

Challenging heterotopic space: A study of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children

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Abstract

Michel Foucault's (1995) work on the distribution of people, discourses and objects within geographical and institutional spaces has provided an important insight into our understanding of the emergence of contemporary society. Foucault's substantive studies of prisons and medical and psychiatric institutions have been acutely attuned to the ways in which spaces are negotiated and lived through. Rather than conceive of relations of power or abstract ideas about social organisations as being imposed from above upon certain institutional and geographical spaces, Foucault was instead interested in "spaces of dispersion" where different bodies, social forces and ways of life come into contact with one another. In particular, Foucault's concept of heterotopia (Faubion, 1998) is geared towards considering the effects of radically different social spaces coming into contact with one another.

This paper applies Foucault's (1995) thinking about space to the experiences of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children. While the movement of the agricultural show circuits throughout metropolitan and regional Australia has historically been significant in fostering relationships between town and country and between residential and mobile communities, the establishment in 2000 of a dedicated school to accompany these circuits has added another dimension to that relationship. Some of the authors' qualitative data gathered in 2003 from semi-structured interviews with teachers, educational officials, parents and students are deployed to delineate the complex ways in which the school challenges received understandings of both geographical and social space.

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Introduction

In their introduction to the edited book *Thinking Space*, Crang and Thrift (2000) noted that “Space is the everywhere of modern thought” (p. 1), that “... in all disciplines, space is a representational strategy” (p. 1) and that “... space ... is not a neutral medium that stands outside the way it is conceived ...” (p. 3). The focus of their book was on the inextricable links between space as theory and as practice – as conceptual frameworks informing and informed by lived experience.

So too with this paper. The authors bring together two separate strands: Foucault’s (1995) thinking about space, identity and power, particularly his notion of heterotopia (Faubion, 1998); and the living and learning experiences of Australian show people, particularly the operation of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children. The concept of heterotopia (which is explained in the first section of the paper) is used to analyse the ways in which the show community and school function to challenge received opinions about where and how mobile learners should receive educational provision (which are elaborated in the second section of the paper, drawing on semi-structured interviews with show people and school personnel in 2003).

This interplay between theory and practice is crucial also in efforts to reconceptualise and reinvigorate regional and rural education (which are taken up in the third section of the paper by means of six “[s]pecies of spaces” identified by Crang and Thrift [2000, p. 3]). Challenging heterotopic space therefore entails bringing together conventionally separated spatial elements that in combination provide conceptual and empirical resources for contesting and transforming taken for granted assumptions, whether they relate to the education of show people or to the residents of regional and rural communities.

Theoretical framework

Among the significant areas of concern explored in the loosely interdisciplinary field known as cultural studies has been the interrelationship among space, identity and power (Philo, 2000, p. 222). Space is explored in various dimensions: physical; social or institutional; and virtual. Identity is explored in relation to subject positions such as male and female, in connection with bodily experience and with regard to desire. Power is explored in terms of ideological and social values, bodily forces and productive relations that shape the work that cultures carry out in order to gain value and meaning within their world. The interconnection among space, identity and power within cultural studies has been interrogated through ideas derived from a range of disciplines, among them history, geography, philosophy, sociology and psychology.

Michel Foucault’s influence on cultural studies’ concern with space, identity and power has been profound. He was centrally concerned with challenging the repressive hypothesis on power – the idea that power is owned and controlled by certain elite groups within society and imposed upon others as a manifestation of their authority. Instead, Foucault contended that power was a productive force. This did not mean that it was necessarily a positive force for good, but that it was productive in the sense that it was actively deployed in shaping the bodily experience and forms, the attitudes and approaches to life of the individual subject.

It is perhaps ironic, in this context, that critics of Foucault tend to suggest that his model of power in the end is actually repressive in that it leaves no scope for the

autonomy and freedom of thought and action of the subject, suggesting rather that from cradle until grave the individual is enmeshed within technologies and discourses of control. Art critic and historian, Robert Hughes (1993), for example, argues that Foucault's ideas suggest that "we are not in control of our history and never can be" (p. 71). One reason for this criticism gaining currency is that in the book that Foucault devoted to his most sustained commentary on practices of power, *Discipline and punish* (1995), he focused on the emergence of the prison between the mid 18th and 19th centuries in France. Foucault connected changes in penal technologies with the emergence of a disciplinary power expressed in exercise routines, surveillance techniques and bodies of knowledge aimed at subduing excessive behavioural tendencies of the prisoner in order to produce a compliant and obedient person. Further, Foucault linked these normalising and regularising forces with the emergence of other social institutions such as the workhouse, military barracks and school, all aimed at moulding acceptable forms of personhood amenable to the interests of the state, colonial practices and the capitalist, industrial economy. Certainly, any history of modern schooling within Western society would find ample evidence of disciplinary practices aimed at taming the bodies of the students and moulding them through regular routines, testing and forms of surveillance into well-tempered subjects.

Foucault's studies of discipline were directed at the level of the microphysics of power: that is, the way the body is atomised and moulded by forces focused very specifically at different bodily characteristics and capacities. In this sense, Foucault conceived of the body as an inscribed surface of events. Eschewing approaches that applied the Cartesian dualism between mind and body, and that were aimed at subject consciousness, Foucault focused on the subject individual as an assemblage of bodily forces that is amenable to being shaped in particular ways. At the same time, Foucault was interested in spaces of dispersal – the way in which bodies and objects are dispersed and located across geographical and institutional spaces. So in other words his concern was with the separating out and dispersal of bodies – first from some collective entity and other bodies, and then at the level of the separating out and distribution of different bodily capacities.

Such dispersal of productively empowered bodies across space points to a crucial part of Foucault's argument: the instability of power relationships and the way in which power attracts resistance and negotiation. Michel de Certeau (1984) enunciated this practice of resistance in seeking to identify ways of operating by means of which users reappropriate the space organised by techniques of social production (p. xiv). In a sense, it can be suggested that armed against the productive power of disciplinary forces are counterproductive powers that subject bodies deploy in order to give themselves space for movement and (re)action in relation to these forces.

Foucault's concept of heterotopia is important in this context. Heterotopia refers to the way in which, within the process of dispersal, different spaces can come into contact with other spaces that seem to have no relation to them. Thus, heterotopias can be apprehended as heterogeneous spaces in a sense removed from the world of which they are geographically part, informed with different, perhaps conflicting, perhaps complementary forces. Foucault engaged with the concept of heterotopia most directly in the article "Different Spaces", first presented as a lecture to the Architectural Studies Centre in 1967, and then published within Volume Two of the *Essential Works* of Foucault (Faubion, 1998).

Here Foucault identified certain principles characteristic of this spatial relation:

1. While every society establishes heterotopias, the forms that they take are very diverse, ranging from the sacred spaces found in so-called primitive societies to institutions like the psychiatric hospital and prison in contemporary society designed to accommodate people who have offended social norms (p. 179).
2. Each heterotopia has a precise and specific operation within the society of which it is part, and the same heterotopia can have one operation or another, depending on the synchrony of the culture in which it is found. So the role of the cemetery changes as conceptions of the meaning of mortality alter (p. 180).
3. The heterotopia has the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves, as evident, for example, in the diverse objects that might make up a theatrical stage (p. 181).
4. More often than not, heterotopias are connected with temporal discontinuities, beginning to function fully when people are in a kind of absolute break with their traditional time, ranging from sites that are linked to the accumulation of time (libraries, museums, archives) to those that are linked to time in its most transitory aspects, such as the shows and fairs that take place in towns once a year (pp. 182–183).
5. Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time, as evident in the ritual bowing to the judge that is evident in entering a court (p. 183).
6. Heterotopias have a function in relation to the remaining space spread between two poles: either they have the role of creating a space of illusion that denounces all real space as being more illusory; or of creating a different real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is disorganised, badly arranged and muddled (p. 184).

It is evident that the travelling show in Australia constitutes a heterotopia, and manifests each of these principles in particular ways:

1. While certainly not a place of confinement for social deviants, yet in keeping with Foucault's identification of "carnival" as one example of a heterotopia as an actual place (Warschauer, 1995, n.p.), the Australian show does function as a site of exotic pleasures and sensational experiences; as such, it offers an alternative to the routines and disciplines of everyday existence.
2. The show has a particular role within the history of Australia as a source of unity between town and country, and as an annual institution that might bring people from far-flung districts together for business and pleasure.
3. As such, the show juxtaposes such diverse and seemingly incompatible features as performers, rides, business transactions and promotions, and agricultural displays.
4. While the show does occupy a transitory temporal domain as a once-a-year event, paradoxically, within the Australian context, it is also linked to the accumulation of time as part of its place within Australian cultural tradition.
5. As a site based on various rituals and performative aspects that distinguish it from the everyday and that operate as sources of appeal to outsiders, the show is constructed around a carefully designed system of opening and closing.

6. The show creates a space of illusion and seems to delight in its chaotic, carnival spirit that distinguishes it from the meticulous, well-arranged space of the civic order.

As a heterotopic space, the show community has been conscious of its isolation from the territory occupied by conventional schooling. Show children in Australia have tended in the past to be confronted with options such as being removed from their community and educated in boarding schools, participating in distance education through correspondence or having the traumatic experience of attending the local school of the town in which the show happened to be at the time (Danaher, 2001, p. 255). Dissatisfaction with the effect of such limiting options on the educational experience of their children has impelled the show community to lobby successfully state and federal governments for the establishment of a travelling school made up of mobile classrooms. Between 1989 and 1999, this provision was made available through a specialised program operated by the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher, 1998). Then the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children was established in 2000 under the auspices of Education Queensland and accompanies the show on its annual pilgrimage through eastern Australia and into the Northern Territory, providing primary school education for eligible members of the show community.

In the next section of this article, the challenges facing the show school in fulfilling its role as a heterotopia are articulated. Firstly, consideration is given to changes to routines and responsibilities that the school has necessitated for the show community. With this background, analysis then turns to several principles introduced earlier and considered central to the concept of heterotopia with respect to the spatial relations constituting the school and the showgrounds. While Foucault's ideas about the heterotopia are amenable to being taken up in numerous ways to illuminate multiple issues and cultural contexts, the emphasis of the discussion in this paper is on the effects on school practice of the juxtaposition of radically different spaces within a single institutional setting.

The Queensland School for Travelling Show Children as a heterotopia

Show communities are well organised institutions, an idea that may not always be consistent with perceptions held by outside observers. For example, Australian show communities travel the same routes from year to year and they know ahead of schedule where they will be at particular times of the year. They may spend longer in some localities than in others but the length of their stay at each location is predictable. Packing and unpacking are completed very efficiently and with military precision, enabling the vans to begin the journey to the next town in minimum time.

The program administered by the Brisbane School of Distance Education, and particularly the establishment of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, necessitated changes in the daily lives and routines of show people in ways that may not necessarily have been anticipated or perhaps fully appreciated until the school was underway. Previously, with children studying by correspondence or attending boarding school, there was some flexibility in family and show life not usually available to families with children attending regular schools. School attendance has necessitated new routines in the mornings, with parents having to prepare their children for the school day and to organise lunches,

uniforms and transport to school. At the other end of the day, homework may need to be completed.

These tasks were not part of the regular routine of educating children before the Brisbane School of Distance Education program and particularly the show school were established. The classroom, which is a van on wheels, is often stationed in a local school and so lessons are not always completed on the showgrounds. This change in location has had profound implications for social relations within show families and on the show circuits more generally.

The routines and responsibilities that made their ways into family life with the establishment of specialised schooling have replaced other responsibilities. Home tutors often helped the children with their correspondence lessons and, in many cases, these tutors were also the children's mothers, who had several roles to play in the show community, such as working on stalls or in the canteen. Now these mothers have the responsibility of getting the children to and from school and supervising homework.

With the change in part of the rhythm of show life that this specialised schooling has brought, it is important to look more carefully at how life has changed for the children and their families and what aspects of life school has replaced. Prior to 2000, even when children were engaged in distance studies during the school day, they were around their parents and other show people for most of the time. Children were immersed in the show and took on particular tasks that made a contribution to the running of the show. Now the school-age children do not see as much of what their parents and other show people do because they are usually away from the showgrounds during the school day. The effect that this may have in the longer term can only be anticipated and may not be fully appreciated until children who have attended the show school from year one complete their primary education.

The show school is able to provide a consistency and regularity in the children's education that was more difficult to achieve through distance education studies. With the improved educational provision will undoubtedly come higher levels of formal literacy and education generally than what could often be achieved by previous generations of show children. The extent to which many of the traditions associated with show culture can be continued and passed on from one generation to the next remains to be seen. Children who gain a more highly developed formal education will additionally have more choices in life beyond school. Whether children return to the show circuits in the same numbers as they did previously also remains to be seen as they consider options for further education and training as well as a greater range of employment or career prospects.

The authors of this article have argued for quite a long time now that Australian show people do not fit into the popular mould that places itinerant people into a category that stereotypes them as marginalised from society (Moriarty & Danaher, 1998). Instead, our research has found this group to be highly organised and cohesive and to have a vibrant lifestyle. The changes to their lives and the introduction of more routines that the establishment of the show school has brought, it could be argued using Foucault's (1995) thinking, are further evidence that these people are neither marginalised nor without power. Not only did the show people successfully lobby government to gain their school but also the routines that their children adopted as a result place them in an even better position than they occupied previously to take on further education, training or employment outside the show, an idea consistent with Foucault's concept of spaces of dispersal.

This is because opportunities such as further education or employment outside the show depend at least in part on being able to follow routines that society takes for granted and that it instils in children attending school.

The show school could be seen as the conduit between show life and life outside the show. In Foucault's conception of heterotopia (Faubion, 1998), the show school comes into contact with the regular school when its van is placed in the grounds of a school close to the showgrounds. In one sense, the show school is not connected with the host school, apart from the fact that they both come under the auspices of the state education authority. Similarly, the show school, while consisting of children who are offspring of sideshow alley and agricultural show personnel, is also to some extent an entity of its own, away from the hustle and bustle of the show and under the jurisdiction of the education authority. While it could not be argued that there exists a complete absence of relationship between the show school and the host school on the one hand, and the show school and the showground space on the other, as might be expected in a full appreciation of Foucault's heterotopia, there are other features of space that are consistent with this conception.

For example, when the show children complete their homework after returning from school to the showgrounds, the materials used to complete the assignments are juxtaposed against a palette of artefacts that belong to the show and that characterise its space. Conversely, when the show children break completely with the show space and traditional show routines and are at school, they are just like people who leave their own more familiar surroundings and spend time in libraries or museums. Another principle of spatial relations and heterotopias occurs when shows unpack on arriving in a town and pack up before leaving. The same routines are evident with the show school, when the classroom van is assembled and disassembled.

Three sets of quotations from the interviews conducted with the members of the show community and the officials of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children in August 2003 (Moriarty, Danaher, Kenny, & Danaher, 2004) illustrate some of the ways in which the show people and the school officials engage with the challenges to received understandings of geographical and physical space that heterotopias represent. The first set is taken from an interview with two parents who had been prime movers in lobbying for specialised schooling for show children:

- Parent 1: If we could get in to see a minister, we just got the money out of our own pocket to fly. We all paid for our own, so that way we could do it.
- Interviewer: How many people get to see the Federal Minister for Education and the State Minister?
- Parent 2: Not many.
- Interviewer: That shows real commitment, doesn't it, to keep the fight going, to knock on all the doors?
- Parent 2: There were a couple of people, . . . [a former Queensland state parliamentarian], a couple of people like that who really could see that we needed a van, and he was fantastic.
- Parent 1: . . . [another political figure], because he knew something about it, and he just kept thumping and thumping until we'd get in there to see them. We even got people in there that know these people.

In this exchange, the parents and the interviewer reflect on a situation that demonstrated the political dimension of heterotopias. Here the acknowledgment of the rarity of parents being given access to federal and state ministers of education, juxtaposed with references to material realities such as needing “a van”, highlighted the direct link between this bringing together of usually separate fields (high level political figures and parents) and the consequent change to those realities. In other words, powerful heterotopias can bring about substantial effects on the members of those disparate spaces, a point that the show people have recognised and built on in several fields of activity.

The second quotation comes from an interview with a staff member of the school:

Staff member: . . . friends of mine are teachers, and they’ll say,
“That’s not in the teacher’s job description”. I say,
“Yes I know, but if we want our school to work – ”.
I’m not a librarian, that’s not in my job description
. . . , but I do it because we want our school to work
and to succeed, and to show people this is how it’s
done.

This statement portrays a heterotopia relating to the work of school staff members, whereby roles and responsibilities that might be kept separate in some schools are brought into alignment in the show school. As a small school (and like many rural schools of similar size), the show school depends for its effective functioning on individuals discharging a variety of heterogeneous tasks requiring different levels of application of skill – very much like the show people themselves in ensuring the efficient operation of sideshow alley.

The third set of quotations relates to an interview with a group of older children at the show school reflecting on their relations with the students attending the local schools with whom they have had contact:

Child 1: People used say we were circus people . . .
Interviewer: Did they? Did they like that idea or – ?
Child 2: No, they just say that.
Child 1: And sometimes they ask us to do tricks.
Child 2: They think we’re circus people and they ask us to
juggle or something,
Interviewer: And what do you say?
Child 3: We say we aren’t circus people; we’re show people
from the show who travel around Australia . . .
Child 1: We don’t know how they live and they don’t know
how we live. But still we get to see like a new thing
every week and they have to just sit there and do the
same boring old stuff. They get to see like one
exciting thing a year.

Here the heterotopia of the show school being located in the grounds of a local school, generally for a period of a week, articulates with the heterotopia of show children and local children mixing in a shared physical and social space. The statement that “We don’t know how they live and they don’t know how we live” encapsulates generations of mutual ambivalence and suspicion, ameliorated to some extent by the interdependence entailed in the two groups’ significant contribution to the other’s livelihood and community sustainability (given that sideshow alley is an indispensable component of the agricultural show in regional and rural localities).

These are just some of the ways in which Foucault's concept of heterotopic space (Faubion, 1998) is enacted in the show community and the show school, by bringing together in a single site elements of different spaces that would ordinarily remain separate. While the show community continues to be a mystery to many casual observers, the show school is a significant space that has impacted on all the show people whose children are its students. It is important that this school and its impact on the show community and particularly on the children and their life chances are not a mystery and are well understood. The school resonates with, yet in many ways is a distinctive variation on, attempts overseas to provide a more highly developed formal education for show children and the children of other itinerant workers. The school, its impact and progress are being examined to determine the extent to which it might lead the way internationally or, alternatively, become and remain an Australian artefact, just like the School of the Air or the Royal Flying Doctor Service, providing solutions to uniquely Australian challenges.

Implications for conceptualising space and renewing regional and rural education

The significance of heterotopias is that they challenge, contest, invert and reverse conventional and received understandings of geographical and social spaces and the associated social relations that constitute and derive from those spaces. These processes are crucial also for the ongoing reinvigoration of educational provision in contemporary regional and rural communities.

This significance is demonstrated in the links between the preceding discussion of heterotopias and the Australian show people and the six “[s]pecies of spaces” that Crang and Thrift (2000, p. 3) articulated as encapsulating much of the contemporary theorising of space. While they acknowledged that they could have selected several other such “[s]pecies”, these six provide a useful basis for synthesising this paper's intended contributions to the conceptualisation of space and to discussions of regional and rural education. Three “[s]pecies” have been deployed to frame each of these two contributions, augmented by heterotopias in conceptualising space and by the show people's education in informing regional and rural education.

In relation to the conceptualisation of space, the first “species” identified by Crang and Thrift (2000) was the “[s]paces of language” (p. 4). They emphasised in particular the impact of specific spaces on language, as seen in the spatial dimension of language use. By inverting conventional understandings of space, heterotopias can challenge the ways in which language is used to structure and reinforce social relations – including ways that are exclusionary and marginalising. Seeking more equitable and socially just social and spatial relations requires attentiveness to the role of language in facilitating and/or resisting such efforts.

Crang and Thrift (2000) identified “[a]gitated spaces” (p. 16) as the fourth “species”. By this they meant references (which they did not necessarily endorse) to the speeding up of time-space compression associated with cyberspace and globalisation. From a different perspective, “[a]gitated spaces” can refer to the unsettling of current social and spatial relations, which can be productive and/or destructive and which can challenge taken for granted assumptions about how one views oneself and the world. Heterotopias might be seen as a particular form of “[a]gitated spaces” that contributes to that unsettling.

For Crang and Thrift (2000), the “[s]paces of writing” (p. 22) were the sixth “species” that they identified. Clustered around performativity, these spaces draw attention simultaneously to the multiple ways in which writing is imbricated in perpetuating the current social and spatial relations referred to in the previous paragraph and the many potential opportunities that writing presents for creating different ways of relating with one another. These two key features of writing are reinforced by the textual layering of heterotopias, which can sometimes enable new and previously unrecognised scriptural connections to be made explicit.

With regard to regional and rural education, the second “species” identified by Crang and Thrift (2000) was “[s]paces of self and other, interiority and exteriority” (p. 7). They argued that “[t]hese entanglements of different orders get worked out in concrete spaces” (p. 13). This reinforces the crucial point that, in Australia as in most contemporary societies, “urban” is constituted in significant part by not being its other, “rural”. From this perspective, the “[s]paces of self and other” help to explain the continuing construction of regional and rural education as a “special case”, different from “the mainstream”. While this difference is sometimes deployed to underpin a romantic imaginary, it should not disguise the empirical reality that generally rural schools have fewer human and physical resources than their metropolitan counterparts. The show people have demonstrated one possible solution to these “[s]paces of self and other”, by lobbying successfully for specialised provision under the auspices of a centralised bureaucracy. This suggests the importance for rural educators of taking an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to the strategic use of resources and to creating their own spaces for the enactment of educational provision that is not predicated on being “other” in relation to “urban”.

Crang and Thrift (2000) identified “[m]etronymic spaces” (p. 11) as their third “species”. They defined metonymy as “a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering” (p. 24), and they cited Paris as being generally considered “a metronym for modernity and Los Angeles as a metronym for post-modernity” (p. 11). Regardless of the reasons for these depictions, these two sites are metropolises. From the perspective of regional and rural education, this point reinforces the othering of rural spaces noted in the previous paragraph, by implying that powerful and productive spaces are inevitably associated with urban life and that rural spaces are likely to denote a form of pre-modernity. At the same time, the depiction of these constructions as metonyms, or “partial or incomplete rendering[s]”, provides some grounds for optimism that alternative constructions of rural spaces as interdependent communities developing social capital are feasible. This has certainly been the case with the show people, who have resisted the metronym of themselves as feckless and untrustworthy wanderers in favour of a counternarrative that highlights their distinctive and valued lifestyles.

The fifth “species” identified by Cring and Thrift (2000) was the “[s]paces of experience” (p. 19), which they argued has been challenged by several streams of contemporary thought, “all of which . . . relate in some way or another to issues of *mobility*” (p. 19; emphasis in original). This point resonates with Foucault’s (1995) work on decentred subject positions noted at the beginning of this paper. While the show people are literally mobile, they are also mobile in deploying shifting subject positions in their numerous interactions across multiple spaces with local people, senior politicians and bureaucrats, staff members of the show school, colleagues on the show circuits and so on. So too with residents of regional and rural communities: their prospects for maximising the effectiveness and utility of educational provision rest with their capacity for engaging their mobile and multiple subject positions – understood as the “[s]paces of experience” in strategic

alliances with other stakeholders and likeminded individuals to fashion that provision in ways most appropriate to the needs and aspirations of their respective communities.

This discussion suggests that concepts are as subject to spaces of dispersal and heterotopic juxtapositions as the topics/objects of which they seek to make sense. Consequently, in applying the concept of heterotopia to a school, the authors have been able simultaneously to unsettle and disperse the category of concept using the six “[s]pecies of spaces” (p. 3) identified by Crang and Thrift (2000).

Conclusion

According to Philo (2000), Foucault’s focus on “a space of dispersion” (p. 219) reflects his signposting of:

... an avenue for inquiries which does not so much revel in dispersion as subject this dispersion to careful analysis free from any totalising retreat towards a priori constructs not rooted in the empirical materials at hand. Crucial to Foucault’s general history is hence the recovery of the ‘local, changing rules’ that in particular times and places govern, and in a sense simply *are*, the observable relationships between the many things under study. (p. 220; emphasis in original)

This paper has remained faithful to Philo’s (2000) rendition of Foucault’s approach, by linking the qualitative data collected with the show people and the personnel of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children with Foucault’s concept of heterotopia (Faubion, 1998), rather than applying that concept a priori. It has also remained faithful to that rendition by using the concept to delineate some of the “local, changing rules” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 55; cited in Philo, 2000, pp. 219–220) that operate on the show circuits and at the show school. Understood as framing and organising devices, these “rules” include the importance of continual lobbying on behalf of the interests of mobile learners and the need to enact centrally designated policies in ways that exhibit the greatest sense, sensibility and sensitivity in local – and mobile – contexts.

This discussion has highlighted the commonality to heterotopia, the show people’s educational and social experiences and implications for regional and rural education of space as a contested and politicised terrain, rather than a natural and neutral location. Challenging heterotopic space involves deploying conceptual and empirical resources to render that contestation and politicisation explicit – for example, by drawing attention to generations of inequitable educational access by show people and some rural residents. This bringing together of radically different spaces (such as mobile and settled communities and parents and politicians) highlights the geographical and social dimensions of those spaces at the same time that it points to new possibilities for educational provision and community sustainability.

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