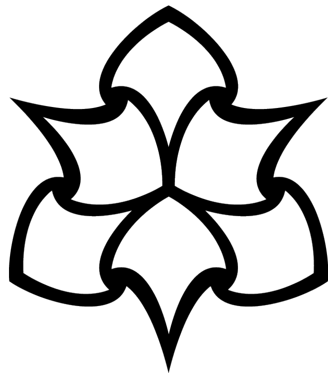

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Non-metropolitan productions of multiculturalism: Refugee settlement in rural Australia

Raelene Wilding and Caitlin Nunn

Department of Social Inquiry, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, Durham, UK

Abstract

In spite of the widespread backlash against multicultural policies, diversity remains a feature of globalized societies, requiring better understandings of how cultural difference is negotiated in rapidly transforming communities. Building on existing studies of multiculturalism in metropolitan contexts, we use interviews and ethnographic research to consider the transformation of a non-metropolitan community from a relatively homogeneous to an increasingly diverse place resulting from recent humanitarian resettlement flows. We argue that the new arrivals and established settlers in this regional city collaborate in the discursive and practical production of a form of multiculturalism that is shaped by the particularities of a rural imaginary, which they assert as distinct from urban experiences of super-diversity. At the same time, the local emphasis on rurality contributes to the reproduction of power inequalities that limit opportunities for eliminating discrimination and social exclusion in spite of evidence of conviviality in formal and informal encounters.

Keywords

Refugee resettlement; multiculturalism; rural imaginary; non-metropolitan; diversity; Australia

Contact details Raelene Wilding r.wilding@latrobe.edu.au

Introduction

The recent backlash against multiculturalism has seen governments around the world retreating from the term when developing or describing their policies (Joppke 2004; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Yet, the global 'age of migration' (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014) is contributing to a demographic reality in which cultural diversity is an increasingly common experience for growing numbers of both nations and neighbourhoods. People around the world are being called upon to develop ways to manage diversity and live alongside difference in a constantly shifting local and global environment. In this paper, we explore the negotiation of difference at the local level by considering how a small city in rural Australia has transformed in response to the arrival of a substantial community of humanitarian migrants. While the culturally and visibly different newcomers are one part of this transformation, we treat this demographic shift as the context rather than the primary driver of transformation. Rather, what our analysis points to is the ways in which leaders of both the newly arrived migrant group and the existing community are active collaborators in the production of a community that navigates difference by perceiving itself as, and aspiring to be perceived as, both multicultural and rural.

An assertion of multiculturalism by a community is perhaps not surprising in Australia, an immigrant nation with a history of identifying itself as "the most multicultural society in the world" (Jupp 2007, 6). Yet, it is important to tease out just what such an assertion might mean, given multiculturalism's varying invocations as a descriptor of demographic diversity, a policy program aimed at supporting and promoting cultural diversity, and a normative cultural ethos that is approving of heterogeneity and diversity (Pakulski 2014). In demographic terms, Australian multiculturalism is robust, with a population originating from nearly 200 different countries and 300 ancestries, with nearly half of the population either born overseas or having a parent born overseas (ABS 2016). Furthermore, in spite of ongoing contestation over multiculturalism's role in Australia's national identity (e.g. Hage 1998; Moran 2011), and continued evolution of policies and practices, multicultural policy has had bipartisan support since the 1970s (Pakulski 2014; Moran 2017). This underpins the distinctiveness of Australia's 'culture' of multiculturalism, in which respect for diversity is often claimed to be the unifying cultural trait that supports social cohesion and binds the nation together, in contrast with the damaging effects of prior assimilationist approaches to managing mass immigration (e.g. Brett and Moran 2006).

Australian multiculturalism, nevertheless, is unevenly distributed. Most accounts either implicitly or explicitly locate it within large metropolitan centres such as Sydney and Melbourne (e.g. Ho, Vincent and Butler 2015; Lobo 2010; Wise 2010), reflecting the broader global tendency to identify multiculturalism in large world cities (e.g. Wessendorf 2013; Wise 2016). In contrast, rural and regional places in Australia have been more commonly understood as predominantly English-speaking, Anglo-background, Christian and white (Dunn and Nelson 2011; Forrest and Dunn 2013; Jordan, Krivokapic-Skoko and Collins 2009).

The association of multiculturalism with urban centres has a long history, not least because encounters with strangers are an inevitable part of high density living in places where mobility and social heterogeneity are commonplace (Wirth 1938). However, there is a growing need to better understand the negotiation of difference within non-metropolitan settings. Of course, the rural has always been multicultural to some extent (e.g. Panelli et al 2009). However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to overlook the extent and context of rural multiculturalism, particularly in light of at least two key transformations. First, even those who continue to live in relatively homogenous villages, towns and regional cities are participants in global flows of media, imagery and knowledge, including debates regarding migration, refugees and diversity (Appadurai 1996; Amin 2012). Second, the relative homogeneity of non-metropolitan places is being challenged by a growing trend for international migrants to settle outside of major urban centres (e.g. Bahn, Barratt-Pugh and Yap 2012; Green, De Hoyos, Jones and Owen 2009; Hirschman and Massey 2008; Hugo 2014). This is the result of a variety of factors and processes. In Australia, it has emerged as part of a broader regional development strategy that encourages new arrivals to settle in regional and rural locations (e.g. DIBPR 2014; Jordan, Krivokapic-Skoko and Collins 2009).

In spite of the increased incidence of non-metropolitan migration, there is to date little discussion of how these practices and the mobilities they provoke are transforming the non-metropolitan communities to which people are migrating (but see Gidarakou, Kazakopoulos and Koutsouris 2011; Radford 2016; Ray and Preston 2013; Schech 2014). It is important to recognize that any attempt to produce a firm distinction between the urban and the rural, the metropolitan and the non-metropolitan, is doomed to fail – both contexts have their sites and processes of exclusion, inclusion, conviviality and incivility, and the boundaries between one and the other are difficult to quantify (Neal and Walters 2008). Nonetheless, residents of towns and cities that identify as rural, regional or non-metropolitan often perceive themselves

and their communities as different, emphasising characteristics that they see as distinguishing them from dense urban spaces of diverse strangers. As Yarwood (2005) argues, images of the rural have important implications for how people live within and engage with non-metropolitan places and people.

Many people are drawn to live outside of large cities because of social constructions of the non-metropolitan as sites of community and close social ties, as places in which everyone knows everyone else (Gray and Phillips 2001; Winterton and Warburton 2012). Residents value what has been termed "countrymindedness" (Aitkin 1985), emphasising continuity, interdependence, and a strong interest in the local community. This also contributes to their reputation for being exclusionary of outsiders: both new arrivals who are ethnically similar and those who are visibly different (Dempsey 1990; Frankenberg 1957). The result is an image of rural settings in nations such as Australia, the UK and Canada as relatively homogenous, largely white populations who are bound tightly together through common histories and interests, but who tend to be intolerant of cultural, religious or visible difference (e.g. Bugg 2013; Forrest and Dunn 2006, 2013). Importantly, these are *ideas* of "rural community". They persist and are produced through discourses and practices in and about places and within and about groups that identify themselves as located outside of metropolitan centres (Neal and Walters, 2008; Yarwood 2005), rather than necessarily providing some objective descriptive truth of a particular place and its people. Invariably, the countrymindedness, homogeneity and even the social exclusion are perceptions that are readily challenged by close attention to the details of social divisions in everyday life in a rural community (Dempsey 1990; Frankenberg 1957). Yet, they are maintained as symbolic boundaries that bind the community, distinguishing locals from those who are perceived as outsiders (Cohen 1985).

In this paper, we present findings from a project exploring the settlement of a large and growing community of humanitarian migrants from South-East Asia in a previously relatively ethnoculturally homogenous regional Australian city. The experience of this small rural city is increasingly common in many places around the world. As a result of international migration flows in combination with national settlement and development policies and local leadership, the population profile has visibly and rapidly transformed. One of the features that makes this place distinctive is that the local settlement experience was proclaimed by both long-term residents and new arrivals we interviewed as largely positive, with minimal evidence of conflict or discrimination. Through our analysis of these claims, we

explore the ways in which encounters across difference both provide opportunities for an "emergent positive, shared intersubjectivity" (Werbner 2013, 402) that lays the grounds for a successful multicultural future in rural contexts, but also for the simultaneous reproduction of structures of inequality and social exclusion.

The study

Our discussion is based on research conducted in a small regional city in Australia, which we call "Hometown".[1] The population of some 90,000 people notwithstanding, Hometown identifies as rural, defining itself against the larger metropolitan centres of Australia of several million people. It is a beneficiary of the broader trend of rural population decline and concentration (Regional Australia Institute 2015), with a modest annual population growth. Prior to the arrival of humanitarian settlers from Southeast Asia, the Local Government Area was comprised primarily of Anglo-background, English-speaking Australians with a small number of individuals from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. At the 2006 Census, 90 per cent of the population was born in Australia, the next largest group being 1.9 per cent who were born in England. Over 94 per cent spoke only English at home; the next largest linguistic group was 0.2 per cent of the population, who spoke Italian. The local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was half of the national average, at 1.1 per cent. This small regional city presents a clear contrast to the complex diversity of migrants in major urban centres in Australia, with no substantial communities of visible ethnic groups to challenge Anglo-Australian social and cultural dominance.

Soon after 2006, humanitarian migrants from refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border began to arrive in Hometown. The Karen are a religiously and linguistically diverse group who have been fleeing persecution in the nation they term Burma (formally, Myanmar) since the early 1980s. Over 70,000 have been permanently resettled in the USA since 2005, with smaller numbers resettled in nations as diverse as Canada, Finland and Japan (Tan and McClellan 2014; Kaspar and Naing 2014). Over 10,000 are estimated to have been resettled in Australia, mostly in the suburbs of major cities (DIAC 2012; DIBP 2013). A small group of residents in Hometown actively sponsored the first Karen settlers, providing accommodation and social support and linking them with education and employment opportunities. It is now estimated that some 1500 Karen live in the city, with more arriving

each year, drawn by its reputation as a welcoming place, pursuit of family reunion, as well as employment and educational opportunities. The Karen are the only non-Anglo migrant group of any significant size to be settled here and the first refugee group to arrive in the city in significant numbers, creating a settlement dynamic that is distinctive from the nearest metropolitan centres, where cultural diversity and humanitarian settlement programs are common and longstanding.

Our exploration is based on two modes of data collection. First, we conducted interviews with 35 local leaders from across local government, business, education, healthcare, community associations and settlement service providers and Karen community organisations. They are what Wise (2009, 24) calls "transversal enablers", people "who typically go out of their way to create connections between culturally different residents in their local area". As such, their stories are likely to be different to those of people who are not active leaders in the community (Townsend, Pascal and Delves 2014; Boese 2015). They create opportunities for connection across cultural difference through participating in a range of activities, including gift and knowledge exchange and 'the production of spaces of intercultural care and trust' (Wise 2009, 24) across both formal and informal sites of encounter (Kilpatrick et al. 2015). They are also active contributors to the practices and discourses that produce a sense of rural community, including contributing to a range of local boards and organisations, organising local events and publishing and distributing online and print materials. Our analysis of the interviews is also informed by participant observation at a series of community events and festivals, which provide insights into how claims about interactions and encounters across difference are enacted in practice.

All interviews were transcribed and transcripts and fieldnotes imported into QSR NVivo for analysis. For the purposes of this argument, it is our analysis of intercommunity engagement between the existing Hometown residents and the new Karen arrivals that is most relevant. Our analysis explores Karen and non-Karen perspectives on varying forms of formal and informal interaction in order to better understand how leaders from both parts of the community collaborate in the production of a multicultural rural identity for Hometown.

The discussion is divided into two parts. First, we consider how multiculturalism is discursively produced as part of a rural identity, reflecting what we call 'multicultural aspirations'. Second, we consider multicultural practices, including evidence of the forms of quotidian everyday encounter that have come to be termed 'everyday multiculturalism' (e.g. Wise and Noble 2009) as well as the more formal interactions that emerged as the dominant

mode of producing local multiculturalism. We argue that it is in both their aspirations and their practices that longstanding residents and new arrivals engage in the co-production of a rural multicultural imaginary that supports their respective and collective values and priorities and their negotiation of difference. At the same time, we point to the ways in which these discourses and practices serve to reproduce inequalities that reinscribe dominant rural identities.

Multicultural aspirations

Across Australia on March 21st every year, local councils, schools and community organisations celebrate Harmony Day. They do so by organising events that celebrate cultural diversity and reinforce a positive message "about inclusiveness, respect and a sense of belonging for everyone" (http://www.harmony.gov.au/). In spite of its relative cultural homogeneity, Hometown has been an active host of Harmony Day events for many years, including prior to the arrival of the Karen. These events are sponsored by the local council as well as local businesses and organisations, and draw on the small smattering of local culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and families but also diversity imported from the nearby capital city in order to showcase culturally distinctive foods and artforms through performances, lectures, lunches, dinners and children's activities.

Hometown's participation in national Harmony Day celebrations reinforces a key message we received from the leaders we interviewed, who uniformly emphasized the positive benefits to be gained from a diverse population. When the Karen began to arrive in Hometown, they were entering a local community that already had advocates primed in the national narrative of multiculturalism as an inherently positive characteristic of Australian society. As one local leader explained, "Hometown was quite Anglo, we were ready for more multicultural experiences in Hometown". This helps to explain the rapid mobilisation of support for the new arrivals, including in schools, health services and police services. As another leader explained, the arrival of the Karen meant that Hometown was now "a multicultural rural city that's changing". However, leaders were also clear about the type of multiculturalism they were advocating, highly aware that there were "making a case for the people that don't like multiculturalism". As one woman explained, it was important "to socialise with each other, we cannot have a ghetto".

Karen leaders articulated a similar vision for their settlement in Hometown. Settling in Hometown was framed as an opportunity to 'share with one another, to exchange our ideas and our practices'. At the same time, echoing the concern with avoiding ghettoization, one community leader explained that it was important to both maintain a distinctive Karen identity and culture, but to also 'be recognised as part of the Hometown community, instead of just the Karen community'. This aim was reflected in Karen volunteers making contributions to local organisations as well as receiving support from them. However, it was also contested. At least one leader raised a concern that engagement with Hometown organisations was undermining the Karen community, suggesting that the Karen should 'not forget about our community, but come to the Karen community first', with traditional gender and intergenerational relations identified as particularly difficult to maintain alongside multicultural engagement.

This concern with maintaining Karen distinctiveness was also expressed by non-Karen leaders. As one leader explained, "I believe, you know, it is necessary to help people celebrate their culture and maintain their cultural identity; what we're trying to do is to integrate them, not assimilate, but integrate and provide access to all the services and programs that we have". This was not generally seen as requiring the Karen to change, but rather incorporating them into existing social structures and activities, including Harmony Day. Reflecting the challenges of intercultural engagement without assimilation, a woman leading a community organisation added, "we're creating an environment that's for everybody, not for Karen exclusive of the rest of the community or for the rest of the community exclusive of the Karen".

Local leaders agreed that Karen contributions to Hometown "enhance and invigorate the community", but Karen settlement also provides an opportunity to demonstrate the community's tolerance and acceptance of difference, particularly in contrast with metropolitan contexts. As one community leader explained,

> "Hometown is, as a wider community, we're just very accepting of other cultures that come in … from my understanding they [the Karen] don't experience a lot of racism or they're not getting, I don't know, abuse, like you see on the trains [in the major metropolitan centres]… I think we're just a very accepting community as a wider community".

Even those Karen leaders who acknowledge some racial discrimination in Hometown frame these experiences as an exception, contributing to the image of Hometown as an

accepting community. As one Karen leader explained, hostility is best understood as coming from “some people who don’t know about multicultural diversity and stuff like that, maybe they just need some basic education about that, just a bit of knowledge”. In this way, multiculturalism in Hometown is identified as an incomplete project, requiring further effort. In addition to education, awareness was raised as a key issue. One of the local business leaders, for example, explained that he considered it his responsibility to encourage employers to consider introducing new arrivals into their workforce, saying “we need to get our heads in that mindset [of being open to diversity] because I think as a community we want to be seen as being an accepting community”.

This desire to be seen as an accepting and welcoming community can be interpreted in at least two ways. Multiculturalism is presented as a normative moral good (Pakulski 2014), and so as intrinsically desirable. However, the embrace of the new arrivals can also be seen as an example of strategic cosmopolitanism (Noble 2009, 2013). In the context of broader regional decline, the arrival of the Karen has brought a number of additional benefits. Manufacturing and agricultural businesses have benefited from the new source of unskilled, low-paid labour and the housing market has benefitted from new rental tenants and home purchasers. The Karen have also opened new flows of funding into Hometown. All humanitarian settlers are supported by Federal government funding guaranteeing English language classes, income support and settlement services support, leading to the rapid expansion of the service provision sector in Hometown. Numerous grant opportunities have also become available to organisations providing support and services to the new arrivals. For example, local primary and secondary schools are able to apply for grants for support workers to assist their new culturally and linguistically diverse students, and non-government organisations have expanded their service base. This has become an important source of employment for the local educated middle class as well as for members of the Karen community. In addition to increasing student numbers in schools, the Karen have also reinvigorated local churches, whose diminishing and ageing congregations have been significantly inflated and energized by an influx of young Karen families.

A further benefit of Karen settlement is a reinforcement of the value of the rural, alongside the desirability of the multicultural. This is supported by two key factors. First, the Karen settlers are themselves from rural backgrounds. They readily express their preference for Hometown’s quiet streets and rural setting, which resonate with their memories of small rural villages in Burma and Thailand and contrast with experiences of visiting or living in

Australian metropolitan centres. They also appreciate the opportunities to engage in activities such as growing vegetables, fishing, and camping, alongside access to essential services, education and employment opportunities.

Second, the Karen community demonstrate an affinity for the ‘country welcome’, both accepting the hospitality of locals who provide initial settlement support, and offering hospitality in return in the form of invitations to birthdays, weddings and community events. The scale of the community and its rural identity are considered advantageous in facilitating this convivial exchange. For example, the manager of a local community organization explained:

> “I think the good thing about [Hometown] is that we all work together. We’re all – I guess that’s being a bit smaller – we all get to know each other and we may be more open to listening than people in [a city] <laughs>. …When I go [there] and you’re walking through the shopping centre, no one looks at each other or smiles, but [here] we still have that. And that mentality stretches across so many things we do.”

The Karen particularly noted this conviviality in the churches they joined, where services were held in Karen languages as well as English. As one Karen leader explained, “you see each other every day, thinking, ‘oh, you are my church member, we love each other and we talk together’. It’s good”.

The vision of Hometown constructed by both Karen and non-Karen leaders is one in which cultural distinctiveness is maintained, yet cultural exchange and social interactions are common. The value placed on countrymindedness is blended with positive perceptions of multiculturalism to construct a shared vision of Hometown as a small, friendly place in which diversity is achieved through convivial engagement and informal interactions between distinct groups. The problem of lingering hostility to diversity is positioned as something minor, able to be addressed through ongoing education for those who continued to misunderstand the benefits being offered. Discursively, multiculturalism in Hometown is an unqualified success. In practice, however, the picture is more complex.

Multicultural practices

A regular feature of Hometown’s Harmony Day celebrations is an afternoon of performances held in a small park in the town centre. The 2015 celebration included performances by an Indigenous dance group, a bagpipe band and a Sikh martial arts troupe,

as well as speeches by dignitaries such as the mayor, who incorporated the event into a broader vision of Hometown as an "arts and culture destination". The affable white male MC wove the diverse performances together with introductions and commentary that drew on a range of indicators of difference including culture, nationality and even race, engaging at times in awkward moments of mis/recognition such as mistaking a Sikh for a Hindu and having the audience guess the country of origin of an Asian-background singing duo. The audience, which included a smattering of people from local ethnic communities along with many, primarily older, Anglo-Australians, ebbed and flowed in the warm afternoon sun, at times exceeding 100 people. Many people seemed to know each other and in between performances friends and colleagues warmly conversed, while Anglo-Australian volunteers could be heard speaking in simple English with recent humanitarian arrivals, checking in and confirming appointments. Partway through the event an indigenous woman started approaching attendees for money for a train ticket, telling people she had been assaulted that morning. She was generally ignored or regarded with embarrassment or annoyance.

Among the performers were two Karen young men, dressed in traditional shirts, who sang and played guitar. Like many of the performers they were volunteering their time. Accompanied by friends, they hung around at the fringes of the event, kicking a soccer ball, though when the indigenous dance troupe began performing they moved to the front and started filming on their phones. When engaged by other audience members they were polite and friendly. They were particularly animated in their discussion with some local police officers about an upcoming soccer tournament between police and Karen youth: part of the local force's multicultural community engagement strategy.

From both Karen and non-Karen perspectives, accounts of the local welcome of Karen settlers tend to emphasize the kindness and accepting embrace of the rural community. A Karen religious leader notes that "people in [Hometown] are very kind to refugee people". Indeed, the settlement of Karen refugees is regarded as a whole of community undertaking. As one service provider indicated, "it's been a big co-ordinated effort of the whole town to get these people settled". Local transversal enablers are quick to note that they use their formal role to try to foster practices of multiculturalism in the wider community, both through their own actions and through their assumed role as community educators. Leaders routinely take on mentoring roles for refugee-background youth, to the extent that one emergency services worker noted that "just about every community leader I've spoken to is

mentoring someone". Similarly, more structured sites of encounter, such as churches, open opportunities for informal engagement, including sharing food and offering lifts.

While acknowledging the countryminded kindness being displayed towards the Karen, it is also important to recognise that the production of multiculturalism in Hometown is an uneven process, characterised by practices that both support community belonging and reproduce relations of inequality. The genesis of multiculturalism in the city in refugee settlement, as well as the recentness of this transition, mean that cross-cultural relations are generally asymmetrical, with Karen people typically (but not exclusively) positioned as beneficiaries of various forms of support. The capacity of Karen people to publicly express their own preferences in relation to their participation in Hometown is also limited; the inherently educative functions of many formal and informal encounters reinforcing the rules of multicultural engagement. As one Karen leader commented in his speech at a community event, drawing on a local trope used by both Karen and non-Karen: "the Australians are like parents who welcome and support us". This public expression of humility may be understood as both a polite deference to the Hometown dignitaries in attendance and an astute reflection of the hierarchical nature of local multiculturalism.

This asymmetry is evident in the relations of welcome we observed and were told about, which are typically instigated through both professional and voluntary top-down processes of refugee settlement and multicultural service provision. Cross-cultural friendships that are initiated outside of formal settlement and community organisations appeared to be rare. In schools, it is common for Karen youth to gather in their own groups, which is accepted as "only natural" by educators. In workplaces, Karen have a reputation for preferring to work alongside other Karen, sometimes prompting intervention by management. As one business leader explained,

> "a larger group of four or five of them working together and speaking in their own language on the floor might be joking and pointing at some of the English speaking people, who make the assumption that they're having a joke at their expense, and that can cause occasional tension. So, we've had a number of discussions in regards to this over a number of months".

In other respects, Karen people are regarded as performing in accordance with local expectations. For example, many non-Karen leaders are pleased to explain that the Karen are particularly good at the country welcome. As a long-term volunteer describes it: "they're into hospitality and so…when I've been to their homes to celebrate different birthdays, or

functions, or something, they would always put on a big feast and they will make you the centre of attention". Interestingly, this hospitality in the private sphere is seldom reciprocated, with locals rarely inviting Karen to their own birthday parties, weddings or family events. Karen community members are invited to public rather than private functions, and to events that are explicitly oriented to multicultural engagement and exchange, rather than to participate in discussions of other community issues, such as infrastructure, tourism or youth unemployment. Their belonging in Hometown is implicitly grounded in their Karen-ness and the contribution this makes to local multiculturalism, constraining other modes of identification and engagement.

While positive stories dominate in the accounts we received, it is also true that the everyday multiculturalism described is not always a happy story of mixing and encounter that is respectful of difference (Valentine 2008; Ho 2011). No Karen leaders suggested that the attention they were receiving from volunteers and organisations was unwanted, yet some of the non-Karen leaders expressed concern that some organisations were stifling and overwhelming the Karen with flows of support that might lead to dependency rather than independence. One Karen leader began to allude to these different expectations of involvement and support when he shared an exchange with a volunteer English tutor. The tutor was declaring that older Karen women must learn English, saying, "Unless she can speak English, she will be like a prisoner in her own home". His own perception was somewhat different. Hometown is "not like a refugee camp", he said, "she can live here and she can visit friends or family in the Karen community, just not in the other [Australian] community". Far from the prison-like conditions experienced in the camps, life in Hometown is considered amiable and sociable, with Karen able to rely on each other for support. Yet this pressure to adapt to dominant ideas of multicultural citizenship can also be observed within the Karen community, with Australian educated young leaders at times chastising friends and family who are not investing in English acquisition and wider community engagement.

In addition to the perceptions of sometimes stifling or overwhelming attention, there are a number of accounts of a range of minor incivilities and micro-aggressions encountered by Karen people in public space. While many Karen stress that such racism is fairly uncommon – and certainly not as prevalent in this city as in Thailand and major Australian cities – these encounters include being told to fuck off, or to go home, eggs being thrown at houses, and water being thrown at people. As a Karen religious leader sees it: "some, I mean not all, but a few, I think they hate the Asia people or they hate the refugee people". More

prevalent are subtle instances of interpersonal and structural exclusion. As one local employer explains:

> "I think [this] has been a fairly Anglo community for such a long time. I think we're getting much better but I think there's still pockets that tend to, maybe not intentionally, but I think there are pockets that tend to exclude others. And, you know, there may not be any ill-intent in that but I just think that that happens".

This perspective is shared by other local leaders, who see part of their role as educating the local population. Thus, they use their positions to facilitate the top down imposition of a multicultural ethos that accompanies their informal interactions across cultural boundaries. These include cultural awareness sessions in schools and workplaces that have a strong emphasis on respecting and acknowledging difference in general and the refugee experience in particular.

The perceived need to effect change among local community members is strongly linked to assumptions and expectations that Hometown is a welcoming community that simply needs encouragement and information to fulfil its identity. These discourses and practices also inform local government policy and strategy aimed at shifting community attitudes to being more respectful of difference. In these ways, a division is established between a progressive rural community supporting a multicultural future, and a small conservative, backward section of the population who require rehabilitation in order to remain within the newly imagined rural multicultural community.

Discussion

While multiculturalism in Australia originates from and is sustained by top-down policies and associated structures and practices such as English language classes, anti-discrimination legislation and Harmony Day celebrations, its successes also rely on everyday civilities and convivial social interactions within diverse streets and neighbourhoods, or what has been called 'everyday multiculturalism' (Wise and Velayathun 2009; Werbner 2013). To date, most accounts of the everyday dimensions of multiculturalism are situated in urban and suburban contexts, spaces in which diversity, mobility and social heterogeneity are taken-for-granted norms of everyday life and in which high density living ensures that encounters with strangers are common (Wirth 1938). With increasing global diversity, it is increasingly necessary to consider how residents in non-metropolitan places are responding to and

negotiating the contradictions of increased diversity on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the perceptions of homogeneity and local unity that have been an important means of sustaining their sense of local community.

Theorising the "everyday" of everyday multiculturalism requires a complex balancing act of acknowledging the surface realities of the mundane while also recognising the underlying social forces that shape those surface realities in unequal ways. It is in those surface realities of everyday encounter and exchange that the inequalities of society are produced and reproduced, with practices giving substance to the unspoken rules that shape what may be said, what may be done, by whom, and in which settings (Goffman 1959, 1967). Everyday interactions and encounters rely on shared symbols and meanings that give definition to (and draw from definitions of) not only the persons in and nature of the encounter, but also the setting within which that encounter takes place (Goffman 1959). These symbols and meanings do not remain static. Rather, people adjust their actions and definitions in response to the reactions of others, and adapt their own responses to those reactions (Blumer 1969). Thus, interactions are shaped not just by conscious behaviours, but also by feelings evoked during interactions, which shape interpretations of the self and interactions with others at an unconscious level, with responses to the expressive reactions of others in any given encounter producing feelings of being affirmed, challenged, threatened, safe, supported or contested (Weigert and Gecas 2003).

In non-metropolitan settings such as Hometown, encounters are framed at least in part by the positive feelings associated with imagery that values the acknowledged characteristics of rurality – including both 'countrymindedness' as an orientation towards being welcoming, and the insularity associated with the desirability of community and cohesion. This insularity, often perceived as a negative feature of rural communities, is reframed in Hometown as a foundation from which other cultures might be accepted and embraced in a process that is integrative without being assimilatory or disruptive of local social and cultural norms. Both the Karen and non-Karen leaders acknowledge and act to preserve the distinctiveness of their respective communities, yet also emphasise the need for regular exchanges in formal settings in which their cultural practices are recognised and shared.

For the non-Karen leaders, the new arrivals represent an opportunity to reimagine their local community as fitting more closely with national models of multiculturalism and global models of cosmopolitanism, both of which are strongly associated with the moral good. However, they do so in ways that also sustain their rural identity. Rather than being

dismissed as a rural backwater, they are able to reposition Hometown society as part of global flows and discourses. Unlike metropolitan centres, they do so through a sense of engagement that they are able to suggest involves the entire community, overlooking the evidence that it is primarily achieved through the activities of transversal enablers. Multicultural exchange is embraced within a simultaneous model of rurality in which countrymindedness and a valuing of rural ways of living and rural forms of conviviality are essential in maintaining a local distinction from metropolitan forms of multiculturalism.

This positive story of integration is nevertheless framed by an uneven ability to define the situation, with some able to exert greater influence than others (Dennis and Martin 2005). In the production of multiculturalism, it is the long-term residents of Hometown who have more capacity to define the normative frameworks that apply to their social encounters across difference, albeit always in tension with the capacity for new arrivals to subtly transform both the setting and the definition of the encounter (de Certeau 1984). The co-production of multiculturalism in Hometown is thus an unequal space of meanings and definitions that shape intercultural encounters. These uneven structures are evident in asymmetrical relations of exchange and interaction in which Karen residents are frequently positioned as recipients rather than providers, and in which the Karen community are primarily valued for their role in constituting Hometown as a successful multicultural community.

Conclusion

Regional locations are part of a national and international story of migration, multiculturalism and diversity. However, the dynamics of multicultural encounter within this non-metropolitan place are different to those of major cities, informed by the specifics of the setting itself. We do not mean to suggest that there are particular features of a location – such as particular population size – that determine the experiences and practices of multiculturalism. Rather, our argument is that the meanings and symbols mobilized by members of a community that defines itself as non-metropolitan are significant in shaping how that community responds to and negotiates new demographic forms of diversity. Our focus on the shared production of multiculturalism helps to highlight the creativity of encounters across difference. What it also demonstrates is the desire to identify the foundations of commonalities and accepted inequalities. The Karen arrivals and their Hometown hosts produce a common ground of interaction and encounter that is based on an

acceptance of a number of shared values. These include the valorising of national discourses of multiculturalism that promote convivial encounters across diversity, as well as a shared framing of the rural as a distinctive and valued setting within which to practice everyday life.

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Endnotes

1. By giving this location a pseudonym, our aim is to both protect the anonymity of research participants but also emphasize that the issues encountered in this place are not altogether unique to the location, with similar processes being experienced across regional and rural Australia (see also Bryson and Thompson 1972; Dempsey 1990).

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