

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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