I also decided not to use the real names of those involved so that the real-world person is less likely to be implicated by the character-version of them that exists in my creative work than they would be if they were described or identified in greater detail. Those referred to in the creative work can retain their own account of the events that took place.

I am dubious as to Malcolm’s conclusion in The Journalist and The Murderer that betrayal is a fundamental part of writing about others. For this project, I interviewed people who have had very traumatic experiences – such as the disappearance of a loved one, hoaxes from the public, family violence, displacement, and political unrest. The interviewees’ acts of telling these stories alone are acts of generosity, and it would be remiss to treat them with anything but respect. Moreover, as I was interested in subjective, experiential accounts, it was appropriate to keep a curious stance rather than an undermining one. This is not to say that a writer should be ‘a publicist’, should treat the stories uncritically, or should agree with interviewee. A writer must be aware of the limitations of any singular story. Simultaneously, it appears to be a misguided approach to apply steadfast ethical rules in light of the multifaceted aims possible in creative nonfiction projects as well as the range of accounts a practitioner may work with. Rather, part of creative practice is making ethical determinations as they arise. That formulation needs to incorporate considerations about the subjects as individuals, as well as the point of the project. For example, it could be unethical to approach interviews with politicians, or other public figures – or indeed, a convicted murderer – with an unconditional positive regard. It would be important to hold them up to a higher level of scrutiny to reflect the seriousness of their power, their responsibilities, and conduct.

However, there are situations where a gentler, trauma-informed interviewing approach is appropriate. In these cases, researchers can take steps to design their interviews to mitigate the potential harms resulting from talking about traumatic events. Feminist-informed interviewing (Campbell et al., 2010), and the counselling interview (Coyle and Wright, 1996) are two examples of approaches designed to avoid re-traumatisation. Both approaches hold that it is important for a researcher to listen to interviewees closely and empathetically, without entering into a therapeutic relationship with them. For Campbell et al. (2010) it is important to redress the hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee by presenting oneself as a flawed, multifaceted person who is interested in learning what the interviewee has to share, and ensuring that the interviewee understands that they can disclose as much or as little as they like (p. 61). The interviewer should also be a reassuring presence who attends to the emotions of the interviewee (p. 62). Coyle and Wright (1996) advise the use of counselling techniques such as paraphrasing
and summarising what the interviewee has said so that they can correct misunderstandings and to demonstrate active listening (pp. 435-436); as well as to display ‘unconditional positive regard’ for the interviewee, that is, to accept them and their story (pp. 437-438). These principles generally describe the way I approached my interviews. I felt this was an appropriate strategy for ethical, trauma-informed research for the present project. Although creative nonfiction practitioners outside of academia are not obligated to consider their interviewing approach on ethical grounds as deeply as those who must uphold their institutional guidelines, these skills seem useful for all practitioners, especially if they work on sensitive topics.

One of the more reassuring ideas I encountered in my research on interviewing people who have experienced trauma came from Anderson and Jack (2006), who advise that while it is important not to force people to talk about difficult experiences, by broaching the topics, a researcher can show their interviewee that it is okay to talk about it – it is safe to tell the story, and the story will be listened to. Asking about trauma is allowing it to be acknowledged and expanded upon (p. 131). While this idea made me more comfortable about broaching difficult topics as an interviewer, it also gave me a sense of responsibility. If I show people that it is safe for them to tell me their stories through demonstrating my interest in what they have to say, I feel that I owe those stories some degree of validation in order to show that the curiosity was genuine.

Another ethical issue that must be considered in the practice of creative nonfiction is erasure. This is an ethical pitfall of Serial (2014) as the murdered girl in the centre of the case, Hae Min Lee, is barely mentioned. None of her family speak and her overall presence in the story is scant (Van Schilt, 2014). Lee’s absence is partly necessary – she is, after all, dead and her family had ignored requests to speak on the show. All the same, it may have had a devastating impact. Lee’s brother posted a message on an online Reddit message board dedicated to Serial which explained that his mother had suffered a heart attack upon hearing the news of Lee’s death, and implored listeners to see that their story was ‘REAL LIFE [emphasis original]’ ("brotherofhae", 2014). It was clear that the podcast came at an emotional cost to Lee’s brother and has arguably added to Lee’s initial victimisation. In response to her limitations surrounding who she can interview, Koenig shifts the attention between Syed (his character, and the likelihood of his guilt), and herself (how she grapples with confusing and conflicting accounts) as the central threads of the show. While this is Koenig’s ethical resolution, listeners are able to debate, as per Van Schilt, its adequacy.

A similar act of disappearance took place in Helen Garner’s Joe Cinque’s Consolation (2004). The book followed a murder trial where the accused, Anu Singh, was convicted of killing her

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2 Although it is easy for someone to pretend to be Lee’s brother online, Reddit does have a moderation system whereby poster identities are verified through various means. The identity of this poster was verified, but there is no absolute guarantee that the user is who they say they are.
boyfriend Joe Cinque. Singh refuses to be interviewed for Garner’s book; meanwhile Garner becomes personally close with the Cinque family. Garner is very clear about the imbalance that necessarily unfolds in her offering as she vilifies Singh. Garner highlights Singh’s hypochondria, body obsessions, and her frequent threats to kill herself as evidence of her turpitude. She writes, ‘she was the figure of what a woman fears most in herself – the damaged infant, vain, frantic, destructive, out of control’ (p. 18). In the book, Garner writes that she did not want to document one side of the case because of the ethical minefield such a situation poses, though proceeds anyway. The way Garner seems to resolve this point of ethical contention is to be upfront about her bias, and to tell the story using a personal tone – the story is her reaction to a woman who killed her boyfriend rather than a full picture of the woman herself. An answer to erasure – however imperfect – is borne out through practice.

Erasure is an ethical problem I contended with also. As someone writing about missingness, there are characters who are integral to the piece who I could not meet. In these cases, I asked questions to get a sense of the missing person’s character. I wanted them to feel known and vivid in the mind of the reader. At the same time, I wanted to situate the story from the perspective of the person living with a missing loved one, and not to assume too much about the missing person based solely on description provided to me. I wanted the missing person to have a kind of ‘presence’ but for their identity to remain removed enough so that they were not defined by someone else. My approach was concretised after I spoke to Loren about her work for MPAN, as she made the point that avoiding erasure – that is, representing missing persons as people who are multifaceted, and have or had rich lives (as, indeed, we all do) by including information about their hobbies, their traits, their family and friends, and other things they care about on posters and in media about them – is an effective way of raising awareness of cases. She said that by rendering the missing person in full detail, onlookers care more about them and become more invested in their fate. They also come to realise that missingness is an issue that could affect anyone. It is difficult to include people who you cannot interview in a way that does not erase or override them, but it is ethically important for my project in terms of garnering awareness of missingness.

Erasure is also an important ethical consideration when working with archival documents – which I briefly include at points in my creative work. Steedman (2001) cautions that it is a mistake to view archives as historical memory. Archives do not consist of all of human experience that can be recollected when relevant. Rather, archives consist of a very particular subset of human documentation, implicitly imbued with politics (who decides what/who is important and needs remembering?) as well as randomness (e.g. some documents are destroyed in accidents or through vandalism, not in proportion to their importance). Moreover, a researcher cannot know what an archive has failed to preserve because, by definition, if a document is not in the archive, you
cannot know it ever existed (p. 68). When a writer looks to the archive for stories, they also need to think about what is not there, and what may have been erased.

Other ethical questions exist in creative nonfiction (particularly for memoirists or those closely working with sources) such as: Should I tell this story when my family (or others close to me) may not approve? Can I render my account as the authoritative one when others in the story may have a different version? Should I change people’s names or remove other identifying details so that they don’t know I’ve written about them? How much are other people’s traits and actions part of my story, and how much should be left for them to tell? (Bloom, 2003: 279) These questions were somewhat relevant to my project – though not to me as much to the stories told by interviewees. I allowed interviewees to use pseudonyms for themselves or others in order to preserve their existing relationships. I thought closely about the implications the writing may have beyond the page. For instance, when writer Lionel Shriver (2009) fictionalised her family story for a book it caused a lingering rift between her and her parents. The ethical principle of beneficence – ensuring that participants do not come to harm as a result of their participation (Orb et al., 2001: 95) – means that both practitioners and participants weigh the importance of telling their stories with the risk of damaging relationships. These questions, however, as with the other complex ethical questions around the treatment of interviewees and erasure, are not readily resolved by a set of strict rules within creative nonfiction. However, transparently grappling with them in the work allows readers to witness the difficult issues and engage with such ideas alongside the key story and themes.

**Immersion**

Creative nonfiction provides scrupulous, in-depth accounts of issues or phenomena (Sims, 1984: 10). Robert S. Boynton’s book of interviews with a range of writers who practice creative nonfiction, *The New New Journalism* (2005), emphasises the importance of immersion. Ted Conover aims to spend as close to a year as possible in the reporting process (i.e. at relevant locations, conducting interviews, shadowing key people, going to meetings, etc.) (p. 14); and Leon Dash spent four years reporting for the story of a single person (p. 65). Other projects do not require such long timeframes, but are still in the realm of hours, days, weeks, or months spent reporting. Practitioners interviewed in the book also preferred to conduct in-person interviews (though many also make use of telephone interviews) so they can immerse themselves in detail of what the person is like and pick up on their mannerisms and surroundings in order to build solid characterisations.

Sims (1984) points out that immersion has downsides as an approach to a topic. It is risky. It can be time consuming, travel and other expenses can be costly, and there are no guarantees that the resultant work will be published, or renumerated. It can also be difficult to plan because a
practitioner may find they need longer than expected to obtain the necessary insights for their work (p. 10). At times, immersion can be so intense that a practitioner may find themselves part of the daily lives of their subjects (p. 11).

My risk was mitigated by conducting research in an academic context as a recipient of a scholarship and of guidance through the doctoral program both from supervisors as well as on an institutional level. My level of immersion was also on the lower side – I spent hours with interviewees rather than years – but compared to a journalistic interview for a shorter and less narrative-led story, which may involve quick phone calls requesting a comment on an issue, the interview process for creative nonfiction can be intense.

Indeed, I invariably felt very drained after each interview because of the intensity of the interaction, the emotions involved, the need to pay close attention to what was being said as well as the surroundings. McHugh (2007) describes how exhausting this process of ‘aerobic listening’ can be (p. 151). Similarly, Holmes (2017) says that in-depth interviewing is ‘a mutual and engaging endeavour’ (p. 69) which can also be mutually draining. She describes an interview in which she identified with the interviewee’s story and felt personally affected by the interaction. She observed that a challenging interview can be challenging for both parties. The conversation is a shared experience that is dependent on the specifics of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and the ‘anxieties and conflicts’ each may ‘trigger’ in the other (p. 74). The emotions that are felt in the space of an interview by both parties may be as much of a function as what happens in the moment as of the emotional content of the memory being recollected. When conducting interviews that deal with such huge themes as injustice, ambiguity, and loss, it is little wonder why I found the interviews affecting. They could easily, if perhaps only subconsciously, remind me of times when I have encountered those themes in my own life. Although the interviewees’ experiences were clearly separate from my own, like Holmes, I found that their stories caused both of us to ‘reexperience the… dramas of our own pasts.’ In this way, the story ‘became, for a moment, our own [emphasis mine]’ (p. 74). Here, the in-depth interviews are so immersive as to at once deeply describe a story and situate the interviewer in the emotional realities of their own history.

Immersion is also potentially much wider than a practitioner’s interactions with interviewees. Immersion involves making notes, transcribing the interviews, and closely reading the transcripts. There is no established methodology of dealing with one’s interview notes and transcriptions within creative nonfiction. Some practitioners may decide to ‘code’ their data – sorting and linking different excerpts into themes, ideas, and concepts (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003) –
while others prefer annotation or take on their own idiosyncratic style. In my project, I found that – consistent with a Narrative Analysis approach, as defined by Riessman (1993) – stories do not always necessarily fit comfortably with the approach of coding. It made more sense for me to look at transcripts as holistic documents and let the themes take shape from this full account. The methodology of Narrative Analysis (explored in great depth in Chapter 6), calls on researchers to keep in mind the fact that an interview is produced in a specific context and in a specific relationship dynamic. What individuals choose to disclose, and at what juncture of the interview is pertinent to the way the interviewee produces and relays meaning in that space. The interview is likewise shaped through the way an interviewer approaches the person and story, and changes that approach dynamically, as per the circumstances of the interaction itself. The stories included in the creative work are not stories of events as they occurred. After all, it is impossible to recount those precise moments. Rather, they are stories about the dynamic interaction of the interview and the recollections made in moments that experientially flowed and were woven together by association and by the interaction itself. One of the ways my method of working with interviews was influenced by Narrative Analysis (other ways are detailed in the next chapter) was to choose to see interview experiences as fundamentally fluid, immersive interactions. Moreover, choosing not to divide up the transcripts into interpretive chunks meant that I read them in their entirety many times, which further immersed me in the data.

Creative nonfiction not only involves immersion in subjects’ lives but also in the topic of the work. Practitioners investigate their topic in different ways, drawing information from academic texts and other reading, as well as archival materials, reports, and a range of other primary and secondary sources (Rineer and Parrish, 2012: 115). For example, I visited four different archives (the State Archives of New South Wales, two branches of the National Archives of Australia – in Canberra and Melbourne – and the research centre of the National War Memorial) to collect a range of historical stories about missing persons. Although I ended up using a very small proportion of the stories I found in the creative piece, it was important research because it allowed me to explore materials of people who were missing a loved one and had written to authorities about it. As the Precedents of Practice chapter likewise demonstrates, I immersed myself in creative portrayals of missing persons. Again, relatively few of the texts I read were mentioned in the creative text, but it contextualised some of my own reporting, allowed me to see what I could accomplish that has not yet been accomplished, and exposed me to further understandings of missingness.

3 A host of different systems are used by writers, here are a few examples: John McPhee (2013), for instance, says that he organises his notes and transcripts with the use of index cards. Some nonfiction writers use computer software such as Scrivener (Amir, 2014). Gay Talese pins typewritten pages to his wall (Boynton, 2005: 374). Dan Roam (2009) advocates for the use of sketches as an organising system.
Within the broad principle of immersion there are many questions writers must address through their practice. One question is: when should research end? The practitioners interviewed in *The New New Journalism* have different views. Sometimes the length of time reporting took was set arbitrarily (one year, a few months, etc.); other times practitioners had clear ideas about what was required before moving on. For instance, Susan Orlean says that she finds it is time to wrap up her interviewing phase ‘when my attention span becomes shorter’, she feels less fascinated by the content of the interviews and has already transitioned in her thinking towards how she will write on the topic (Boynton, 2005: 288). In some cases, the question of when to stop had more to do with how long a writer could endure their research – Ted Conover, for instance, reported on life as a prison guard by working as one, and did not want to spend more than a few months in that situation (p. 12).

I decided that I would not attempt to recruit further research participants when I felt like a had a holistic picture of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, feeling satisfied with the ‘snapshots’ of individual stories that were divulged to me while also accepting that there are many other stories of missingness, and it would be impossible to capture them all. There is no end to learning about a phenomenon. You can always ask more people about their experiences or research it further (although given that missingness has attracted a relatively small number of studies, it would have been difficult – if not impossible – to find any further academic literature about it). A researcher/practitioner needs to draw a line somewhere and say to themselves ‘that’s enough’. A few factors went in to deciding where ‘enough’ was. Some are personal. There are time limits on my doctoral candidacy, and at some point, I would like to be able to turn to other creative projects. I had some limitations when it came to sampling in this specific project (which I discuss in the Introduction to this exegesis) in that I could not approach specific people to ask them to talk to me myself. This would make further sourcing quite difficult, particularly given time limits. When I started the project, I knew I wanted to get stories from the perspective of people living (or who have lived with) ambiguous loss, people who have been missing themselves, and people who work in the sector. I was able to fulfil those self-imposed requirements, plus was able to speak to people with even more diverse experiences than those I stipulated (such as people professionally involved with the process of finding missing persons, and, in Mina, someone with lived experience of displacement). The diversity of perspectives and the quality of insights I have been privileged to feature felt sufficient to complete this project and (with supplementation of further research into missing persons) give a credible account of the space of missingness.

Another question related to immersion is: how many people do I need to talk to? Lummis (1998) suggests from an oral history perspective that there is a danger in viewing collected interviews as singular accounts of experience because these stories may prove to be ‘representative of a wider
group’ (p. 278). A good sample size, then, would be achieved where enough material is produced for the stories to be interpreted on a wider social level (p. 282). In creative nonfiction, such a generalised account of a phenomenon is not the goal. Moreover, individual scenes and details of stories hold important aesthetic function, so there is a focus on the few over the many. Yet, how unique a story is, or how it fits within the general phenomenon can be useful to ascertain in considering how these individual stories relate to other individual stories, and drawing connections between them. I was interested in exploring missingness from multiple perspectives, although felt able to limit my number of interviewees by the fact that I could compare their accounts to existing research and situate them contextually in this way. Lummis’s guidance could also be applied to other kinds of creative nonfiction projects where the aim is not to provide an overview of an historical or social phenomenon, for instance in the case of biographies of individuals. Practitioners may, for example, ask themselves how many people close to the subject do they need to talk to in order to get a clear, consistent view of who the subject is over time.

A final question relating to immersion is: how long should be spent in interviews? In my interviews, I found that conversations had a natural length, usually (but not uniformly) of one hour. Interviewees seemed to grow tired at around this point. Individuals, of course, are complex and their stories will have evolved out of the context of their entire lives. To truly get to know someone is a truly long-term (if not lifelong) project. There has to be a point where it is safe to stop, and in general, I believe that my interviewees defined that for me. I never had anything scheduled in the hours after an interview, so was always prepared for it to go as long as it needed. This meant that the interviewees were often free to define the temporal parameters of our interaction. For example, with Sarah, I could hear a dryness in her voice from talking after around an hour, and I asked her if she wanted to stop, and she responded ‘no’, and went on to talk about pertinent issues around the changing nature of Q’s case. After some time had elapsed, she told me very clearly that it was time to end the conversation. Other interviews tended to end after interviewees said something along the lines of ‘I don’t know what else to say’. Interviewees I approached in their professional capacity tended to have a professional approach to the interview. They had allotted a specific amount of time to talk to me (again, usually an hour), and I saw that as reflective of their personal boundaries. They seemed to be indicating to me that an hour was the amount of time they could take out of their schedules to talk to me (although they were still generous with their time if I had follow-up questions). The parameters defined by the interviewees themselves felt intuitively right for me. There seemed to be a point where the matters under discussion had been examined thoroughly, and though I may have had follow-up questions, they were relatively minor.

These were my experience on scoping immersion, although I note again that various responses to all these questions on scope can be reasonable, depending on both project and practice.
Vulnerability
As a researcher and a practitioner of creative nonfiction, Minal Hajratwala (2007) identifies the vulnerability of the writer as a useful part of the creative nonfiction form. When the research phase of a project ends, she explains, there are still unknown aspects of the topic under consideration. This is a frustrating reality. However, she argues that creative nonfiction can accommodate ‘not-knowing’ by making it part of the story (p. 305).

The reason why Hajratwala associates ignorance with vulnerability is because this point in the research is a surrender. Her own project looks at the experience of diaspora across generations. Some important characters for her work are no longer alive, and informative documents retracing their past do not exist. ‘Here I must bow to the truth of our lives as migrants and the children of migrants: that the most vital facts have, often, been lost in the passage’ (p. 305). Yet, one can write of the experience anyway because there is room for the vulnerability of interviewees within creative nonfiction, as well as the writer’s vulnerability in dealing with unknowns.

Hajratwala’s point about creative nonfiction becoming a site in which the precarious state of ‘not-knowing’ can be grappled with is particularly salient for my project. My project also came to terms with questions which do not and perhaps will never be answered – this is the nature of missing persons cases. My task was to give space to unresolved narratives rather than to construct neat endings. I argued in previous chapters that unresolved stories can be unusual, or discomforting, yet creative nonfiction offers modes of encapsulating ‘not-knowing’. We can observe this in Second-hand Time (2016) by Nobel-prize winning writer, Svetlana Alexievich. The book brings together a range of voices on the collapse of the Soviet Union alongside personal stories set in Russia in a ‘polyphonic form’. Here, large swathes of interview transcripts are included with almost no context or narration from Alexievich. What emerges are multiple views – sometimes contradictory views – of life in Russia. The range of perspectives are never integrated or reconciled, testimonies are placed together as an account of the fluctuations of history. The work fundamentally goes against the idea that we could have an objective account of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, and yet, while the ‘truth’ is inaccessible, the book is informative of the complex, ambiguous realities of those depicted.

Creative nonfiction stories are not necessarily vulnerable in the way Hajratwala lays out – stories seem to tend towards resolution – however, nonfiction stories which look overly smooth or ‘softened’ may face critique. In an essay about radio show/podcast This American Life, Williamson (2012) takes issue with the ways in which the series may muffle reality in order to make the story fit familiar personal narrative arcs. Williamson points to a story about Pete Jordan (or ‘Dishwasher Pete’), a relatively well-off young man who was touring the US to work as a dishwasher at various locations ‘as a kind of vision quest’. Williamson writes:
For public radio listeners – the majority of whom are college-educated and who, on average, earn tens of thousands of dollars more than the median American income – Jordan was the perfect guide to the unpleasant world of dirty, low-wage work. He maintained his sense of humor and enough ironic distance to safeguard listeners from anything resembling despair over the fate of America’s wage-earning class.

Any points Jordan made along the way were about his own personal growth and his musings while washing dishes. Meanwhile, the less palatable complexities of the US class structure and problems faced by unskilled labourers are conveniently sidelined for the sake of an unwrinkled, humorous story that depicts dishwashing work as a lifestyle choice. Williamson highlights many more examples of its privileging of heart-warming messages above wrestling with complexity, ‘all too eager for soft landings in times of moral confusion and social trouble’. Loviglio (2011) shares these critiques, arguing that This American Life constitutes a neoliberal project of emphasising individual stories of ‘delight’ and ‘surprise’ (p. 288) and ‘the power of intimacy and comfort of universal themes’ (p. 289) above important questions around public life such as wealth distribution. The show trades political engagement and analyses of structural power for a heart-warming, unchallenging, digestible format – ‘replac[ing] historical struggles with personal ones’ (p. 302). Although creative nonfiction stories can centralise the stories of individuals, both critiques suggest that it can be problematic to structure a nonfiction narrative against vulnerability. Such stories risk erasing the complex forces that underlie them, and this is problematic for the goal of veracity as well as vulnerability – even if it does have a pleasant ending.

Speculation and Reflection

Alongside the use of vulnerability in creative nonfiction, Hajratwala (2007) also argues that speculation has an important place. She defines speculation as ‘the tool that allows us to enter even what we do not know’ (p. 306). When a practitioner recognises their epistemological limitations, they can bring the narrative forward by postulating what could have happened. Speculation is advantageous in recognising that when the limits of knowledge are breached, a story may still retain imaginative momentum, and the teller may have informed opinions on the likelihood of different possibilities. Still, it is key to use speculation transparently, and to not confuse the yields of speculation with fact.

The power of speculation was of thematic interest to me in my research on missing persons – at once, it can be practical as it re-focuses the search for someone, and it can be a cause of considerable stress. As Clark et al. (2009) write, ‘Speculation was pervasive, constant, protracted and debilitating for those experiencing missingness. It was a source of contradictions and was paradoxical. It was important, in that it allowed new possibilities to be generated and then
investigated, but it provoked great uncertainty’ (p. 273). Speculation can be practical – it can provide an initial blueprint to help organise searches, and it can keep hope going. One can extrapolate, then, that speculation can be a mode toward finding the truth. However, in making this claim I’m also mindful of the story of Sarah, my interviewee, in which, after decades had elapsed, a coronial inquest was opened into the fate of her missing son without her or any family member asking them to do so. To Sarah’s dismay, her son was declared dead. However, this is not a certain fact. The ruling undermined the ambiguous realities that families of long-term missing persons face. As Wayland (2015) observes of the participants in her study – individuals who likewise live with a long-term missing loved one, ‘all of the participants spoke of the awareness that they had to be flexible with ideas about the return of the missing person. For them, to live in one space perpetually, where they either believed a return would not occur or were hopeful that one would eventuate, did not correspond with the unresolved nature of loss that accompanies a missing person’s investigation’ (p. 203). Speculation may offer guidance and comfort, but should not erase the realities of ambiguity, nor of vulnerability within a nonfiction narrative.

A practitioner of creative nonfiction should clarify where they are venturing into speculation. One mode of speculation in creative nonfiction is ‘perhapsing’. That is, working to speculate on the unknown past or future by using phrases such as ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe’, or framing imaginative sequences with these words (Knopp, 2009). The use of self-consciousness can also be an effective method of framing speculation. Dave Eggers’s memoir, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (2000) consistently notes that the author has reconstructed dialogue (as the book ‘has been written from memory, and reflects both the author’s memory’s limitations and his imagination’s nudgings’ (pp. 10-11)) and has omitted some events. At points, speculative interludes that Eggers labels as ‘fiction’ work to highlight the overall instability of his account. The experimentation with narrative and its acknowledgement of truth’s limitations in the context of one’s life does not undermine the book’s memoir status – despite its use of fictionalisation and the attention it draws to its own speculative nature, the overall tone is one of transparency.

Martin (2013) reflects on his own use of speculation in writing a scene in a work of creative nonfiction he did not directly witness. He purposely decided not to research the event in order to experiment with transparently conveying his imagination of what happened within his text. He writes, ‘By overlaying the factual with the imagined and then refusing to do the research that could have privileged the former, I allowed the form to be expressive, not only of the event itself, but how that event cast a light into my own interior.’ Like Eggers’s memoir, the fallibility of the writer itself can become a theme of the text through the use of speculation. Moreover, how the narrator has come to relate to the event is the content of the work, rather than the ungraspable event itself.
I use words like ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’ to speculate on a handful of occasions through my creative project, but I was really more interested in allowing space for the speculation of interviewees. Creative nonfiction is a particularly good form for this because there are clear linguistic devices that can be used to delineate what’s imaginary from what’s real, what’s unlikely from likely, and what limitations there are in regard to existing knowledge. On this latter point however, I wondered if linguistic code is really enough for the message of epistemological limitation to sink in when it came to the use of ‘hard’ data in particular, such as in the use of statistics. I pointed out in my creative work that while I couched statistics in phrases that denoted a lack of certainty in the available data (like ‘around’, ‘more than’, ‘underestimation’, etc.), it would still be natural for readers to take the numbers as fact. I felt the need to point this out specifically in Chapter Nine of the text to reinforce the sense of uncertainty and to be transparent that many – if not all – of the figures are themselves forms of speculation.

While speculation is a way of hypothesising what could have happened and what might happen next, reflection encompasses an individual’s thoughts and analysis about what happened. As with speculation, a practitioner must decide how to use reflection as a tool. Likewise, reflection is not truth, though the interpretations of the truth it offers may be ‘earned’, as per Pesca’s view that cultivating expertise licences opinion (Ragusea, 2014). Reflection is also used in creative nonfiction rhetorically – it explains events, canvasses what a character was thinking and/or feeling at a given point, and connects the story being told to other stories, contemplations, considerations, and/or themes (Gerard, 1996: 7-11).

In addition, according to, McClanahan (2006), reflection can be ‘a turning, convoluting, sometimes distorting but always transforming power.’ Reflective writers may surrender to the fact that we cannot represent things as they truly were and that events occurred purely through our gaze (and our imperfect memory of those filtered events). They are also aware that they are transforming the experience into a specific form and genre which will be at odds with raw experience and they interrogate why they are writing it and who they are writing it for. Here, reflection organises thoughts, events, and interactions and transforms them into a story which adheres to a broad purpose, even though reflection is necessarily constrained by the subjective mind that produces it.

In producing my creative work, I came to think of reflection as one of the most important ways in which the work could contribute to others’ understanding of the topic of missing persons. I reflected on what I thought I knew against what others had told me, I noted the points where I felt surprised as I was conducting research or when I was interviewing people. I also provided points of reflection by relating their stories with my own research into philosophy, psychology, history, or other relevant material, thus broadening the discussion from individual testimony to wider
themes a general audience may relate to. By reflecting on these things closely, I felt that I could make the ‘I’ narrator a stand in for the audience, attending to what points were worth honing on, what was worth clarifying, and what was interesting. At points, I was able to relate to what interviewees were saying through my own previous experiences. I wanted to refer to these points sparingly but enough so as to allow the reader to explore their own analogous memories, even if they are not essentially the same. Reflection felt, to me, like a passage between the events that occurred and cannot be accurately replicated, and the audience who has no direct access to those events.

Plurality
Creative nonfiction can be thought of as a ‘hybrid’ genre because of its ability to blend nonfictional stories with the storytelling techniques of fiction. Cappello (2013) also sees creative nonfiction as ‘hybrid’ because of its ability to piece together knowledge of a range of categories. She writes, ‘areas of thought and of experience sequestered in life are allowed to share a space in art’ (p. 67). In creative nonfiction, it is common to use scholarly and professional research, statistics, and archival documents alongside descriptions of scenes, experiences, interviews, memories, and to reflect on the overall impression these disparate sources make (Gerard, 1996: 7-11, Hesse, 2009: 21). The form allows multiple forms of knowledge to sit together like a collage. Creative nonfiction can also approach a topic through a range of disciplinary lenses. Practitioners have many choices about what sources to draw from, what information and opinions to privilege, and what kind of knowledge contribution they hope to make. In this sub-section, I argue that creative nonfiction’s plurality enables a democratic rendering of issues and sources, and allows it to draw from and make contributions to various systems of knowledge.

Democratised Knowledge
The multiplicity of sources creative nonfiction can flexibly use may point to the way knowledge itself can be democratised in the form. Although expert opinion and findings are often an important cornerstone of the research, creative nonfiction aesthetically privileges stories and scenes. A compelling story can be vital and persuasive alongside ‘hard’ data. As such, sources with personal experiences on a topic are central to most works. As mentioned in my previous chapter, I wanted my creative work to have space for those with lived experience of missingness to challenge the status quo in various ways, and to present those accounts as authoritative (albeit subjective). As Solnit (2016) suggests, writers can play a role in supplanting a flawed, mainstream narrative with a new narrative by raising the voices of those who have something important to say. For example, Laurie Penny (2012) wrote about anti-capitalist Occupy protestors in the US travelling by bus in order to protest against a NATO summit. By paying close attention to the details of the scene she finds herself in, she provides a sympathetic account of the protesters. She writes:
Up front, the “bus captains”, self-appointed team leaders from the nurses’ union and other groups, attempt to keep the gang on-message with little rallying speeches. Shen Tong, one of them, is largely ignored when he steps up with a prepared list of talking points for the media – until he leads them in a call of “We are the 99 per cent”, at which point the whole bus chants as one... It is a cry for inclusion, for recognition. It is about demanding your place in a society that you thought had nothing to offer you.

Here, the specific aesthetics of creative nonfiction can work to elevate marginal voices and challenge social hierarchies. In my own work, the testimony of professionals in the missing persons sector stand alongside those with lived experience of missingness. All are valued within the plural form, and all have a valid claim to knowledge through story.

**Transdisciplinary**

Creative nonfiction may also generate insights that are related to a number of disciplines. Hesse (2003) observes that there can be a range of ways in which creative nonfiction texts are categorised in bookshops and libraries. They can fit under categories as diverse as history, sociology, science, and cultural studies. Additionally, creative practitioners in academia often straddle various social science and humanities fields (Nash, 2014: 83). For my own creative work, I grappled with findings from disciplines as diverse as sociology, anthropology, criminology, youth studies, psychology, social work, nursing, law, history, media and cultural studies, geography, political science, data science, and even computer science. While incorporating findings from a range of disciplines is vastly removed from practising or fully understanding the methodologies of those disciplines, creative nonfiction can draw from a range of different knowledge bases; and as such, can contribute insights that may be relevant to a range of disciplines.

A subset of creative nonfiction texts, according to Sims (1990), incorporates insights on society such as class, gender, and race while attending to specific stories. He characterises the genre as a mesh of journalism, memoir, and sociology (p. vii). This insight is salient to my own work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the accounts given to me by interviewees reminded me of the anthropological theory of Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) on ‘the Mindful Body’ and how an event such as disappearance can lend itself to analysis on the level of the individual (What were they feeling and thinking? What was going on in their life?), the social (Did they have adequate social supports? What was their home life like?), and the political (Why isn’t there better funding for social services or early intervention programs?). I do not think that my creative work is by itself also a work of social science/cultural studies, because academic work would require greater theoretical engagement and disciplinary-specific frameworks throughout. I note that I do not use
the theoretical word ‘missingness’ at throughout the work, even though that is what it is essentially about. This is because the creative work is oriented towards a general, non-academic readership. That said, the work is implicitly indebted to the range of disciplines listed above would be of interest to a general reader who would like to learn about culture, society, and politics, through the lens of missing persons. The plurality provides a holistic account of a phenomenon.

The sense of holism found in many creative nonfiction works can also include the dimension of historicity. Hajratwala (2007) conceptualises her own creative nonfiction work as ‘intimate history’ because creative nonfiction is a vehicle through which personal stories contextualised by historical events can be told, and both the macro and the micro elements of history can inform each other. She writes that creative nonfiction is ‘where character intersects with history’ (p. 3). This intersection is also found in Jenny Diski’s memoir/historical account, The Sixties (2009) which reflects on her own memories of the era in the UK. In so doing, she offers historical and sociological reflections of art, popular culture, drug culture, and social attitudes that characterised the time period through her own personal lens, focusing on her individual memories and impressions. Creative nonfiction is able to move between these levels of analysis with agility.

Singer and Walker (2013) also suggest that creative nonfiction can be a philosophical project. This is particularly true for stories that may be vulnerable or ambiguous in nature, or may use speculation and reflection in transparent ways. They argue that texts can have existential, ontological, and/or epistemological implications (i.e. insights on the questions of how we should approach our lives, what the nature of existence is, and/or how we come to know things). Hesse (2009) is interested in the philosophical nature of David Foster Wallace’s essay, “Consider the Lobster” (2004). In the essay, Wallace undertakes scientific research on whether lobsters feel pain and discusses the ethical issues around cooking and consuming them. Although the essay is grounded in research, Hesse argues that Wallace’s wrestling with these questions invests the situation with meaning. ‘CNF reminds us that writers matter… in sorting out fact and experience. It’s not a question of finding “the right meaning” or “an important subject” but of representing and reflecting life as we make it’ (p. 21). Here, Wallace’s depiction of inner struggle on the ethics of eating shows that creative nonfiction can be a vehicle for providing insights without pretensions of ‘knowing’ answers with full certainty. The essay is a philosophical investigation, with the creative nonfiction devices (telling the truth, reflecting and speculating, being vulnerable) acting as particularly robust tools for exploration. As with the cultural, social, and political elements of my creative work, there is a philosophical strand running through it around how we can learn to come into our own agency when traumatic events have occurred. My work lends some insights around personal power, which I summarise in Chapter 11 by honouring the ways the interviewees have managed to live alongside and tolerate ambiguity, and describe their diverse approaches in regard to what to do with inescapable uncertainty. This is not philosophy per se, but these are
relevant philosophical insights for anyone, as everyone is affected by uncertainty, regardless of whether they are affected by missingness.

The pluralism of creative nonfiction does not necessarily render individual pieces wide in scope. Ironically, its holism is rendered through a specific focus – an individual story or microcosmic account that comes to shed light onto a bigger topic or phenomenon. This idea is elucidated by Tracy Kidder in his interview with Norman Sims for the introduction to *The Literary Journalists* (1984). Kidder says that one may ‘convey something of the whole by looking at one of its parts… You pluck a guitar string and another one vibrates’ (p. 24). For my creative work, I chose to focus on a small set of individual stories which are a tiny subset of stories about missingness. Yet, these stories were enough to shed light on a large range of concepts and findings. Paradoxically perhaps, the plurality of creative nonfiction often expresses itself through sharp focus.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a general account of the qualities of creative nonfiction as a methodology, drawing both from my own creative work as well as from other works of creative nonfiction. It has conceptualised the genre as fundamentally practice-based while also incorporating key principles and debates around truth, representation, ethics, and practice. The next chapter will examine how creative nonfiction can draw on and provide insights within scholarly research, and elaborates on its potential benefits as part of academia.

**References**


Chapter 6
Creative Nonfiction in a Scholarly Context

This chapter aims to situate creative nonfiction within an academic context. I firstly contextualise creative nonfiction in relation to social science disciplines and methodologies. I reflect on the ways in which Narrative Analysis, Autoethnography, and Oral History came to influence my own creative work, yet simultaneously contrast creative nonfiction with the social sciences. I then examine how creative nonfiction projects can complement quantitative research by contextualising statistical information with stories. I finally advocate for the use of creative nonfiction as a mode of achieving the ethical principle of beneficence, and as a mode of outreach for projects from a range of disciplines. My discussion of beneficence and outreach includes an analysis of the potential value of interview-based methods for participants, using my own interview work as evidence towards its efficacy.

Creative Nonfiction and Social Sciences

Creative nonfiction is not unique for its central interest in story. In the 1960s, the social sciences experienced a ‘narrative turn’ which affirmed the importance of stories and subjective accounts in research and reduced the emphasis on studies with generalisable and measurable outcomes (Raine, 2013: 64). In this sub-section I elaborate upon the ways I have drawn inspiration from social scientific methodologies and disciplines interested in narrative, and then investigate creative nonfiction as a separate but adjacent project to social science by looking at creative nonfiction’s treatment of intimate stories and stories of individual agency.

Narrative Analysis

My own creative work drew tremendously from developments consequent to the narrative turn. While I adhered to the principles described in the previous chapter as key components of creative nonfiction, I was also guided by the social science research methodology of Narrative Analysis (also referred to as Narrative Inquiry).

Riessman (1993) has systematised and theorised the methodology of Narrative Analysis in her text, *Narrative Analysis*. Narrative Analysis is grounded in an understanding of narrative as something people use to make sense of events and their life, and is a methodology geared towards attending to those stories, particularly in interview situations. It investigates how the narratives are structured, how they utilise cultural and linguistic frameworks for a particular effect, and how they persuade the listener. It is not simply an analysis of content (though this can be crucial) but also one of form, and of authorial choices such as what message the creator wants to impart and why (p. 2).
Narrative Analysis – like creative nonfiction – involves an open-ended, unstructured interview style which incites storytelling. The interviews are to be recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions analysed. Riessman does not provide a specifically prescribed set of procedures for analysis, but suggests that questions related to narrative structure may be useful starting points. ‘How is it organized? Why does an informant develop her tale this way in conversation with this listener? [emphasis original]’ (p. 60). Riessman explains that there are inherent limitations in the telling and analysing of stories. To begin, a person experiences the world phenomenologically – we are flooded with sensory information, including small details like the feeling of clothing against our skin or the sound of a ticking clock in the background. Unable to pay attention to it all at once, we select (either consciously or unconsciously) certain aspects of our experiences to attend to over others. Necessarily, a person’s experience is filtered by their patterns of attention. Over time, other aspects of the experience are further filtered in memory. Some aspects of the experience are magnified, while others come to fade. When a person tells the story of an experience to another, the experience is again mediated by the message the person wants to impart and the questions their interviewer asks (pp. 8-10). In a research scenario, there is a further set of interpretations applied to the experience in which the researcher’s experiences and interpretations may determine what is seen as important, or worth (re-)telling, and thus power structures are additionally at play when it comes to representation of experience through story (p. 61). Oral historian, Portelli (1997) likewise understands experience as complex, ‘the actual world is more like a mosaic or patchwork of countless different shapes, touching, and overlapping, and sharing, but also cherishing their irreducible individuality’. When researchers study narrative, they ‘deal with the portions of the mosaic that cannot be subsumed under the grid [of theoretical abstraction]. They give us unwieldy representations, often harder to handle and work with’ (p. 88). Riessman advises that researchers should confront the chaotic nature of experience and the limitations of representing that experience with transparency (p. 1). Although it is difficult to navigate through the data of story, as Portelli (1997) reminds us, it is also an edifying process. The representations, while ‘unwieldy’, are ‘perhaps more consistent not only with the presence of subjectivity, but also in the objective reality of things.’ (p. 88). After all, these stories reflect how individuals understand their lives, not through the frameworks of theory, but through experiences they have attended to, remembered, and defined as meaningful.

I made use of the tools of Narrative Analysis to formalise my procedural and ethical approach to interviewing, as well as to work with the interview data. While creative nonfiction practitioners grapple with a range of questions about their practice, Riessman’s work helped me make choices about how to interview and how to use the data in a way that felt more systematised and grounded than what I may have chosen out of taste, or convenience. While there is little one can do to overcome the gap between experience and narratives derived from it, an awareness of that gap
helped me frame the difference between events, reflections, and speculations so that I was transparent with both myself and within the work about my limitations. Riessman’s work also made me more aware of the editorial decisions interviewees would have made – what to include, what not to include, the pacing and the plotting of stories – and how those choices may have reflected their purpose in telling their story, and their values (p. 2).

Given that a narrative has the power to impart information about a person’s identity as well as the nature of their experiences, it is a holistic account of an individual. This imparts a responsibility to the researcher to preserve a sense of narrative holism. Riessman writes, ‘Precisely because they are meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents’ ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished’ (p. 4). Fracture has grave ethical implications when the stories divulge trauma, because a sense of fracture about such an intimate or formative story could be personally devastating (p. 4). It would be impossible to include everything the interviewees stated during the interview in my creative piece, however these arguments helped me decide to draw on the interviews at length in the creative piece, and to decide against coding my interview data (as discussed briefly in the previous chapter) and instead to see each interview as a whole artefact. This guidance generally has made me mindful of the steps of interpretation and the ethical importance of understanding the meaning that interviewees have imparted to me through their accounts.

According to Riessman (1993), additional interpretation happens in the act of transcription. Words taken from a recording to text get flattened – there’s no immediate sense of tone, volume, pitch, etc. and so a transcript has a different set of meanings than those that get imparted during the initial interview. Minor choices in transcription such as punctuation, paragraph breaks, interpretation of ambiguous words can also alter meanings (pp. 60-61). Relatinly, McHugh (2014) outlines the unique ‘affective power of audio’, pointing to examples where individuals’ stories are enriched through their spoken nature. The affect conveyed in this form cannot always be effectively translated to text. The nature of a sigh, the person’s pattern of breath, their tone, and even the sounds in the background of an interview, overall add to a rich rendering of their character and story. These details build intimacy – ‘where audio truly triumphs is in creating connection with the listener. As you listen in real time, particularly to someone in an emotional state, you develop what I call a pact of intimacy… sound envelops you, comes with you in the car, surrounds you in the kitchen’ (p. 5). My awareness of transcription issues made me think not about how to get a ‘true’ representation of the conversation (Riessman says that this is impossible), but to think about how my transcription reflects what the interviewee intended to say, and reflects what I understood (noting that an interview is as much dependent on the subjectivity of the listener as the storyteller). It also provided a challenge in integrating close
detail to build intimacy through text – a less immediate form than a one-on-one conversation or an audio recording.

I understand my research methodology as primarily invested in the tenets of creative nonfiction itself, as outlined in the previous chapter. It occurs to me that creative practice may have a posture of being against methodology in that creative practitioners should be able to experiment with ideas outside of existing frameworks. Appropriately, there’s a limited framework prescribed in creative nonfiction as to how to create (and conduct research through that creation) beyond authorial choice. A practitioner will make stylistic and ethical decisions based on the demands the project makes of them, and they will have their own standard of truth based, again, on their individual decisions. The fluidity of creative practice is an important component of it, and while I had thought carefully about my own principles (particularly in regard to ethics, as I discussed in the previous chapter), I did not want to compromise my capacity for spontaneity. That said, there was great value in having another methodological framework in the back of my mind – Narrative Analysis – in order to make decisions that were grounded in a theory that felt salient to me because of its interest in the ways people derive meaning from the chaos of life.

Accordingly, I implemented the framework of Narrative Analysis by interviewing individuals with an awareness of the context of the interview and the fact that editorial choices were being made (both by me and the interviewee), and by viewing the stories told in the interview as a product of that interaction. I transcribed the interview as close to life as possible, labouring over decisions as to where to put punctuation and paragraph breaks, when to include a pertinent break, or when to omit detail of ordinary thinking time. I outsourced the task of transcribing and translating my interview with Salma with some qualms about the lack of control I would have over the resulting representation of the interview interaction. I provided copies of the transcripts to each interviewee, and I invited them to dispute or retract anything that had been written (in total, only two corrections were made to the translated transcription and some interviewees retracted things that they had said). Although imperfect, the acceptance of the transcriptions gave me confidence that they were an honest – if imperfect – representation of the interview experience we shared.

In early drafts of the creative piece, I included detail of every part of every interview relayed to me. This was the point where my creative practice took over from Narrative Analysis – I was given the stylistic feedback that my work needed to be more focused, more centred on my observations, and more interested in the dynamics of scene. Hence, parts of interviews were omitted or re-ordered, or told more in my words than those of the interviewee. Despite this departure from narrative holism, I still aimed to capture each interview as a unique interaction that occurred in a specific space at a specific time and to truthfully represent how each individual
copes with their situation and renders it meaningful. I made sure to avoid further fracture – for instance, by ensuring that each story included was told with its context intact by expanding on doubts, ensuring that all pertinent details of an anecdote were relayed, and including relevant biographical details.

**Interdisciplinary Influences**

In preparing for the interview and writing processes, I also drew from disciplines such as autoethnography and oral history. As discussed in the previous chapter, the hybridity of creative nonfiction affords space to interdisciplinary influences. Here, I briefly outline the value of both to my creative work in this section, although more specific details are dispersed throughout the exegesis.

Autoethnography is a type of anthropological ethnographic research which provides cultural insights through the lens of personal observation and narrative. The ‘ethnographic gaze’ constantly shifts between the subject and the self-reflective researcher (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014: 14). An example of an autoethnographic approach is provided by Geertz (2005) in his classic account of Balinese cock fighting. He reflects on Balinese culture but does so deliberately from his own perspective as an American anthropologist travelling with his wife. By framing his observations in this way, readers can see how his account is of his interaction with a cultural event rather than an objective account of what the event is and what it means. As a result of reading in this area, I adopted a posture of self-consciousness and an awareness of my positionality, assumptions, and my impact on the data. Taking from Geertz’s lead, my aim is to describe and analyse narratives and events as I understand them, without pretensions to objectively defining another’s reality.

My work has drawn on theories that were originally formed through cultural research (not autoethnography per se, but certainly reflexive ethnographic work), in particular the theoretical framework of Practice Theory and the concept of liminality. These concepts, particularly the latter, helped me understand the interviewees’ stories in relation to social dynamics and power, considerations which have been central to Part II of this exegesis as well as in investigating missingness as a social issue through my creative work. I note that I did not directly use an ethnographic methodology – such an undertaking would be a project quite divorced from my own – but the ideas imparted within ethnographic literature informed my perspective on researching others’ experiences.

Gillespie (2012) argues that the various parallels between creative nonfiction and autoethnography are ripe with opportunities for cross-disciplinary research. In terms of the process of research, both nonfictional writing and autoethnography use techniques of fiction such as plot and character development within a narrative. Often, a study of subjects in both disciplines
is immersive and will involve rigorous processes of fact-checking and triangulation. Autoethnography, like creative nonfiction, can also involve a self-reflexive process of producing a written text which situates the researcher as the first-person narrator, and researchers themselves can be part of a story. Both also involve vivid descriptions which provokes the interest of readers. Autoethnographic accounts such as *Everything is Wonderful* (2014) by Sigrid Rausing – which examines her interactions on a collective farm in Estonia as a young researcher – provided an example of how individual stories can be prioritised within a framework of academic rigour. Further, Tessa Muncey – an autoethnographer who draws on her own previous experiences of being a teenaged mother in her scholarly work – offered useful guidance for developing a strong writing practice, self-scrutiny, and upholding scholarly integrity through subjective accounts of a phenomenon in her instructive text, *Creating Autoethnographies* (2010).

I likewise drew heavily from the insights of oral historians. Oral history collects historical data through recorded interviews with research participants who are encouraged to articulate their experiences in their own words. It shares with creative nonfiction the primacy of individual accounts in understanding wider phenomena and a commitment to what Hajratwala (2007) terms ‘intimate histories’. Portelli (2005) sees ‘questions of memory, narrative, subjectivity, dialogue’ as central interests to oral historians, interests which – as per my discussions in the previous chapter on subjectivity – were likewise central to this project. Through the exegesis – particularly in this and the previous chapter – I have made reference to ways in which works of oral history have supported my understanding of subjectivity. Additionally, I have implicitly drawn on oral historians’ view of memories as fluid – rather than factual, unchanging representations of the past – in my creative work through pointing out how an interviewee’s relationship with a specific disappearance has changed over time. Thomson (2015), for example, shares the story of a returned Australian World War I veteran to show how his relationship to his war memories transmuted both with regard to changing social attitudes as well as through his own reflection and exposure to different ideas. Initially, the veteran was reluctant to remember his war experiences at all because, in the social context of the 1920s, it felt impolite and inappropriate to talk about the memories. They were also emotionally difficult to revisit, especially since – upon his return to Australia – the veteran felt disenfranchisement with the way soldiers had been treated politically. When he later joined the Communist Party in 1930, he was able to analyse his experiences through a Marxist lens. Here, his memories could be told as part of an analysis of war as an ‘imperial and business rivalry’, and his memories fuelled an interest in social change and his allegiance to the labour movement (p. 350). The meaning of the memories changed again in the 1960s and 1970s. At this point, veterans began receiving greater veneration in the national culture. He began to spoke publicly about his memories in an effort to ‘impart a message of peace’ (p. 352). Here, memory is dynamic over a lifetime, and similar insights were included in my creative work.
In addition, there are a number of projects which utilise the interview methods of oral history and, in turn, provide a creative nonfiction narrative told predominantly through the researcher’s perspective (e.g. Barrett, 2012, Klaebe, 2004). As with autoethnography, the types of stories in oral history accounts can be similar in focus and style as those produced in works of creative nonfiction. In my own work, I also found it useful to draw on research in the discipline for practical purposes: in order to understand how to make interviewees feel comfortable, how to broach difficult subjects, and how to maintain a posture of interest and nonjudgement (e.g. Terkel and Parker, 2006, Anderson and Jack, 2006, Blee, 2006, Borland, 2006, McHugh, 2007).

**Individual Stories**

Creative nonfiction seems as well to be a particularly strong mode of exploring personal, traumatic, or otherwise ‘intimate’ aspects of individual experiences with more sociological, economic, historical or otherwise macro-corollaries. As Hajratwala (2007) points out, while narrative may be widely of interest to a range of social scientific disciplines, they nonetheless tend to ‘privilege the great communal forces—social change, geopolitical turmoil, economic status—as explanations of [per her research interests] migratory choices and outcomes.’ Such a structural, impersonal analysis may be at odds with how migrants themselves see their choices. Hajratwala observes that, instead, migrants’ stories tend to describe ‘highly individual factors’ of their experience, such as ‘coincidence, impulse, and destiny (karma or divine will).’ She believes that creative nonfiction makes room for the individual alongside the social. She analogises that if the academic social sciences were to describe a cloth, they would ‘assert the primacy of the loom’ while the individuals involved ‘could see only the submolecular composition of thread’. Creative nonfiction moves between both perspectives (p. 304).

The critique that social scientists tend to be too broad in their approach to understanding social phenomena and social change is shared by Rapport (2003), particularly in relation to power. He argues that power is often explained through a structural or institutional frame, rather than through the force of will of an empowered individual. A person is supposed to behave in a certain way ‘because’ power is exerted upon them, not ‘in order to’ carry out their individual plans in accordance with their values (p. 52). Rapport’s critique must be understood with nuance, given that, as explored in Part II, individuals are often afforded agency when dealing with their circumstances. For instance, Practice Theory allows for mutable social structures that may persuade certain actions but ultimately are subject to change at the hands of individuals. Yet, while social scientific theory may conceptualise agency as a present force, it tends not to focus on the intricacies of the individual experience of agency. Rapport’s critique identifies the neglect of the intimate lives, thoughts, values, and dynamism of individuals within social research. He argues that social sciences lack awareness of the ways in which individuals may come to and exert individual power and avoid the pitfalls of institutional forces obstructing their defined projects
and their life. Correctively, he uses a number of case studies to demonstrate the ‘existential power of individuals to create personally meaningful and viable environments and to traverse these in the pursuit of their own life projects’ (p. 3).

Creative nonfiction incorporates such a focus on self-defined ‘life projects’ through its attention to character, minute detail, the use of scenes, the microcosm, and its use of immersive research such as interviews which allows the person to vocalise their story on their own terms. As much as my creative work was a story of missingness as it relates to forces such as governments, law enforcement agencies, and geopolitical turmoil, it was also a story of how individuals have come to negotiate with those forces, form an authoritative account of their experiences, identify goals for themselves, and ultimately both cope with and change their circumstances.

As Rapport (2003) further articulates, the individual’s story and their exertion of power is important. Each person is ‘irreplaceable’ and what happens to them may fall into certain predictable patterns but is nonetheless unique (p. 25). Attending to subjective experience therefore provides a wealth of understanding that is erased when power is simplified as unidirectional. Writing and telling stories allows individuals to lay claim to those stories and to their personal power, to solidify their meaning (if any), to put forward an account of who they are and what is important to them, and to provide lessons to themselves and others. What may arise is a less streamlined overview of how power works, but power is complex – it is both individual (choosing to do what one likes) and relational (influencing others) (p. 79); it fluctuates (one has more power in some circumstances than in others) yet is enduring (one keeps one’s opinions and maintains a will of one’s own); it is distinct from authority and thus not always clearly discernible, and nor does it protect an individual from periods of powerlessness (pp. 82-83). How people come to recognise their power is also an important consideration for general audiences. As Kierkegaard (1988 [1843]) argues, understanding who one is and coming to see that one has choice forms the basis of one’s ability to act ethically. When an individual realises that their choices matter, there comes a point where attempting to change the status quo seems fruitful rather than hopeless (pp. 250-251). Issues relating to power arose in my interviews, especially pertaining to individuals’ experiences of abuse and, at times, indifference from governments and law enforcement agencies. In turn, there were discussions of coming to reconcile senses of disempowerment with personal agency such as through advocacy work or storytelling. Privileging subjective experiences also, albeit indirectly, means that stories can go towards many different conceptualisations of power and how interviewees feel power, claim power, or struggle for power within the story of what happened to them. This close examination of agency is a project that is well-supported by creative nonfiction as a form.
Complementing Quantitative Research

My own research into missing persons began with looking at statistical reports. It allowed me to ascertain the extent of the issue such as how many people it affects, and who it tends to affect. The prevalence of missing persons and the resultant impacts missing persons have upon their social circle and society at large gave my inquiry an important grounding and has helped me make the argument at various points that it is an important area of study. While quantitative information has been integral to my work, qualitative research has allowed me to understand what is at stake on the topic of missingness. What does it mean for individuals to go missing or to live with a missing loved one? How does missingness feel? When we see the figures, what makes us care? Creative nonfiction can be a mode of contextualising and complementing quantitative studies, elevating numerical data with meaningful stories which allow the reader to engage and empathise.

Both quantitative and qualitative research have important strengths, although, as Casebeer and Verhoef (1997) point out, they tend to be separated in academic practice. Quantitative research provides numerical estimations of the prevalence of phenomena on a population-scale. In experimental conditions, it can draw conclusions about the correlative relationships between variables. Qualitative research is concerned with what a phenomenon means in relation to a person’s life, as well as how it is experienced and understood. Many research questions are best aligned with one methodological category or the other, but as the authors argue, blurring these boundaries in many cases could give a more holistic overview of the phenomenon under study. For example, in health research, a quantitative study which uncovers an unusually high rate of asthma in a particular region could be supplemented with a qualitative study to help bring about stories which may account for the disparity.

Possible suggestions for future creative nonfiction studies could be to look at interesting statistics and attempt to tell the story behind them (data-driven journalism is concerned with this (Henninger, 2013)). However, Casebeer and Verhoef (1997) observe that there are a range of models under which story and statistics can be used in conjunction. Quantitative work could follow a story (for instance, a memoir about a particular experience could be followed by a study of how prevalent that experience is within a population). The methods could also be combined within a single study such as in a longitudinal analysis of a particular experience and how it may change over time.

Outreach

Several scholars have suggested that using creative nonfiction strategies in varying types of research (particularly research involving narrative) could go towards outreach efforts (Camhi, 2015, Caulley, 2008, Narayan, 2007). Camhi (2015) goes so far as to suggest that higher education institutions should offer creative nonfiction night classes so that academics can to learn to harness
the form. While I personally would refrain from mandating creative nonfiction courses – it is itself a major, immersive, effortful undertaking that would service some (rather than all) research – there does seem to be scope for integrating creative nonfiction within some academic writing, as well as scope for researchers to collaborate with creative nonfiction practitioners to bring their research to a general audience.

Caulley (2008) charges the bulk of academic writing with being ‘boring’ and recommends researchers adopt a creative nonfiction aesthetic to make their work more ‘interesting’. While I agree that the aesthetics of creative nonfiction allow for a more engaging reading experience, he neglects to address why it is important for academic writing to be ‘interesting’. There may be a number of competing priorities for an academic writer – precision, reference to existing theories and literature, and the requirement to grapple with complex, abstract topics. To add layers of story on top of it could be inappropriate. Yet, in contexts where being interesting is important – such as bringing research to a general public – his guidance on how to make academic writing more vital through writing techniques such as use of scene is useful.

There are a number of reasons why it may be important to bring research to a general public. Wai and Miller (2015) argue that outreach helps academics learn to write well and clearly, that it can help structure the research itself (for instance, in the early stages a researcher could think about how they would explain what they’re doing to a layperson and in doing so figure out what the research is and what shape it should take), and that it can lead to a range of career benefits such as media and public speaking opportunities. From an ethical perspective, Boyer et al. (2016) see outreach as a fundamental part of scholarship. Just as it is the role of the university to conduct research, to build on and synthesise disciplinary theory and knowledge, and to teach, they see it is equally important that universities work to apply the research to the wider community, and to help that community engage with findings. They ask, ‘How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? How can it be helpful to individuals as well as institutions?’ (p. 94). The community would further be able to shape future research by giving feedback or bringing to light their own relevant observations and stories which could subsequently help formulate future studies. Creative nonfiction could be a mode of communicating relevant information to an interested community because of its use of accessible, interesting prose. It could also support this dynamic vision of engagement for topics under study which members of the community can relate to and potentially contribute to.

Beneficence
Beneficence is an ethical principle that holds not only should no participant come to harm as a result of their research participation, they should also benefit from it (Orb et al., 2001: 95). It is possible that the publication of my creative work could go towards creating positive change in
how people view missingness and treat those affected by it. It may also give readers who are affected by missingness the sense that they are not alone, and they may valuably learn from the insights therein. In these ways, the communities that the interviewees are part of may stand to benefit from the research. The accessible, interesting aesthetic of creative nonfiction may be a way to bring the research to as many members of those communities as possible.

Moreover, the mode in which research is conducted in creative nonfiction projects – that is, unstructured, immersive interviewing – may be beneficial to research participants themselves. Clearly, part of the reason to seek interviews with people who have lived experiences surrounding the topic of missing persons is because they are uniquely placed to share insights about that experience. The stories that emerge are valuable in this descriptive sense – in providing an account of what a relatively common phenomenon (missingness) is like from a number of different perspectives. As I argued in Chapter Four, these perspectives alone are ‘breaking’ in providing information which may have not been previously well-known. They also challenge habitual narrative modes in a structural sense by refusing to fabricate a resolution where none exists, implicitly contravening a socialised preference for closure.

The stories can also serve a purpose for the storyteller. In an interview setting, storytelling can be cathartic, it can validate one’s own experiences and come to acknowledge one’s own challenges and achievements. It can also ‘contribute to a sense of purpose, increase self-awareness, grant a sense of empowerment, [and] promote healing,’ (Corbin and Morse, 2003: 346). Here, stories go beyond the function of conveying information. Riessman (1993) argues that just as narrative organises chaos in the narratological sense, it can also serve to make sense of traumatic circumstances. Stories can transform the unthinkable into something survivable (p. 4). Wells (2011) similarly argues that narrative can be a mode for ‘personal healing’ (p. 58) because of its ability to construct a sense of identity, glean validation from others, and shape experience into meaning (p. 6).

The interviewees in this research clearly articulated reasons for participating in the study and particular messages they wanted to convey. They were given space to achieve these aims. Usually the messages were informational and were intended to bring attention to things the general population may not know about, may have false beliefs about, or may not have considered because discourse on missing persons is so limited. For instance, Loren’s assertion that the police did very little after her brother was reported missing was designed to break the misapprehension that missing persons are a police issue and that the police are always in charge of the search process. This and other examples of challenging myths have been documented in Chapter Four.

At other points, interviewees reflected on the importance of their entire narrative. It was important that something of substance – whether tangible or intangible – come out of their difficult
experiences, and telling their story in the context of research was considered a way of achieving that end. According to Corbin and Morse (2003), ‘A frequent reason cited by persons for consenting or requesting to participate in a study is the hope that telling their story will help others’ (p. 342). This motivation was key for the interviewees involved in my research also. The interviewees tended to feel that telling their story as part of their research participation (or other form of outreach such as charity work) could be a way to help others who may be going through similar things. Here are some examples of statements interviewees made which reflected on the purpose of storytelling and/or outreach:

*Because it happened to me and I cannot be the eyes to see things happening to me. I have to raise my voice for the ones who can’t raise theirs. And I have the voice and I think it’s violence against human beings to not use it.* – **Mina**

*I really feel that there’s this complete lack of support for long-term, families of long-term missing people... I clicked through to the link on [UK missing persons charity] Missing People and I read it and I thought, ’wow, they’re saying everything I’ve been thinking and wanting and hoping for’, in terms of trying to get more support for missing, families of missing. So, that’s when I first contacted them again and said... ‘I’m here, you know, I want to talk to you.’ And even though they couldn’t directly help me then, it’s helped me to do something with the charity that’s helping other people... for me it’s been incredibly important to be doing this work with Missing People, meeting other families, trying to make the situation better for – when I say better, it’s never going to be better-better – but [to] try to make the situation less chaotic and painful for anybody whose child’s walked out the door, whose husband, mother, father, walks out the door. Because, I’ve been there, and I’ve done that and, you know, if we can help other people so that they don’t feel quite so alone and don’t feel quite so unsupported.* – **Sarah**

*Brandy: Eventually I met this church group and they really took me in, and you know, helped me get the help that I needed, find a counsellor, started to see value in me and my story, you know, we went out of the country to visit Hungary, where we all told our story, and when I tell my story, like the whole church would like break down crying [laughs]. So that’s kind of where I learned my story had power, I wasn’t just a victim but that I was a victor, and*
that there were so, there were thousands of people who had my same story, and had never had the guts, or the gall, or the confidence, or the support to tell their story, so I heard many first-time stories from grown-ups, this 60-something years old, this teenage kid, you know 17, 18, 19, 20 that had never told anybody. And that became my thing.

Erin: That’s very special, I suppose, that people were able to confide in you – in someone really – for the first time. And you were that person.

Brandy: I didn’t know how powerful it was, I had no idea, you know, when you’re moving through your nightmare, you’re not even trying to get to your dream life, you’re just trying to survive until the daylight comes back, and then you’re gonna go to sleep [laughs] so you can survive the next day, I had no idea that my story and my courage and all of those things that they would come to inspire people... [and help them see] that they too were survivors and thrivers and that they could do what they wanted to do... I really believe that this is a powerful story, that these are powerful stories that you’re getting access to, they’re important. I’m really excited to see what you do with them.

* 

It’s such a strange, surreal scenario to find yourself in. To have a platform in which you can connect with people who understand the torment is really, really important. – Loren

Salma phrased some of her story through the framework of providing advice for parents whose child has been abducted. For example:

You should trust [the Department of] Justice, you shouldn’t be afraid. Truly...
The child will come back.

The role of their story was important for participants. They understood that they had gone through something that many people have gone through, but while experiences around missing are common, conversations about it are not. Finding others to relate to or some guidance to help cope with it is not easy. To be given the opportunity to articulate their story was gratifying.

Writing about empowerment in the context of research participation calls for careful attention to the ways in which the research is collected, and particularly the power dynamics of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. As narratology advises, stories are constructed in specific contexts for specific purposes, and the interviews were conducted with my presence as both audience member and co-producer of the narrative (Zilber et al., 2008: 1048),
This is an unavoidable reality, so my emphasis was to try to make the interview experience as affirmative as possible through a positive regard for my interviewees (as discussed in the “ethics” section of Chapter Five). It was important, for instance, that interviewees were given the space to comment on aspects of the experience that are salient to them. As much as possible, I aimed to create an environment where the interviewees were comfortable to talk about their stories but equally not pressured to talk about particular topics. I kept in mind some of the advice Studs Terkel offered in relation to interviewing, in particular, that ‘ineptitude’ (he uses the example of struggling with the recording equipment) makes a person seem less intimidating which can help people open up; that active listening can be a mode of allowing the storyteller to drive the narrative; and that it’s important to be grateful to the interviewee – to maintain a constant awareness that they’re helping you (Terkel and Parker, 2006: 124). In all my interviews, I was younger (usually considerably younger) than the interviewees. I am a student rather than a member of staff at a university, I have no professional expertise and very limited personal experience in regard to the topic of missing persons. These factors all made it straightforward for me to impart the accurate sense that the interviewee carried far greater knowledge and insight than me and that they were doing me a favour by helping me with my studies. As much as it is possible, I believe this context redressed some of the power imbalances in the researcher-subject relationship.

Additionally, in an unstructured interview, the interviewee can decide what stories are told, how they are paced, what information is disclosed, and the level of ‘emotional intensity’ of the interview (Corbin and Morse, 2003: 340). My questioning strategy was to ask what happened with some degree of chronology, and to ask about aspects of the story told so far that I wanted to clarify or double-check, and for reflections on themes the stories touched on. I often summarised, reflected back, or commented on what had been said which often prompted the interviewee to explore a topic in greater depth without being asked a question and without being directed towards providing specific information. In keeping with non-directionality, where possible, I tried to form questions based on the answers I had already been given. I wanted, in essence, to ask as few questions as possible, although the proportion of questions to answers varied between interviewees. As it is not possible for me to divorce my own interests from the interviews, the recordings, and the transcripts, what I have chosen to focus on in both my creative and exegetical work is just that, a choice (Zilber et al., 2008: 1063). Yet, in incorporating a narrative analysis approach that Riessman (1993) advises, I carefully understood the stories holistically (p. 4), maintained an awareness of my biases (as much as it is possible), and to cultivate an openness towards new ideas and information. I always asked a question such as ‘Is there anything else you’d like to add?’ and usually the interviewee offered something. In my interview with Sarah,
this question prompted another half hour of conversation and became key material on living life when the details of a long-term missing persons case keep changing.

In every interview, the story took on a shape that I had not expected, and offered insights that made me see the topic of missing persons afresh. Surprise, according to oral historian, Portelli (1999), holds an important place within any interview. An interview is ‘dialogic’, an ‘interpersonal encounter between researcher and narrators, from which both emerge with a new, different awareness.’ A researcher lacks knowledge of an interviewee’s experience, and likewise an interviewee might not go into an interview with the understanding that their experiences are of significance to others (Portelli, 2005: 4). Without surprise, an interview is just a reiteration of what’s known and/or a failure to shift perspectives. In Portelli’s own work about the Nazi massacre in Rome in 1944, after an interview with a woman (he had kept the tape rolling), he found unexpected information about her life subsequent to the massacre. She divulged testimony about her experience of routine sexual harassment after those in her community had learned of her husband’s death. The surprise led him to re-shape his research to discover other, previously unspoken (and even ‘unspeakable’ given that there was no word for sexual harassment at the time it was happening) experiences which comprised an important and novel historical finding (p. 2).

Likewise, I realised that it was likely that some of the most important statements for my research would be ones that I found surprising or challenging. The stories I listened to were produced in my presence and informed by my interests and thinking. Nonetheless, unstructured interviews give interviewees opportunities to carve a different path because there is no rigid set of questions to follow or topics to discuss. Fundamentally, unstructured interviewing is a mode of research that is invested in the stories of participants, as well as their insights about those stories, and their agency.

Despite some limitations, unstructured interviews can offer an empowering experience to interviewees where they are conducted sensitively. Campbell et al. (2010) observe that even in circumstances where interviewees revisit painful events, most interviewees see their participation as a positive experience (p. 61). Firstly, it is an opportunity to ‘be heard and validated’ (p. 61). Structurally, in the context of the interviews I undertook, the interviewee was implicitly accorded expertise and were free to make challenging analyses of their situation and on the topic of missing persons generally. Most of the interviewees at some point expressed that the group they were a member of (as a loved one of a missing person, a formerly missing person, and, in Mina’s case, as a refugee) had been neglected or ignored in popular culture. Even Charlie, who has many years of professional experience in policing, told me that he struggled to get individuals and agencies to listen to his insights about best-practice in regard to missing persons cases and to implement his recommendations. As McHugh (2007) writes, ‘few of us are ever really listened to in daily life. People are distracted, daydreaming, or bored, and the words are only half heard. When
someone REALLY listens to you, it’s like a force field [emphasis original]’ (p. 151). My act of paying complete attention to interviewees could itself be understood as a structural challenge to the dismissive outside world. Likewise, narrative can be a mode through which interviewees were able to talk through trauma, and make sense of it from their perspective in a way that did not trivialise their experiences (Crossley, 2000: 528).

Storytelling in an in-depth mode could have other benefits too. For example, telling one’s life story can be a way to take responsibility for it – not necessarily to blame oneself for traumatic events, but to recognise that one retains agency and that one’s story may hold power (Crossley, 2000: 535). Psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (2006) holds that by coming to a sense of meaning through story, trauma can even be reconfigured as a positive, formative experience. Campbell et al. (2010) also point to benefits to participation in interview-based studies such as getting the opportunity to answer challenging questions, seeing one’s trauma in a new light, and being able to control the conversation about that trauma where one can decide what to disclose (pp. 68-69). I cannot assume that these positive outcomes came into play in all the interviews, but given the voluntary conditions that interviewees decided to enter into the conversation and the constructive goals they had for their participation, storytelling in this context could have affirming potential.

**Conclusion**

In Part II of this exegesis, I elaborated upon the observations and opportunities that were drawn out through narratives about missingness. I argued that interviewees were able to challenge stereotypes and other flawed understandings of missing persons and their loved ones, and in some ways also challenged storytelling structures by allowing their narratives to hang as an ongoing story, or an unresolved one. In this and the previous chapter, I outlined my approach to the research – through the tenets of creative nonfiction, bolstered by a methodological framework of Narrative Analysis and insights from other academic disciplines. I defined important elements of the practice of creative nonfiction and argued that such creative nonfiction projects have an important academic value in melding the dynamism of individual power along with considerations of social structures and the movement of history. This synthesis of micro and macro is particularly relevant in exploring stories of mystery and trauma as it lends space to acknowledge the power of individuals as well as highlighting the scope of and institutional issues around missingness. Ultimately, the methodology of creative nonfiction felt like a constructive way to balance an account of social systems in need of reform with a sense of hope that is grounded in the reality of individual lives. I also noted the value of creative nonfiction in complementing quantitative research and in outreach efforts – especially in working to benefit or even empower individuals and communities who have either been directly involved in producing the research, or who otherwise have a stake in its findings.
References


Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to give voice to the complex, multifaced experience of missingness. I developed an account of missingness through my creative nonfiction work which serves to render my findings accessible to a wide audience. This exegesis provides a conceptual background to my creative work, explores key insights pertaining to storytelling within the liminal space of missingness, and articulates the principles and value of creative nonfiction as a practice-based research methodology.

Part I of this exegesis described and analysed the background texts and concepts that informed the creative work. It first looked at a large sample of other creative works on the subject of missing persons, mapping out the range of work that exists on the topic, exploring major themes, points of possible inspiration, and potential gaps that my creative work could address. I then elucidated the key concepts which drove my creative work—missingness and newsworthiness—which shaped the direction of my research.

Part II of the exegesis was concerned with the findings of my interviews. I examined the structure and content of the interviews and argued that they challenged dominant modes of understanding missing persons as an issue as well as storytelling itself. In the interview context, interviewees were conceptualised as experts on the topics under discussion and had space to offer unexpected, difficult, and different insights. I found this mode of storytelling particularly powerful in its ability to ‘break the story’—that is, to supplant falsehoods, misunderstandings, and stereotypes with new, truthful, and historically marginalised accounts (Solnit, 2016). Here, they questioned ‘news’ on the subject of missing persons, highlighting misunderstandings about missing persons that exist in contemporary discourse as well as the patterns of neglect of the topic. The neglect was especially manifest in the ways in which certain aspects of disappearance are prioritised over others. It is often the shock of the disappearance itself that featured in coverage. Conversely, the elements of cases before and in the long-term aftermath of a disappearance are afforded less attention. Overall, the interviewees found little public space where the realities of ‘missingness’—that is, the social causes and impacts of individual cases—could be elaborated upon.

I found that the interviewees did not necessarily make sense of their stories of missingness in any particular way. The narratives they provided often lacked closure and the meanings they conveyed could be deconstructionist in nature with meaning itself cast as a mutable concept. Nonetheless, there was a clear message that it is possible to live with mysterious circumstances and stories which lack a resolution without imposing a sense of closure or clarity on what remains ambiguous. Likewise, the stories both implicitly and explicitly asserted that valuable observations on a topic (in this case, missingness) could be made from a liminal space.
Part III turned to the form and methodology my creative piece took – creative nonfiction. I reflected on my own creative work and drew from a wide range of sources about creative nonfiction in order to understand what creative nonfiction is, how it works, and how it is useful within the academic context in which this material has been produced. I argued that creative nonfiction has a number of principles (which I define as veracity, aesthetics, ethics, immersion, vulnerability, speculation and reflection, and plurality). There are no set of rules or prescriptions under these principles. Instead, I argued, a creative nonfiction practitioner grapples with them in relation to their practices and their projects. There are many advantages within the set of choices practitioners can make: the accounts that unfold are truthful, interesting, rigorous, and can draw seamlessly from an array of sources and knowledge bases. I further argued that creative nonfiction is able to provide constructive accounts in terms of accounting for individual power while also describing macro-social conditions, that it offers important opportunities in complementing quantitative research, and that it holds many opportunities for outreach as well as upholding the ethical principle of beneficence.

Through the exegeesis, I have made a number of suggestions for future work. These limitations, and gaps, have been articulated in the relevant chapters, but I also provide a short summary here. In terms of research on missing persons, further work in general will be valuable. The literature on the topic is currently promising but not voluminous in nature. I found little over a hundred sources on missing persons (not including those creative texts discussed in the first chapter), many of these are not academic texts but grey literature, including reports, statistical overviews, guidelines, and media reports.

As I reflected on in Chapter Four, given the idiosyncrasies of individuals’ stories, more interview data is likely to lead to even further insights. Each individual has a unique story which will relate to its own set of relational, social, and political issues. The scope of my research – to interview only nine people – was appropriate for the creative project at hand (as I explain in Chapter Five and the Introduction), but cannot be said to be representative of all experiences concerning missingness.

It became clear in my work that very little is known about missing unaccompanied migrants in Europe. Narratives concerning people affected by displacement and missing migrant children would be a particularly vital area for future research given the scope and urgency of the issue. Some of the potential outcomes missing migrant children face – as relayed in data collected by Missing Children Europe – are frightening, including experiences such as trafficking, forced labour, organ harvesting, and death. Research into this area may serve to cast much needed light into the current situation, and may find paths to prevent future harm.
It would also be advisable for future work to consider the role of social media in working to bring cases to mainstream awareness, particularly for missing persons who do not fit the profile of a ‘missing white girl’ or a ‘perfect victim’. The potential of social media to democratise coverage – and overall, redefine newsworthiness in relation to missing persons cases – has attracted only scant scholarly attention. Yet, understanding how social media may be able to benefit family members and friends of missing persons would have practical value for them in understanding how to broaden their search through this form. As discussed in both the creative work and the exegesis, increasing awareness of cases may ideally help family members and friends locate a missing person, but it can also serve to bring about a greater sense of community, and comfort in the knowledge that others care about their case and that they are not alone.

In addition, while my exegesis included an overview of creative texts on the topic of missing persons, this literature review was non-exhaustive. It is curious that a theme so pervasive and enduring in literature and popular culture as missing persons (remembering that missing persons appear in the works of Homer and Shakespeare as well as more contemporary creators) has attracted very little critical attention. As I reflected on in the first chapter of the creative piece, popular culture can both shape and mirror our ideas about risk, mystery, and missing persons. Further investigations of textual portrayals of missing persons would be a valuable way to expand our understanding of the role of absence in the stories that circulate through our culture.

I would also suggest more research projects in creative nonfiction and more integration of creative nonfiction in academia for the reasons outlined in Chapter Six. There are many potential opportunities for creative nonfiction as a methodology to bring a constructive light to important phenomena and for storytelling to work to reach those who would be most affected by academic findings. In particular, it would be interesting to see how a dynamic project of research and outreach via creative nonfiction could come to inform research trajectories, that is, how the community’s interaction with the research could inform future work. Future research could also valuably amalgamate the principles of creative nonfiction with quantitative research findings. For example, future creative research could take a statistical finding and work to understand this quantitative data point through interview and observational work.

Finally, it is also possible that the research that encompasses both this exegesis and the creative work could be drawn upon to investigate ambiguous circumstances other than missingness. Boss (1999) holds that ambiguous loss can strike people in many circumstances – not just by having a missing loved one. If, for example, a loved one is rapidly deteriorating in terms of their health, diagnosed with a terminal illness, or otherwise changed to be a different person (perhaps through a traumatic brain injury or dementia), one can likewise be subjected to ambiguous loss (pp. 8-9). Some of the associated issues of ambiguous loss in the context of missing persons (such as dealing
with law enforcement) may not apply to other situations of ambiguous loss, but it is possible that those affected would likewise deal with trauma, misunderstandings, and a lack of narrative closure. To elaborate, those in a diverse range of ambiguous situations may – like those I interviewed – not know when their difficult situation is likely to end (or may have to consider it will never end), they may need to renegotiate the dynamics of intimate relationships, they may have to deal with comments from others that betray a lack of empathy or understanding of the situation, the situation may have arisen out of highly traumatic circumstances, and so on. It would be fascinating to explore how broadly the observations about ambiguity and narrative borne out in this research would apply to other scenarios which are likewise ambiguous.

Altogether, my creative piece and exegesis explored the nature of missingness and journeyed to bring these findings to light through the engaging and truthful form of creative nonfiction. While there are topics touched upon through the research that are ripe for further exploration, it is a valuable testament to the ability of those affected by missingness to relate to their own traumatic circumstances with agency. Investigating mysterious circumstances and stories of trauma through the methods of creative nonfiction felt like an effective approach to this project because it was ultimately a constructive portrayal of an issue and those affected by it. I could incorporate multifaceted, individualistic accounts of what those experiences are like, along with the large social element that affects the prevalence of missing persons and the ways in which missing persons cases are prioritised and investigated. I would not posit that creative nonfiction is a unique undertaking in this vein, but it is a useful one. There was space for the valuable points and stories interviewees had to say in the way of life lessons, the capacity for individuals to endure trauma, and individual critiques of systemic issues within the missing persons sector. I also felt that these stories would be moving for an audience, and may compel them to care about and reflect on the issues covered which, in turn, could compel more people to take up the responsibility of assisting with searches and make more compassionate responses to missingness. Introducing the social element of missing persons issues was also important to show the scope of the situation – it is a bigger problem than the reader might imagine. Additionally, I showed that the situation, while wanting, is not hopeless. There are reasons for systemic failures and there are things that could be done to mitigate them. By weaving together individual stories and the social aspects behind them to tell traumatic and mysterious stories in a way that acknowledges each interviewee’s reality, the work offers a constructive path forward for readers.

References
Appendix A: Human Research Ethics Approval
21 January 2016

Ms Erin Stewart

Dear Ms Stewart

Thank you for your letter responding to the HREC review letter. I am pleased to advise that the Human Research Ethics application referred to below has been approved.
Ethics Number HE15/446

Project Title Missingness: Stories from a Liminal Space

Researchers Ms Erin Stewart, Dr Siobhan McHugh

Documents Approved

- Initial Ethics Application
  Response received 14/01/2016
- Participant Information Sheet V3 - 14/01/2016
  Response received 06/01/2016
- Letter of Support from Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN)
- Indicative List of Questions V2 - 28/12/2015
- Consent Form V1 - 28/10/2015

Approval Date 20 January 2016

Study Expiry Date 19 January 2017

The University of Wollongong/Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District Social Sciences HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. The HREC has reviewed the research proposal for compliance with the National Statement and approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with this document.

A condition of approval by the HREC is the submission of a progress report annually and a final report on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/rso/ethics/UOW009385.html. This report must be completed, signed by the appropriate Head of School, and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.

As evidence of continuing compliance, the Human Research Ethics Committee also requires that researchers immediately report:
- proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project
Please note that approvals are granted for a twelve month period. Further extension will be considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date.

If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on phone 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Yours sincerely

Associate Professor Melanie Randle
Chair, Social Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT: Missingness - Stories from a Liminal Space

Researcher: Erin Stewart,
Doctoral Candidate, Journalism, Faculty of Law Humanities and the Arts
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 AUSTRALIA
Phone: 07444721504
Email: els243@uowmail.edu.au

Project Description:
The project aims to look at individuals’ stories in regard to missing persons, from the perspectives of friends and family members, investigators, and people who have formally gone missing. The stories will be collected through interviews as well as other sources (such as published texts and archival data) in order to shed light on what the experience is like, particularly in regard to the ambiguity around not knowing where someone is, or if they will ever be found. It is particularly important for academic investigation because many people go missing each year and many more are affected by it.

The project will culminate into an extended work of nonfiction writing by the researcher. Some interviews may also be used for blog posts and podcasts.

Aims of Research:
- To collect experiences, reflections and stories relating to missing persons.
- To use the experiences, reflections and stories to create text and audio materials to allow audiences to gain a better understanding of the realities surrounding missing persons.

Selection of Participants:
Participants may be approached by Erin Stewart in consultation with a charity for the friends and family members of missing persons. Participants may also self-nominate.

Interview Procedure
The interview will be conducted at a time and place amenable to you – usually at your home, for comfort and convenience. Audio recording involves minimal technical disruption, just a quiet location, two comfortable chairs and maybe a table. The first interview will take around one hour, which would involve general questions about the missing persons case or cases, the relationships involved, and notable things that may have happened. You should feel free to bring up anything you would like, regardless of whether it is asked about directly.

There may be follow-up interviews, the likely need for which would be determined within two weeks. Follow-up interviews will have a similar format to the initial interview, but may require greater detail of particular aspects of the story. They may also involve Erin giving some interpretations about your stories, which you should feel free to agree or disagree with, or to further refine.
You may decline to answer any question, and may halt the interview at any time, for any reason.

Interviews can be a positive experience as it allows you to tell your story to an empathetic and interested listener without interruption. They can also provide a way for your story to make a difference to others in a similar situation to you, or may challenge any misconceptions or misunderstandings that exist in relation to missing persons. However, you should be aware that some topics may be emotive and upsetting, as the interview will involve recalling close personal experiences and some events may be painful to describe.

After the interview, you will receive your own copy of the recording to keep. You can check it to see if you wish to make any amendments or corrections before its contents are used. You will be asked if you agree to its use in various contexts. You can also decide whether you wish to be identified or remain anonymous. If you agree to be identified, you will be asked if a photo of you can be taken, to be placed on websites related to the present research. You can say yes or no to having your photo taken.

You will be informed in advance of details of any published text or podcast relating to your interview. At any stage you can withdraw consent to the interview’s use.

**Risks and Benefits Associated with Participation**

The negatives involved in participating in this project are:

- Intrusion on time and space – at least one hour to complete the interview and a strong likelihood of a second interview with the potential for further interviews.
- Potential distress from revisiting painful memories.
- Potential intrusion on privacy through publication of interview excerpts.

The following is intended to mitigate the above potentially adverse effects:

- The interview will be conducted professionally and ethically.
- Sensitivity will be shown towards any emotional distress.
- You may halt the interview at any time.
- The interviewer will listen carefully and attentively and give you her full attention – usually a satisfying experience.
- You get the opportunity to have your story recorded for posterity. You can express your thoughts about missing persons and challenge existing assumptions. These thoughts may become publicly available, and can inform or assist others.
- Your interview will not be used to misrepresent you or take your views out of context. The interviewer will also be upfront with her thoughts about your interviews so that you have an opportunity to make corrections or refinements.
- You may at any time withdraw consent to use your interview. There will be no adverse consequences for you in so doing, in terms of your relationship with the interviewer or the university.
- You may choose to be identified, or to remain anonymous.

**COUNSELLING:** Participants who suffer emotional distress may wish to ring the UK Samaritan’s free 24 Hour telephone counselling service on 08457 90 90 90.

**Freedom to Refuse Participation:** Participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to decline to be involved, or to withdraw your consent at any time.
Complaints
If you have any complaints about how the research is/was conducted, you can contact the University of Wollongong Ethics Officer on rso-ethics@uow.edu.au

Queries
If you wish to discuss any aspect of the project, you can contact Erin Stewart (details above). You can alternatively contact her primary supervisor, Siobhan McHugh on smchugh@uow.edu.au
Appendix C: Consent Form
CONSENT FORM

PROJECT: Missingness - Stories from a Liminal Space

Researcher: Erin Stewart

I have been given the Participant Information Sheet about Missingness – Stories from a Liminal Space and discussed the research project with Erin Stewart, Doctoral Candidate in Journalism at the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, at the University of Wollongong, Australia, who is conducting this research.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include the potential for distress at recalling painful personal memories and intrusion on privacy by the publication of personal experiences. I have had an opportunity to ask Erin Stewart any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect in any way my treatment by the University of Wollongong or by Erin Stewart.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Erin or her supervisor, Siobhan McHugh by emailing her on smchugh@uow.edu.au. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong via email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

CONSENT PART A: USE OF INTERVIEW TAPE AND TRANSCRIPT:

By signing below I am indicating my consent to:

Participate in an interview that will canvass aspects of my experiences related to missing persons that I am willing to discuss.

I understand that the recording made from my participation will
(1) be drawn on for a piece of written nonfiction work.
(2) may be used in a podcast and/or blog post.

I understand that I may nominate below any special conditions regarding access and use and I will be given a copy of the complete interview for reference and personal use.
SPECIAL CONDITIONS

(1) My interview may be drawn on for a written work of nonfiction.

Yes/No  (Circle as appropriate)

(2) My interview may be used in edited form for an audio documentary to be podcast and/or blog post (placed online)

Yes/No  (Circle as appropriate)

Other Conditions, if any ________________________________

Signed             Date
.......................................................................       ....../....../......

Name (please print) ________________________________

CONSENT PART B: USE OF PHOTOGRAPHS (circle yes or no)

I consent to having my photo taken for the project.   Yes / No

If YES, I consent for my photo to be:

published online on a website illustrating the project  Yes/No

Signed             Date
.......................................................................       ....../....../......

Name (please print) ________________________________