

## Engaging with challenging spaces

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The subtitle of this issue of *Studies in LEID* arrested me before I had even begun to read the articles “Challenging Spaces.” What space, what challenge? What speech part is represented by that present participle? Is it an adjective (“*challenging*” (*adj*); *calling for full use of one’s abilities or resources*) or a variant of an elided verb (“*challenging*” (*v*); *call to engage; invite with defiance*)? Who is doing what, and to whom?

The journal contents go some way to providing answers; and the editors note in their introduction that both meanings have valence in the context of this extremely topical issue. In each of the articles the writers describe and analyse spaces that would challenge most of us to function with any degree of efficiency. Together they make up an issue that is absorbing and often intriguing, and deal with a concept that is currently very hot in intellectual circles: space, as actuality and as idea.

This is not to suggest that space is a new concept on the academic circuit. It has been widely considered across the scholarly domain for as long, I guess, as people have been looking at where they live and wondering how it all works, and, given that (Euclidean) space comprises three of the four dimensions that make up the universe, it is safe to say that it will always attract research attention. In this issue of *SLEID*, space is invested principally as the page on which stories of communities are narrated. That is fair enough. Leave it to the physicists and the geologists to consider its phenomenological aspects, or to the philosophers to conceptualise its representational properties. These writers necessarily focus on educational space: how people occupy schools and educational communities, and how they negotiate or otherwise make claims on shared space. All space, of course, is shared and hence must be not only navigated but also negotiated. This issue goes some way to demonstrate the capacity of individuals and groups to navigate the spaces in which they find themselves, and also to negotiate for a slice of that space. But they do more. Each paper explicitly or implicitly points out that space functions not only as actuality and inhabited domain, but also as a communicative domain. It is within spaces that people negotiate their being-in-the-world; that they navigate, and seek to suture, the gaps between themselves and others.

To this extent, the idea of space in this issue works metaphorically as much as it does materially. This would please writers such as Lakoff and Johnson for whom space is a central cognitive metaphor. They consider space a root analogy, one of those interlocking patterns of meaning making that makes the world for us, and our place in it. We “put down roots”, we “move forward”, we are “looking up”, or “feeling down”, and so on. All these analogies concretise our experience of the world in general and of particular spaces. I stress this here because space is experienced not just as itself in its materiality, but dialogically, in how we bump up against others. Communication, interaction – language, at base – is not experienced

in abstraction, but in space and place, by embodied and located people. We use it and make sense of it according to the local norms, and to intertextual knowledges we each possess; a view that is, in Andrew Goatly's terms, "the Bakhtinian view of language" (1997, p. 71). While the articles in this issue do not, for the most part, develop theories of space and habitation, they do elaborate the Bakhtinian view of language and of space, seeing space always as a human artefact, reworked and relived by individuals and groups who are confident that the space could be organised differently.

What is communicated in the spaces that fill the space of this issue? One very important issue is that regional and rural areas are occupied by highly contemporary communities. This goes some way to interrupt the "truth" that the space between country and city is a space of centuries as well as of kilometres. Whether housed in a remote town or in the heart of Sydney, people must address the necessities of being with and for others, and deal with the simultaneous and often contradictory requirements to get on with everyone else, and at the same time look after ourselves. While many commentators still identify cities as the prime site for engaging with the complexities of cohabitation, anyone looking carefully at small communities could identify many advantages in doing so. Social, political and cultural structures and relations can be viewed in high relief in smaller communities; and besides, the rural dweller is every bit as much a citizen as is the city-zen. The focus in this issue on rural and regional spaces interrupts the binary logic of city/country. (Appropriately; as Ellis and Penman's reference to ternary relations reminds us, binaries can not be sustained; it is never just *this* option or *that* one, but always a range of possibilities.) The rural/regional focus also interrogates the "truth" that country people "belong", and inhabit the space, on the basis of birthrights (the rights accorded by virtue of connection and descent), while city people are lost in anomie and alienation, their belonging precariously predicated on natural rights (the rights accorded to all by virtue of their being alive). Clarke and Stevens' article disabuses the facile view of birthright-belonging (the young woman principal has quite a struggle to establish herself, despite being "one of us" to the local community).

As a collection, these articles are a reminder of the richness and contemporaneity of the country. Just like the city, it offers many opportunities and many potholes for the unwary. Marx and Engels would have agreed, I think: in their *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere they point out the ways in which lived space, urban *and* rural, works in similar ways to open and close possibilities. The identification of rural people being marked by *idiocy* – Marx's term – meant only people governed by narrow and private concerns: alienated people, whether rural or urban (Marx, 1852/1963, pp. 123–24). Engels extends this, seeing idiocy, or alienation, as the "fundamental principle of modern society" (Engels, 1845/1968, pp. 30–31).

This issue of *SLEID* provides stories of how people attempt to undo this idiocy, this process of alienation, by engaging with the spaces where they find themselves. The young woman working as a principal in a rural school is described, in Clarke and Stevens' article, as reshaping that space and the space she herself occupied within it. The Show families described in the contributing editors' article live across spaces – almost outside of space, by institutional standards – but have redefined their location as valid and legitimate. Jen Elsdon's art students brought an "outside" space into their visual diaries, and in the process perhaps transformed their sense of self in both "here" and "there." Ellis and Penman show that even an institution, the University of South Australia, can refused to comply with the dominant view of the regional space as lack, and instead reformulate both the space, and its capacity to provide educational opportunities. Not that it's all "wine

and roses”, of course. I would be hard pressed to say that using iconography of one’s cultural origins makes the settling in process any easier for migrant youth; I doubt that one success story will make the rural space much more accommodating for young professional women. I wonder about the futures of the Show Children and how readily they will in fact be able to translate their mobile education into careers. Nonetheless, the stories of spatial practice and spatial identity in this issue, set as they are in the light of the theorising of space afforded by the editors’ article, remind us that regional space is not necessarily tyrannised by difference: it can be reformulated, and can speak back its knowledge to other spaces of habitation.

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