PRIFYSGOL ABERYSTWYTH UNIVERSITY

Aberystwyth University

Refugees, race and the limits of rural cosmopolitanism

Woods, Michael

Published in:
Journal of Rural Studies

DOI:
10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.09.027

Publication date:
2022

Citation for published version (APA):
Woods, M. (2022). Refugees, race and the limits of rural cosmopolitanism: Perspectives from Ireland and Wales. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *95*, 316-325. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.09.027

Document License
CC BY

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

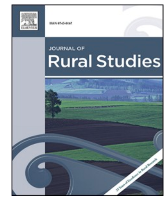
Download date: 22. Jul. 2024

Journal of Rural Studies 95 (2022) 316–325

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud



Refugees, race and the limits of rural cosmopolitanism: Perspectives from Ireland and Wales

Michael Woods

Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, SY23 3DB, UK

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords:
Rural cosmopolitanism
Refugees
Migration
Ireland
Wales

A B S T R A C T

In many parts of the Global North, the imagined (and often illusionary) "whiteness" of rural societies has been both exposed and contested by the transnational movements of racialised migrant workers, refugees, asylum seekers and other immigrants. Such dynamics have prompted a renegotiation of ideas of race and rurality, with both reactionary responses of white populism and more progressive responses that assert a "rural cosmopolitanism" that evokes associations with hospitality, solidarity and community in rural culture. To explore these themes, this paper discusses evidence from three rural towns in Ireland and Wales with recent settlement of refugees or asylum seekers. The paper examines the articulation of a discourse of cosmopolitanism in the towns, the roles that are scripted within these discourses, both for migrants and for established residents, and the performance of these expectations. It reveals gaps between discourse and practice, with "actually existing cosmopolitanism" in the towns being characterized by ambivalence and precarity. The paper argues that both the discursive construction and the partial practice of cosmopolitanism are embedded in the rural, non-metropolitan settings of the towns and informed by place-specific palimpsests of migration and colonialism.

1. Introduction

The global acceleration of migration from, to, and through rural areas over the last three decades has contributed to the emergence of "new immigration destinations" (McAreavey and Argent, 2018) in rural regions in many parts of the Global North that had previously been characterized in both academic and popular discourses as largely homogenous predominantly white communities.[1] Alongside labour migration and amenity migration, the settlement of asylum seekers and refugees in rural communities,[2] often following shifts in state strategies, has been a significant catalyst for change. The transition towards more ethnically and culturally diverse populations has prompted new dynamics of rural place-making, as historically embedded associations with whiteness and national identity have been questioned and attitudes towards difference and otherness tested.

Although instances of racist and xenophobic hostility to refugees and other racialised immigrants in rural localities have been documented (Hopkins, 2010; Hubbard, 2005; Neal and Agyeman, 2006) and in some cases linked to support for far right parties and candidates (Berlet and Sunshine, 2019; Schaub et al., 2021), arguably the more widespread response has been the acceptance and accommodation of international migrants in rural communities. As such, some authors have identified the rise of a "rural cosmopolitanism" (Krivokapic-Skoko et al., 2018; Woods, 2018), understood both as the hybridization and translation of diverse cultural influences to create new rural identities and as a communal sentiment of tolerance, openness and conviviality that embraces diversity.

Yet, as I have argued previously (Woods, 2018), apparent rural cosmopolitanism may be precarious and contingent on certain economic, social and political conditions. As this paper discusses,

E-mail address: m.woods@aber.ac.uk.

[1] The concept of "new immigrant destinations" refers to rural localities with significant immigration in the early 21st century following a period of relatively low immigration, which has increased the ethnic or cultural diversity of the community. It is contrasted with predominantly urban-focused immigration in the post-Second World War period. The concept has been applied to localities in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, although its application in settler colonial societies arguably obscures the presence of indigenous peoples and the immigrant status of settled white populations. The empirical examples in this paper are taken from Europe, where the relevance of the concept is more apparent, but may still be critiqued as ignoring 'hidden' historic patterns of immigration and ethnic diversity.

[2] The distinction between "refugees" and "asylum seekers" is a legal construct. In this paper "refugee" is used as an overall term for all displaced persons and humanitarian migrants, with the term "asylum seeker" used when pertinent to the specific context discussed.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.09.027
Received 23 January 2022; Received in revised form 9 September 2022; Accepted 14 September 2022
Available online 29 September 2022
0743-0167/© 2022 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

cosmopolitanism is both a discourse and a practice and it is by no means certain that the assertion of cosmopolitan values by community leaders and civil society groups will be translated into cosmopolitan practices by the broader population or sustained in changing circumstances. The articulation and enactment of rural cosmopolitanism is intrinsically entwined with wider processes of place-making in the global countryside and may be pragmatic and conditional in motivation.

This paper investigates the articulation and practice of cosmopolitanism in non-metropolitan small towns in Britain and Ireland that have experienced recent refugee resettlement. Drawing on case studies of Ballyhaunis in Ireland and Aberystwyth and Newtown in Wales in the United Kingdom, it examines how the reception of refugees and asylum seekers has been framed by discourses of cosmopolitanism and supported by the performance of practices of hospitality and conviviality that reflect cosmopolitan values. Claims to cosmopolitanism have been enrolled into place-making in the three case studies, reinforcing the self-presentation of the towns as progressive and caring places. However, the paper also probes the limits of cosmopolitanism in the towns, finding the practice of cosmopolitanism to be compromised by ambivalence in the local population and structural constraints of the rural setting. Accordingly, it reflects on the utility of rural cosmopolitanism as a concept and its capacity to capture the complex ways in which race and identity are negotiated in contemporary rural place-making.

The next section elaborates the concept of rural cosmopolitanism, emphasizing its performativity, exploring connections to place-making, and engaging with critiques. The third section establishes the empirical context by outlining recent approaches to refugee and asylum seeker settlement in the UK and Ireland and reviewing insights into rural refugee-community interactions from the literature, followed by an introduction to the case studies and summary of the methods for data collection and analysis. The remainder of the paper focuses on the empirical case studies, examining the discursive construction of cosmopolitan values in relation to refugee settlement, the performance of cosmopolitan practices, and the limits to rural cosmopolitanism, before discussing conclusions for wider debates around race and rural place-making.

2. Rural cosmopolitanism, race and place-making

Rural cosmopolitanism is one of a battery of concepts that rural researchers have employed to investigate the re-making of rural places in the context of accelerated global mobility and the increasing diversity of rural populations, alongside ideas of conviviality, multiculture and multiculturalism (Neal, 2002, 2012; Neal and Walters, 2008; Radford, 2016, 2017; Wilding and Nunn, 2018). In each case, the deployment of a concept more conventionally associated with urban societies intentionally challenges the stereotype of rural communities as exclusionary and lacking in diversity. Whilst there are synergies and correspondences between the concepts, cosmopolitanism embodies distinctive elements that speak to relational place-making.

First, cosmopolitanism expressly ties the diversity of rural places to translocal connections and enhanced global mobilities. Cosmopolitanism can be either an individual or a collective attribute and in the former instance describes hyper-mobile individuals who transcend different places and societies, developing an open, multi-cultural outlook (Hannerz, 1990). Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's (2003) original coining of "rural cosmopolitanism" as a term extended this notion of cosmopolitan individuals beyond the elite travellers commonly featured in earlier studies (Hannerz, 1990; Sklair, 2001) to rural migrant workers, but crucially also emphasized the capacity of such individuals to be agents of change in both of the societies that they inhabit. Accordingly, as a collective attribute, rural cosmopolitanism refers to the response of rural communities to encounters with the external "other", including through migration. Cosmopolitanism involves more than an absence of hostility, segregation or discrimination and as a condition of openness and respect for difference it is differentiated from efforts to integrate or assimilate migrants into pre-existing community norms. Moreover, cosmopolitanism goes beyond multicultural coexistence to conviviality, or entwined and equitable living together (Gilroy, 2004; Noble, 2013; Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014).

Second, as an ethic of behaviour, cosmopolitanism can also be articulated as a normative project. Popke (2011) drew on Keith (2005) and Massey (2005) to propose "rural cosmopolitanism" as a model for negotiating racial diversity in rural America that "would seek to expand and politicize our sense of throwntogetherness, and to see in this a rationale for a wider net of engagement and responsibility" (Popke 2011: 253). For Popke, cosmopolitanism is hence closely bound to the social relations that constitute a community and attuned to structural conditions that shape relational place-making. It is, however, for Popke also an aspirational ideal, and is contrasted in Torres et al. (2006) with the "silent bargain" that they argue characterises relations with Latino labour migrants in the rural southern USA, in which acceptance of a racial other is conditional on economic interests and circumscribed by marginalization and discrimination.

However, Schech (2014) and I (Woods, 2018) have both argued against an absolutist notion of rural cosmopolitanism to foreground examples of imperfect and partial "actually existing cosmopolitanism" (Robbins, 1998) in rural small towns in Australia and Ireland respectively. Such studies focus on, in Beck and Snzaider's (2006) terms, what cosmopolitanism *is* rather than what cosmopolitanism *should be*, acknowledging that cosmopolitanism is "always situated, always imbued with partiality and vulnerability" (Ley, 2004: 161). It is in this sense that rural cosmopolitanism can be posited as inherent precarious, contingent on the temporal configuration of social, cultural, political and economic relations in place (Woods, 2018). Rural cosmopolitanism relies on processes of "realignment" in which expectations are aligned with local realities and rhythms to produce a new construction of normality (Hiitola and Vaha-Savo, 2022; Hoibjerg, 2020), but is conditioned by local economic and political circumstances (Whyte et al., 2019) as well as the historical palimpsest of racialised social and cultural relations and outlooks (Butler and Ben, 2021).

The gap between the cosmopolitan ideal and actually existing cosmopolitanism further points to the duality of cosmopolitanism as discourse and practice. Schech (2014), for example, identifies rural cosmopolitanism as a "strategy" employed by regional towns in Australia to frame policies towards humanitarian migrants and to harness their labour. Yet, cosmopolitanism only fully exists in a place through practice in the embodied everyday interactions of community members (Mukherjee and Rath, 2015; Müller, 2011; Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014). The performativity of cosmopolitanism involves acts of hospitality, mutuality, tolerance, innovation, solidarity, reconciliation and reciprocity, ascribing roles within a community. Yet, these roles may not be uniformly performed. The pivotal work of "transversal enablers" (Wise, 2009) in connecting diverse groups in a community (see also Herslund, 2021; Radford, 2016), may be conducted against a background of "ambivalent cosmopolitanism" (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007) among the wider community, in which adherence to cosmopolitan behaviours is inconsistent and contextual.

Furthermore, whilst cosmopolitanism is commonly presented as a progressive project, it can exhibit conservative tendencies (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). Superficial assertions of cosmopolitanism in place that are not backed up by widespread practice may obscure and accentuate inequalities, and the expectations placed on migrant and minority groups by cosmopolitan discourses can unintentionally constrain their capacities and choices. Moreover, as Stead et al. (2022) note in the introduction to this Special Issue, references to rural cosmopolitanism too often assume that "rural places are raceless, classless, already-made, and made-as-white – places into which non-white others arrive". By focusing on encounters with the external other, cosmopolitanism can fail to recognize the historical palimpsest of racialised social and cultural relations on which places have been built

(Butler and Ben, 2021), the constitutive power of colonialism and its legacies in place-making, or the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender and other social characteristics in long-standing inequalities within communities.

This paper seeks to advance a fuller and more critical understanding of rural cosmopolitanism by exploring how claims to cosmopolitanism have been discursively constructed in the three case study towns and connected to articulations of place identity, how these discourses of cosmopolitanism have created expectations for practice by both existing community members and by refugees, and the extent to which these expected practices have been performed. In so doing, it considers how structural conditions, including histories of migration and colonialism, have informed the articulation and practice of rural cosmopolitanism and contributed to its limits. The paper examines these questions in the context of shifting state strategies for the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and Ireland, as described in the next section.

3. Refugee resettlement and rural areas

3.1. Refugee resettlement policies in Britain and Ireland

Although large numbers of refugees are housed in temporary camps in rural regions globally, in Britain and Ireland most refugees have until recently tended to be settled in urban centres. In Britain, the urban concentration of refugees was consolidated following criticism of the dispersal of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s which found that refugees settled in rural areas experienced difficulties securing employment and were isolated from cultural networks and support services (Barber, 2020; Dalglish, 1989). Plans in the early 2000s to construct "self-contained asylum centres" in rural areas, to accommodate asylum seekers whilst applications were processed, were largely abandoned following local opposition (Hubbard, 2005).

The Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 prompted an arguably unintended pivot in strategy, as the UK Government sought to balance public pressure to accept Syrian refugees and concerns of increased anti-immigrant sentiment, including in areas prioritised in the existing scheme, by introducing a de facto demand-led dispersal policy. In this, local authorities were invited to apply to take refugees. Significantly, many of the councils that applied were predominantly rural authorities, such that districts taking the largest numbers of Syrian refugees relative to population included rural areas in Devon, Herefordshire, Oxfordshire, Yorkshire, west Wales, Northern Ireland, the north-east of Scotland and the Western Isles (BBC News, 2018).

A similar trajectory has been followed in Ireland, albeit on a different timescale. Asylum claims in Ireland exploded from fewer than a hundred per year before the early 1990s to over 11,000 in 2002, as the country's economy boomed (Conlon, 2010). Initially, most asylum seekers settled in Dublin, but to relieve pressure on the city the Irish government introduced a "direct provision system" in 2002, placing asylum seekers in 75 accommodation centres dispersed throughout the country (Fanning, 2011; Kinlen, 2011; White, 2012). Significantly, many of the centres were located in or near small towns and rural communities, often in former holiday camps, hotels or convents. Such rural sites reinforced the segregation and isolation of asylum seekers, functioning as a "punitive system" (Fanning, 2011: 43); whilst integration was further inhibited by a deliberate lack of consultation with host communities and local agencies "for fear of a backlash or unwillingness to co-operate" (Kinlen, 2011: 37).

Parallel participation by Ireland in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees's (UNHCR) resettlement programme, taking an annual quota of 200 pre-recognized refugees through much of the 2000s and early 2010s, was also tied to a policy of rural-focused dispersal. Following a six-week orientation in the small town of Ballyhaunis, UNHCR-sponsored refugees were predominantly settled in rural towns and villages, including Kosovans in County Cork and Kilkenny, Kurds in Carrick-on-Shannon in County Leitrim, Karen in Ballina and Castlebar in County Mayo, and Rohingya in Carlow (Murphy, 2015).

In both Britain and Ireland, the rural resettlement of refugees has been underpinned by neoliberal rationality. The management of direct provision and asylum centres has been contracted to private sector operators (with rural sites commonly selected as cheap, secure locations), and large aspects of welfare support for refugees and asylum seekers have been delegated to community and third sector organizations. In Britain, the neoliberal logic was further consolidated by the introduction of the Community Sponsorship Scheme in 2016, under which refugees are sponsored, supported and provided with housing by community groups rather than local authorities. Some of the early groups to participate in the scheme were once again in less-diverse rural towns, such as Aberystwyth, Cardigan, Fishguard and Narbeth in Wales.

3.2. Research on rural refugee settlement

Research on the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Britain and Ireland has been limited to date, but studies from elsewhere in Europe, North America and Australia over a longer period present evidence of mixed experiences for both refugees and rural communities. These include countries with long-standing dispersal policies, notably Sweden, but also to lesser extent Australia and Germany, as well as countries where rural resettlement of refugees is a more recent development. The application of neoliberal rationality is nonetheless largely shared, especially an emphasis on demand-led dispersal that has created opportunities for rural localities to attract refugees. Indeed, whilst far-right anti-refugee sentiments have been documented around rural refugee resettlement in Germany and Norway (Berg-Nordlie, 2018; Schaub et al., 2021), the broader pattern is of local pragmatism, with refugee settlement presented as ameliorating challenges of depopulation, economic stagnation or labour shortages (Hellstrom, 2020; Hudson and Sandberg, 2021; Krivokapic-Skoko et al., 2018; Schech, 2014; Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020). Whyte et al.'s (2019) nuanced analysis of asylum centres in rural Denmark, for instance, describes the transformation of initial scepticism or hesitancy over time into acceptance, as perceptions framed through the negative discourses of the national media were replaced by lived experience. Yet, pragmatic acceptance of refugees is not the same as a humanitarian disposition to welcome and assist refugees. As Whyte et al. comment, refugee resettlement is interpreted through pre-existing local conditions, and opinions may change with shifting circumstances.

Neither does pragmatic hospitality necessarily result in the effective inclusion and accommodation of refugees in local communities. Although a few studies argue that the social capital of rural communities enhances inclusion (Haugen, 2019), or that rural settings allow space for refugees to maintain cultural practices related to farming and food (Gilhooly and Lee, 2017), more commonly the literature echoes earlier research on Vietnamese refugees by highlighting the challenges and disadvantages faced by refugees in rural localities. These include difficulties of access to housing (Herslund, 2021; Weidinger and Kordel, 2020) and employment (Hellstrom, 2020), the latter sometimes exacerbated by an implicit channelling into low-paid, insecure jobs in shortage occupations such as social care or food processing (Carlbaum, 2021; Hausermann et al., 2021; Nelson and Marston, 2020) (though see also Vogiazides and Mondani (2020) for a contrasting analysis). Social constraints to inclusion can also arise from close-knit rural community networks and the uncertainty of refugees about "how to behave and navigate in the town, and how to engage in the more formalised associational life" (Herslund, 2021: 239). As such, Herslund notes, "participation in routines and local practices becomes challenging, hindering the forming of a sense of belonging" (Herslund, 2021).

The challenges of settling in rural communities have been found to contribute to the onward migration of refugees who have secured leave to remain in the country. This includes moves to urban areas to find employment or housing or to join ethnic or cultural clusters (Boese et al., 2020; de Hoon et al., 2021; Haugen, 2019; Hellstrom, 2020), but also

instances of urban-to-rural migration (Klocker et al., 2021), and intra-rural concentration in employment centres such as meat-packing towns (Nelson and Marston, 2020). Thus, capacities for rural resettlement and social inclusion are differentiated within rural areas as well as between rural and urban areas.

These accounts of rural refugee settlement highlight dynamics and practices that resonate with the concept of rural cosmopolitanism in several ways, including the importance of mundane social interactions in settings such as bars, shops, schools and public spaces (Radford, 2017), and of acts of reciprocity between established residents and refugees (Wagner, 2019). However, in focusing on questions of "integration", "assimilation" and "tolerance", they tend to reproduce language and analytical frames that are rooted in colonial mindsets of cross-cultural interaction (Flavell, 2021), and which arguably contrast with an emphasis in cosmopolitan thinking on openness, conviviality and hybridity. Schech (2014) more directly employs rural cosmopolitanism as a concept to analyse refugee settlement in regional towns in Australia, enabling observations that economic pragmatism was accompanied by assertions of community pride in expanding ethnic diversity and the discursive framing of the towns as safe places for refugees. As such, Schech contended that the towns positioned themselves "within an emerging rural cosmopolitanism", drawing on "local multicultural histories, organizations and practices for know-how and personnel" (Schech, 2014: 611). Yet, Schech also acknowledges the structural constraints acting on refugees and presents these as inhibiting rural cosmopolitanism, adapting Torres et al.'s (2006) formulation of the "silent bargain" to describe refugees trading "better long-term opportunities in the metropolis for the relatively peaceful community relations of a small town" (Schech, 2014: 614). Accordingly, Schech's study suggested a disconnect in the rhetoric and practice of rural cosmopolitanism in relation to refugees, explored further in the case studies below.

4. Methods and case studies

This paper discusses empirical case studies of three non-metropolitan small towns located in predominantly rural local authority areas in Britain and Ireland – Aberystwyth and Newtown in Wales, and Ballyhaunis in Ireland. The three towns range in population from 2300 residents in Ballyhaunis, to around 11,000 in Newtown and around 17,000 in Aberystwyth, but are closer in size to each other than to larger towns and cities that have been the conventional locales for refugee and asylum seeker settlement. They are all distant from multicultural metropolitan centres and share largely "white" histories, albeit with divergent trajectories of migration over the last 50 years.

Ballyhaunis, in County Mayo, has the most diverse population, with 49 per cent of the population at the 2016 Census born outside Ireland. Ballyhaunis has hosted a direct provision centre since 2001 (housing around 300 asylum seekers at any time), as well as Ireland's National Refugee Orientation Centre between 2007 and 2013 (accommodating up to 200 UNHCR-sponsored refugees per year). The town also has a significant cohort of labour migrants, originating in the recruitment of workers from Syria and Pakistan for a halal meat-processing factory in the 1970s.

In Aberystwyth, 33 Syrian refugees were resettled under the UK government's local authority-led scheme between December 2015 and March 2018, with a further family of five subsequently settled under the Community Sponsorship Scheme. These were the first recent refugees in the town, although the presence of a university has contributed to an international community and a liberal outlook. Newtown, an industrial town inland from Aberystwyth, is more culturally homogenous with a 98 per cent white population in the 2011 Census in spite of substantial in-migration from the English Midlands in the 1970s and 1980s. A small group of Syrian refugees were resettled in the town after 2016.

The research was conducted as part of two research projects, with different objectives and research teams. Research in Ballyhaunis and Newtown was undertaken as part of a larger study of globalization and rural localities (GLOBAL-RURAL).[3] Ballyhaunis was selected as a case study of international migration (Woods, 2018), involving ten interviews with residents and stakeholders (including one with an asylum seeker) in October 2015 and March 2017, supplemented by data gathering from and content analysis of newspaper reports and other documents. Newtown formed a longer and broader case study of "everyday globalization" that involved 49 interviews with residents, as well as a survey of 235 households, 3 focus groups, participatory research and archival research between 2014 and 2018.[4] The settlement of refugees formed only one small part of this study, examined primarily through interviews with two refugee support workers and conversations with other volunteers and refugees whilst visiting a support group meeting.

Research in Aberystwyth formed part of a work package in the WISERD Civil Society Research Centre on local civil society in an age of global connectivity, in which refugee support was one of three key themes (see Guma et al., 2019).[5] Data collection primarily involved interviews with five volunteers with the refugee support group conducted in 2017 and 2018, as well as data gathering from newspaper reports and online forums, and participant observation at a workshop on the Community Sponsorship scheme.[6] All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the informed consent of the participants and have been specifically analysed through coding for this paper, using etic codes informed by the literature review (e.g. conviviality, reciprocity, ambivalence) and emic codes derived from the transcripts.

As none of the three case studies were initially designed as research on refugee experiences in rural areas, the data is limited in that it primarily represents the viewpoints of volunteers and established community residents, with relatively little direct contributions by refugees or asylum seekers themselves. Accordingly, the focus in this paper is not on the experiences of refugees, but rather on the discursive construction and practice of rural cosmopolitanism in relation to refugees and asylum members by the pre-existing community. The scope of the research and analysis is also mediated by our positionality, which varied in relation to the case studies. All three members of the research team of the Aberystwyth case study were (in-migrant) residents of the town at the time and had participated in events in support of refugees, though not as activists in the support network. The case studies in Ballyhaunis and Newtown were approached by the researchers as outsiders, creating greater reliance on gatekeepers and the narratives presented by interviewees. All the researchers are white English, except for one of the researchers for the Aberystwyth study who is Albanian. As such, our engagement with issues around race and rural cosmopolitanism was informed by our white cultural socialisation and education and constrained by factors such as linguistic competence.

5. Rural cosmopolitanism in practice? Evidence from refugee resettlement in Aberystwyth, Ballyhaunis and Newtown

5.1. Constructing cosmopolitanism

Unlike examples of refugee resettlement in Australia and Sweden discussed in the literature, economic pragmatism has played little part in the settlement of refugees in Aberystwyth and Newtown, or of asylum seekers and refugees in Ballyhaunis. The placement of Syrian refugees in

[3] GLOBAL-RURAL was funded by European Research Council Advanced Grant 339567. See www.global-rural.org for more information.

[4] The interviews in Newtown were conducted by GLOBAL-RURAL co-investigator Jesse Heley and researchers Laura Jones, Sam Saville and Marc Welsh.

[5] The WISERD Civil Society Research Centre is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Centre (ESRC). See https://wiserd.ac.uk/wiserd-civil-society-research-centre for more information.

[6] The interviews in Aberystwyth were conducted by WISERD researchers Taulant Guma and Sophie Yarker.

Aberystwyth and Newtown stemmed from essentially emotive, humanitarian responses by small groups of individuals to media and social media images of the unfolding refugee crisis in 2015. These were manifested first in fundraising for refugee camps in Calais and developed into lobbying local authorities to take refugees and later organizing activities to support refugees and promote integration after they arrived. In Aberystwyth, grassroots activity evolved further following the introduction of the Community Sponsorship Scheme, with the local refugee support group deciding to apply to sponsor a family itself.

Critically, the initial activists were able to enrol broader support from the local community, politicians and media, with one noting, "there's clearly a willingness to engage, not only with the small-town Aberystwyth society, but also with the more rural places" (Volunteer 4, Aberystwyth). In Aberystwyth, this was widely attributed to the town's perceived progressive sense of place and cosmopolitan outlook, informed by presence of the university, but also a dense network of civil society groups involved with progressive and internationalist causes, and the local dominance of centre-left political parties. As a local councillor remarked at an event on community sponsorship, "it's that kind of town here" (Fieldnotes). In more conservative Newtown, lobbying and preparations to take refugees had been more cautious, with careful framing of the project to emphasize ideas of community:

> There's also another group started called Community Connections … they wanted to call it the Syrian Refugee [Group] and we were all like you can't call them that, because what about integrating and other people are in uproar as it is that they're getting that and they're getting this … So Community Connections is for everybody, but it's based around [the refugees] to start off with (Community worker, Newtown).

The prevailing narrative in both towns, however, was an assertion of local pride in accepting and integrating refugees, especially in Aberystwyth where the relatively early settlement of Syrian refugees was emphasized as affirming its cosmopolitanism:

> When I go to other places, I'm quite proud of all the work [Aberystwyth's] doing, considering it's not a big town. It's only 15,000 people, but it's got more Syrian refugees than Cardiff. (Councillor 1, Aberystwyth)

> I think that's something that Aberystwyth should be very proud of actually. The first or one of the first [towns to received Syrian refugees]. That shows its openness. (Volunteer 2, Aberystwyth)

In contrast, the settlement of asylum seekers and refugees in Ballyhaunis was externally driven, in line with the more centralised and secretive roll-out of the direct provision system in Ireland (Kinlen, 2011). Ballyhaunis obtained a residential centre for asylum seekers because there was an empty former convent available at the right time that was bought by the private contractors. When the same company won the contract to run Ireland's National Refugee Orientation Centre in 2007 and housed it at a second site in Ballyhaunis, there were complaints over the absence of consultation, with a local councillor reported as saying that "there had been 'some disquiet and discontent locally' about the way the town was chosen" (McGarry, 2007: 8).

Ballyhaunis stood out from other small towns in Ireland where direct provision centres were established in that it already had a diverse population created by labour migration and was regarded as a model of multiculturalism and integration. Crucially, however, local acceptance of labour migrants had been framed by pragmatism. Migration was widely acknowledged to have arrested the town's depopulation and helped to retain shops and services in comparison with neighbouring towns, but it was also noted in the parish magazine that "all of these people are contributing to our economy as they are all in full-time employment" (Fitzmaurice, 2002: 38). Asylum seekers, conversely, were prohibited from working by Irish law, leading to them being perceived differently by at least some community members:

> I know that the people from the Old Convent, they definitely are treated differently. Understood differently than workers. Workers are working. At least they're here contributing to society and who are these people, they're provided with everything and they could be perceived as they're just here and they do nothing … again it's my perception, because it's again from work with asylum seekers, how do they feel being perceived. (NGO worker, Ballyhaunis).

Nonetheless, asylum seekers and refugees have been incorporated into discourses that celebrate Ballyhaunis's status as "the most diverse town in Ireland", with a local newspaper article for example stating that the combination of the asylum accommodation centre and migrant workers had "propelled this small town of some 2500 people into quite a distinctive cosmopolitan oasis" (Byrne, 2008: 16). The Ballyhaunis Gathering, an event in 2013 aimed at reconnecting the town's diaspora, similarly enrolled asylum seekers and refugees in its representation of "our heritage and our diversity" (Gathering co-organizer, Ballyhaunis), with residents of the asylum centre carrying their national flags in a parade.

Thus, as Whyte et al. (2019) found in Denmark, the arrival of refugees in these Irish and Welsh towns was interpreted through pre-existing local conditions, which had historical as well as contemporary dimensions. Consciousness of Ireland's own history of colonization and displacement and experiences of racism encountered by Irish emigrants was held to promote empathy towards refugees in Ballyhaunis, most notably in a speech given by the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) at the opening of an extension at the town's high school[7]:

> The Taoiseach spoke to the students about their hopes for the future and his role in that. He said that Ireland as a country understood what was happening on the shores of Libya and in Syria with thousands of migrants coming across the Mediterranean. He said this was because we as a nation, and especially in the west, had travelled thousands of miles to America in the 1840s and ever since. (Connaught Telegraph, 2015: 46).

Historical resonance was less pronounced in Wales, but a volunteer in Newtown observed that the town had "been fluid through the years with people coming up from south Wales and for the textiles" (Volunteer 1, Newtown). Several core volunteers in Aberystwyth and Newtown were domestic or international migrants to the area, with at least one motivated in part by having visited Syria as a tourist.

The influence of travel and migration in constructing cosmopolitanism in the case study towns runs counter to stereotypes of small towns as stable and parochial. More conventional tropes of rurality were evoked in narratives that presented the towns as "safe", "quiet" and "friendly", with comments such as "it's sort of like a nice area, no criminal activities … it's much quieter, it's quite a safe area" (Volunteer, Newtown) and "if you can live in a small town I think it offers a secure, safe environment" (Community worker, Ballyhaunis). Yet, claims to cosmopolitanism were also used to differentiate the towns from other rural towns and communities, especially in Aberystwyth and Ballyhaunis, with interviewees in Aberystwyth for example drawing comparisons between the perceived openness of attitudes in the area and experiences elsewhere:

> I think that was the case in some of the other places that the local community were more suspicious. I mean, Narberth and Fishguard they're much smaller than Aberystwyth. So they were more suspicious of refugees coming in. Whereas here … there is more international community. (Volunteer 4, Aberystwyth).

Accordingly, discourses of cosmopolitanism articulated in the case study towns involved substantial elements of exceptionalism and as such

[7] The then Taoiseach of Ireland, Enda Kenny, was also a local representative of Ballyhaunis in the Irish Parliament (the Daíl).

implicitly recognized the precarity of rural cosmopolitanism and its need to be enacted through practice.

5.2. Practising cosmopolitanism

Discourses of cosmopolitanism have been mobilized in Aberystwyth, Ballyhaunis and Newtown to construct narratives of successful refugee resettlement in the towns. However, the realisation of actually existing cosmopolitanism is dependent on practice. Narratives of rural cosmopolitanism script roles to be performed by various actors in the community.

Central roles are ascribed to the professional support workers employed by private companies or NGOs, who under the neoliberal models in Britain and Ireland are contracted to provide accommodation and manage refugee resettlement, but also to local volunteers who have "the serious task of filling up the gaps" in connecting refugees and asylum seekers with communities (Moreo, 2012: 164). In all three case study towns, local volunteer groups are engaged in fundraising, supporting refugee needs such as sourcing furniture or children's toys, organizing classes and creating spaces in which refugees and local residents can meet. These include weekly lunches in Aberystwyth and Newtown, but also extend to more informal actions:

> there's lots of things going on… the contacts made in this group, I know that (Someone's) husband for example cuts lots of wood and has taken it to (the families for heating). And I know lots of transport, lifts to the dentists, you know, has come out of this group so it's not just sitting around on a Friday morning drinking coffee. (Volunteer, Newtown).

Through these practices, volunteers embody the proclaimed cosmopolitan ethic of the community, but there is also a consciousness of unwritten boundaries, as one articulated in respect to community sponsorship: "Where do we draw the line between friendship and service provider? The Red Cross can do that very easily with their refugees, but we are hoping that we're going to become friends, but we also have to say no at some point" (Volunteer 1, Aberystwyth). Volunteers also expressed frustration at language barriers that limited relationships, particularly with Syrian refugees in Aberystwyth and Newtown. Accordingly, individuals with some knowledge of Arabic, usually from previous mobility – a volunteer who had lived in Egypt, an Iraqi teacher who taught Arabic and the Qu'ran to refugee children and basic Arabic to volunteers – were afforded significance as "transversal enablers" (Wise, 2009; Radford, 2016).

Beyond core volunteers, cosmopolitanism relies on the wider practice of conviviality by community members: smiling and saying "hello" to refugees in street, for instance. A tenet of rural cosmopolitanism is that the propinquity of life in small towns and rural communities makes such routine interactions easier, as a support worker who had first arrived in Ballyhaunis as a migrant recounted:

> [In] the bigger cities you generally feel lost, lonely. In a smaller community you're more visible and if it's a small town and there is more older people and they're usually more friendly … You actually do feel part of the town even, as I said before, "Hello, how are you?". I didn't realise at the time that "How are you?" is only a formal greeting. I felt they're actually interested how I am (NGO worker, Ballyhaunis).

Shared communal spaces such as parks, playgrounds, libraries, supermarkets and especially schools, thus serve as key sites in which cosmopolitanism is practiced and consolidated (c.f. Radford, 2016). The presence of only one high school in both Ballyhaunis and Newtown was attributed as an important factor in encouraging integration and avoiding segregation, with schools facilitating the building of relationships between both children and parents.[8] Schools can additionally reinforce cosmopolitan ethics through teaching and extra-curricular activities, for example Ballyhaunis High School has put on "multicultural" days where pupils share their national cultures providing an opportunity "to talk to other students, contemporaries, and discuss, you know, where they came from and compare some of the similarities and some of the differences" (Teacher, Ballyhaunis).

The proactive staging of cosmopolitanism was also performed by the Gaelic sports club (GAA) in Ballyhaunis, which set up "inclusion teams" and has run "integration days" to introduce new arrivals to traditional Irish sports, with publicity printed in multiple languages and transport laid on from the asylum accommodation centre.[9] A newspaper report described children "wrapping up festivities for the day by marching, in their club and county colours, under the national flags of Pakistan, Palestine, Mali, Liberia, Ghana, Angola, Kosovo, Ireland and half a dozen other countries whose flags I fail to recognize" (Butler, 2015: 3). The initiative symbolically opened a core institution of Irish rural life to migrants and gave established and new residents a common purpose in supporting the town's teams, something that may have been more difficult to achieve in larger places.

The scripting of cosmopolitanism sets out expectations on refugees and asylum seekers to engage with the local community, demonstrate affinity with place, and perhaps most importantly, to provide affirmation of the community's cosmopolitanism by responding positively to the outreach. As such, reciprocity is a critical component in the performance of cosmopolitanism (c.f. Wagner, 2019). In the case study towns, examples of reciprocity ranged from refugees helping local volunteers with simple chores, to residents of the asylum accommodation centre in Ballyhaunis volunteering with a local care provider, to staged actions, such as Syrian refugees in Aberystwyth giving out flowers to passers-by as a gesture of thanks (BBC News, 2016). Not long after the opening of the asylum accommodation centre in Ballyhaunis, a newspaper article reported that asylum seekers had "mobilized themselves into a model army of community workers":

> Armed with spades and shovels, 29 of the 85 people in the hostel run by the Department of Foreign Affairs at the former convent in Ballyhaunis will clean up the local river and car-parks … The "clean and green" unit, which comprises 15 nationalities including Uzbekistanis, Nigerians, Algerians and Croats (Shiel, 2001: 3).

Additionally, food-sharing has become a notable focal point for the performance of cosmopolitanism, involving the extension of hospitality by refugees and the acceptance of that hospitality by established residents. When Syrian refugees in Aberystwyth wanted to raise awareness of the siege of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus in December 2017, the women made "siege soup" which they handed out in the town centre. That action germinated an idea that evolved into running a pop-up restaurant raising funds for school clothes and equipment for their children. In Newtown, volunteers helped Syrian refugees to share their cuisine at the annual food festival.

[8] The position of primary schools is more complex. Capacity issues at the first school in Ballyhaunis meant that some children from the asylum accommodation centre were bussed to schools in neighbouring villages. In Newtown it was noted that all children from Syrian refugee families had been placed in one primary school that was not necessarily their closest, which some interviewees felt inhibited integration with their neighbourhood.

[9] The GAA manages the distinctively Irish sports of hurling, camogie and Gaelic football, which were popularised in the late 19th century as indigenous alternatives to the colonial English sports of cricket, rugby and soccer.

5.3. The limits of rural cosmopolitanism

The enrolment of cosmopolitanism in place-making in Aberystwyth, Ballyhaunis and Newtown has presented the towns as singular entities, making claims about values, attitudes and practices on behalf of the community as a whole. The performativity of cosmopolitanism, however, creates possibilities for dissent or apathy by individuals who fail to conform to scripted behaviours. Interviewees in all three towns were keen to emphasize the absence of racial violence or aggression, which they contrasted with their perception of large cities, yet some alluded to anti-refugee comments appearing on social media or in letters to the local press. Such sentiments conflicted with discourses of cosmopolitanism and some interviewees suggested that they may have come from outside the locality, but others acknowledged that anti-refugee comments reflected strains of political opinion within the community:

> I don't think it is misrepresenting the town. It's very hard to know, as we've seen in the last couple of years with how people vote, it's hard to know what people think and sometimes it's best not to stir the pot to find out, but just to get on and get things established. (Volunteer, Newtown)

More widespread was the ambivalence of local residents who have not opposed refugee resettlement and may share in the asserted collective pride in the town's hospitality towards refugees, but who have demurred from personally engaging with refugees or practicing conviviality. An event to celebrate World Refugee Day in Ballyhaunis in 2015, for example, attracted few attendees from the majority white community. A community worker in Ballyhaunis accordingly hinted at the superficiality of cosmopolitanism in the town, as refugees and asylum seekers were encouraged to see themselves as part of the town, but remained isolated:

> Isolation is a big thing and particularly if we talk about rural context and if we talk about asylum seekers and other migrants … it could be quite illusionary and you'd think that you're part of the town but you're still on your own. (NGO worker, Ballyhaunis).

At the same time, problems were recounted arising from the eagerness of some local residents to extend hospitality, in ways that potentially compromised refugees' privacy and security and emphasized their "exoticness" in the community. In Aberystwyth and Newtown, guidance had been followed to keep the addresses of refugee families confidential, but interviewees described discovering that these efforts had been compromised by small town gossip and volunteers taking friends along to meet refugees:

> I think certain people don't understand that boundary. So of course we are very aware about safeguarding … We did have originally two translators, a female and a male, and the female translator we couldn't actually work with anymore because she then started invited her friends. So she'd bring her friends in. She was part of a, kind of, community church group, and thinking they were doing the right thing but of course then they then bring their friends in and all of a sudden on day two we go round and there's people in their houses. (Support worker, Newtown).

Deviations from the script of cosmopolitanism came not only from local residents, but from refugees and asylum seekers. As noted in the previous section, the discourse of rural cosmopolitanism placed expectations of reciprocity on refugees that they had no part in formulating. Indeed, the expectations were constructed from a position of white privilege, with limited appreciation of how the capacity of refugees to perform ascribed roles might be constrained by precarious legal and financial situations, cultural differences (notably around alcohol), or ongoing trauma. Some interviewees, especially in Ballyhaunis, accordingly expressed frustration that refugees (and other migrants) had not instigated more interactions, and at their perceived limited participation in established community organizations and activities. These comments betrayed a tendency towards expecting the integration and assimilation of immigrants into the settled Irish community structure over a cosmopolitan respect of difference.

In expressing such reservations, respondents highlighted the contingency and precarity of cosmopolitanism as a prevailing frame in the towns. Shifting attitudes among local residents were informed by media representations, experiences of economic recession and austerity policies, and increasing societal Islamophobia, but also by observed changes in the towns. In Ballyhaunis, in particular, the growth in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers prompted even some individuals who had been proactive in promoting the discourse of cosmopolitanism to question whether the town had "absorbed more than its fair share" (McGreal, 2015). As well as implicitly channelling racialised ideas of "carrying capacity" and intra-cultural competition, these questions revealed limits to cosmopolitanism, implying that whilst difference might be celebrated in relation to small numbers of refugees, the re-making of the town into a multicultural place with a minority white Irish population was not acceptable.

Ambivalent or precarious cosmopolitanism is not restricted to rural localities, but the small-town environment of the three case studies contributed to shaping the parameters of cosmopolitan attitudes and practices. Thus, whilst the discourse of rural cosmopolitanism celebrates the propinquity of life in a small community as meaning that new arrivals are seen, known, and welcomed, some interviewees noted that it also afforded a problematic visibility to non-white refugees and asylum seekers:

> People shouldn't be living institutionalised for so many years, but if they exist they should not be in small towns like Ballyhaunis because you're immediately singled out. If you are African appearance it's definitely you're from the Convent. Everybody knows that you're vulnerable. Everybody knows you live on nineteen euro. You can be targeted as a victim of abuse. (NGO worker, Ballyhaunis).

Similarly, assertions around the "natural" conviviality of small towns and rural communities (Neal and Walters, 2008), were skewed by a taken-for-granted assumption that the structure of community life was easily legible. Only a few interviewees acknowledged that new arrivals in Aberystwyth, Ballyhaunis or Newtown have been faced with the challenge of negotiating an unfamiliar topography of institutions, organizations and conventions, reflecting Herslund's (2021) observation that refugees in rural Denmark had to work out how to behave in a small town. One interviewee in Ballyhaunis recalled from personal experience that, "there isn't much going on, especially if you're not local and you don't know … if some kind of random, once-off person landed in Ballyhaunis and didn't have a previous connection she would find it difficult" (NGO worker, Ballyhaunis).

The problem of negotiating small town life extends to structural constraints and deficiencies that follow from the rural location, including limited housing and employment opportunities, restricted shops and services, and skeletal public transport. Several respondents who worked closely with refugees recalled stories of members of refugee communities travelling long distances to buy halal food, or to practice religious rituals, as well as of individuals and families that had moved away in order to find suitable work or housing.[10] Others, however, noted that challenges of limited services, housing and employment are common to all rural residents, and suggested that refugees from rural backgrounds were better equipped to adapt. This contrast in

[10] Aberystwyth and Ballyhaunis have mosques serving Muslim communities pre-dating the arrival of refugees from Syria and other Islamic countries, but Newtown has only a prayer room for men. An Asian supermarket selling halal food opened in Aberystwyth during the pandemic in 2020, prior to which Muslim residents had travelled to Swansea, 2 h away, for most halal products. Syrian refugees in Newtown similarly travelled an hour to Telford to buy halal food. There are long-established halal shops in Ballyhaunis.

perspectives highlights a cleavage in the towns between residents whose positivity towards refugees is pinned on expectations of integration into a community that fundamentally remains the same, and those with arguably more genuinely cosmopolitan outlooks who recognize that coexistence requires access to appropriate cultural resources and change within the existing community.

6. Returning to race

The case studies of Aberystwyth, Ballyhaunis and Newtown illustrate well-intentioned efforts to assert cosmopolitan values in respect to the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers, but also highlight the limits to rural cosmopolitanism. In each town, the articulation of implicitly cosmopolitan discourses of welcoming refugees and celebrating diversity was closely entwined with place-making, drawing on aspects of local culture and history (including their rural, non-metropolitan context) but also projecting a forward-looking identity that was contrasted with other rural towns and communities. As cosmopolitanism is performative, the discourses scripted expected roles and practices for community members and for refugees that have been only partiality enacted. Whilst anti-refugee sentiments in the three towns are limited, ambivalence towards cosmopolitanism is more widespread (Skrbis and Woodward, 2007), contributing to the precarity of the cosmopolitan condition (Woods, 2018).

Tensions are evident between the views of residents whose welcoming attitude towards refugees is premised on an expectation of integration and assimilation, and those who express arguably more genuinely cosmopolitan ideas of the community changing as it embraced diversity. The distinction could be observed in the different approaches of the two schools in Ballyhaunis. The elementary school banned symbols of cultural identity and discouraged any differentiation on nationality, aiming to reinforce the principle that everyone is equal regardless of background, whereas the high school encouraged students to celebrate their own cultures, holding an international day in which students of different nationalities set up stalls to inform each other about their culture.

Frailties in the edifice of cosmopolitanism in part reflected its asymmetrical construction from a position of white privilege by members of the pre-existing community, with expectations extended to refugees and asylum seekers with limited understanding of their interests, hopes, constraints and challenges. One notable finding from the case studies is that it was frequently NGO staff and volunteers who worked most closely with refugees and asylum seekers who articulated a critical counter-narrative to the assertion of cosmopolitanism, pinpointing its weaknesses and limits. In raising problems with this concept, they implicitly spoke on behalf of refugees, not only in our interviews, but also in spaces of public discourse within the communities, in which the voices of refugees and asylum seekers were rarely directly heard.

The few refugees and asylum seekers with whom we spoke to followed the cosmopolitanism script in expressing gratitude and emphasizing the hospitality of the community and security and tranquillity of the small town setting, but they also described difficulties building friendships, accessing services and transport, and finding employment and housing. These people commonly expressed a sense of being temporary residents in the towns. Asylum seekers in Ballyhaunis were residents in the Old Convent centre only whilst their applications were processed – which could take up to five years (Moreo, 2012) – and would be required to move once a decision was made. Limited housing supply meant that few were likely to be able to stay in Ballyhaunis. In Newtown, meanwhile, refugees talked about moving to larger cities for work or cultural networks, and mentioned others who already had. This condition of temporary belonging, which inhibits the development of strong ties with the community, was by contrast absent from the framing of the cosmopolitan discourse, which tended to assume that refugees were a permanent part of the town. Indeed, onward migration by refugees could be regarded by local residents as an affront to rural cosmopolitanism, and examples tended to be rationalised away as cases of individuals from urban backgrounds who couldn't adapt to rural life, or of households being reluctantly forced to leave by structural circumstances.

The significance of race in the negotiation of these dynamics was rarely mentioned, avoided by references to categories such as "refugee" and by an emphasis on religion as a differentiating characteristic. In Aberystwyth and Newtown, Syrian refugees were "othered" in relation to the established community by reference to their Muslim faith and culture. In Ballyhaunis, the presence of a Muslim community pre-dating the asylum centre was reflected in a different but equally racialised tendency to see non-European cultures as undifferentiated entities and to assume that Syrian or Pakistani asylum seekers and earlier Syrian or Pakistani migrants would gravitate together, despite religious or political differences.

Discourses of cosmopolitanism were, as earlier critiques of the concept have noted, framed in terms of interactions between an established community and new arrivals. However, this is not to say that the existing community was regarded as static or homogenous. The presence of earlier in-migrants, both domestic and international, was cited in claims to cosmopolitanism, even if some of that migration – especially in Newtown – may have been motivated by "white flight" from English cities. Neither was "whiteness" unproblematized. In all three towns there was awareness of multiple "white" identities: white Irish, white Welsh, white English, white European labour migrants, as well as the Irish Traveller community, who were commonly recognized as a distinct culture present in Ballyhaunis alongside immigrant nationalities. The differentiation of whiteness reflected sensibilities towards colonialism. In Ballyhaunis, the experiences of English colonialism and the Irish diaspora were drawn on to suggest an empathy with refugees. In Wales, the assertation of cosmopolitanism was employed by some activists to affirm an inclusive vision of Welsh identity, differentiated both from English attitudes to immigration and to forms of white nationalism.

Yet, there was little recognition of how well-intentioned cosmopolitan opinions and practices have also been shaped by white cultural norms and the persistence of orientalist mindsets. Humanitarian imperatives to help refugees are informed by representations of the Global South as dangerous and under developed and notions of paternalistic responsibility; the celebration of diversity frequently plays to embedded stereotypes and tropes of the exotic; and individuals who have served in remnants of empire as missionary priests or teachers in international schools have found roles as transversal enablers.

7. Conclusion

With the acceleration and expansion of global mobility, small towns and rural communities in the Global North are negotiating increasing ethnic and racial diversity. Contrary to conventional perceptions of rural societies as parochial and reactionary, many non-metropolitan places have adopted proactive stances towards welcoming refugees and other migrants, which several commentators have represented as signs of an emergent rural cosmopolitanism. The cases studies of refugee and asylum seeker reception in Aberystwyth, Ballyhaunis and Newtown affirm the assertion of cosmopolitan ideals, but also reveal the complexity and contingency of rural cosmopolitanism in practice. Cosmopolitan scripts set out performative expectations that are not fully realised, with the rural or small-town context contributing to inhibiting factors. Moreover, both the discursive framing and the practice of cosmopolitanism are embedded in racialised and place-specific palimpsests of migration and colonial engagement that are not fully acknowledged.

These findings resonate with critiques that hold that cosmopolitanism as a concept doesn't go far enough in questioning or challenging racial hierarchies and power structures. Certainly, as a normative ideal, rural cosmopolitanism may be insufficiently radical to achieve true racial justice. Yet, the analysis in this paper supports the conclusion that

as an analytical framework rural cosmopolitanism retains usefulness, allowing the disjunctures between discourse and practice to be explored, revealing ambivalence and precarity, and identifying the limits of rural cosmopolitanism in a world shaped by race and colonialism.

Author statement

Michael Woods was responsible for designing and coordinating the research, writing the paper and supporting analysis of empirical data, drawing on interviews undertaken by the author in Ballyhaunis, by Taulant Guma and Sophie Yarker in Aberystwyth, and by Laura Jones, Sam Saville and Marc Welsh in Newtown.

Funding statement

This paper draws on research funded by the European Research Council, Advanced Grant no 339567 (GLOBAL-RURAL) and the Economic and Social Research Council, grant ES/L009099/1 (WISERD Civil Society Research Centre).

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

References

Barber, T., 2020. Differentiated embedding among the Vietnamese refugees in London and the UK: fragmentation, complexity, and ‘in/visibility’. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 47, 4835–4852.
BBC News, 2016. Syrian Refugees in Aberystwyth Give Thanks for Welcome. BBC News website, 13 July 2016. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-mid-wales-36786561.
BBC News, 2018. Where Have the UK’s 10,000 Syrian Refugees Gone? BBC News Website, 24 April 2018. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43826163.
Beck, U., Sznaider, N., 2006. Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda. Br. J. Sociol. 57, 1–23.
Berg-Nordlie, M., 2018. New in town: small-town media discourses on immigrants and immigration. J. Rural Stud. 64, 210–219.
Berlet, C., Sunshine, S., 2019. Rural rage: the roots of right-wing populism in the United States. J. Peasant Stud. 46, 480–513.
Boese, M., Moran, A., Mallman, M., 2020. Multi-local settlement mobilities. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 46, 3277–3295.
Butler, E., 2015. The GAA Is Just like a Family. The Irish Times, p. 3, 6 June 2015.
Butler, R., Ben, J., 2021. Centring settler colonialism in rural Australian multicultures: race, place and local identities. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 47, 2179–2197.
Byrne, M., 2008. It’s a Small World – Ballyhaunis and the National Refugee Orientation Centre. Connaught Telegraph, p. 16, 30 January 2008.
Carlbaum, S., 2021. Refugee women’s establishment in the rural north of Sweden: cultural capital in meeting local labour market needs. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 48, 1210–1227.
Conlon, D., 2010. Ties that bind: governmentality, the state, and asylum in contemporary Ireland. Environ. Plann. D Soc. Space 28, 95–111.
Connaught Telegraph, 2015. Sod Turned on €7m Ballyhaunis School Project. Connaught Telegraph, p. 46, 27 Oct 2015.
Dalglish, C., 1989. Refugees from Vietnam. Macmillan, London.
de Hoon, M., Vink, M., Schmeets, H., 2021. On the move again? Residential trajectories of refugees after obtaining asylum in The Netherlands. Popul. Space Place 27, e2386.
Fanning, B., 2011. Immigration and Social Cohesion in the Republic of Ireland. Manchester University Press, Manchester.
Fitzmaurice, M., 2002. ‘Oh what a year!’: report from Ballyhaunis chamber of commerce. Annagh 25, 10–11.
Flavell, A., 2021. The Integration Nation: Immigration and Colonial Power in Liberal Democracies. Polity, Cambridge.
Gidwani, V., Sivaramakrishnan, K., 2003. Circular migration and rural cosmopolitanism in India. Contrib. Indian Sociol. 37, 339–367.
Gilhooly, D., Lee, E., 2017. Rethinking urban refugee resettlement: a case study of one Karen community in rural Georgia, USA. Int. Migrat. 55, 37–55.
Gilroy, P., 2004. After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?. Routledge, New York.
Guma, T., Woods, M., Yarker, S., Anderson, J., 2019. ‘It’s that kind of place here’: solidarity, place-making and civil society response to the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ in different localities in Wales, UK. Soc. Incl. 7, 96–105.
Hannerz, U., 1990. Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. In: Featherstone, M. (Ed.), Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity. Sage, London, pp. 237–252.
Haugen, S., 2019. ‘We feel like we’re home’: the resettlement and integration of Syrian refugees in smaller and rural Canadian communities. Refuge 35, 53–63.
Hausermann, H., Lundy, M., Mitchell, J., Ipsen, A., Zorn, Q., Vasquez-Romero, K., Lynch, R., 2021. Unsettled belonging in complex geopolitics: refugees, NGOs and rural communities in northern Colorado. Sustainability 13, e1344.
Hellstrom, M., 2020. Refugee settlement in new Brunswick. J. Int. Migrat. Integrat. 21, 21–39.
Herslund, L., 2021. Everyday life as a refugee in a rural setting? What determines a sense of belonging and what role can the local community play in generating it? J. Rural Stud. 82, 233–241.
Hiitola, J., Vaha-Savo, V., 2022. Reassembling attachments: place and well-being among Afghan refugees in a small rural town. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 15, 3602–3618 early access.
Hoibjerg, G.R., 2020. ‘We do not use freezers in Syria’: realignment and the pursuit of belonging among refugees in a Norwegian village. J. Int. Migrat. Integrat. 21, 1083–1096.
Hopkins, D.J., 2010. Politicized places: explaining where and when immigrants provoke local opposition. Am. Polit. Sci. Rev. 104, 40–60.
Hubbard, P., 2005. ‘Inappropriate and incongruous’: opposition to asylum centres in the English countryside. J. Rural Stud. 21, 3–17.
Hudson, C., Sandberg, L., 2021. Contested hope for the future: rural refugee reception as municipal survival? J. Rural Stud. 82, 121–129.
Keith, M., 2005. After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism. Routledge, London.
Kinlen, L., 2011. Welcome to Ireland: seeking protection as an asylum seeker or through resettlement – different avenues, different reception. Refuge 28, 31–47.
Klocker, N., Hodge, P., Dun, O., Crosbie, E., Dufty-Jones, R., McMichael, C., Block, K., Piper, M., Musoni, E., Ford, L., Jordan, C., Radford, D., 2021. Spaces of well-being and regional settlement: international migrants and the rural idyll. Popul. Space Place e2443.
Krivokapic-Skoko, B., Reid, C., Collins, J., 2018. Rural cosmopolitanism in Australia. J. Rural Stud. 64, 153–163.
Ley, D., 2004. Transnational spaces and everyday lives. Trans. Inst. Br. Geogr. 29, 151–164.
Massey, D., 2005. For Space. Sage, London.
McAreavey, R., Argent, N., 2018. New immigrant destinations (NID): unravelling the challenges and opportunities for migrants and for host communities. J. Rural Stud. 64, 148–152.
McGarry, F., 2007. Refugee Centre Decision Angers Councillor. Western People, p. 8, 23 October 2007.
McGreal, E., 2015. ‘Social Cohesion’ of Ballyhaunis ‘Under Threat’. Mayo News, 1 December 2015.
Moreo, E., 2012. On visibility and invisibility: migrant practice between regimes of representation and self-determination. In: Lenlin, R., Moreo, E. (Eds.), Migrant Activism and Integration from below in Ireland. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 72–94.
Mukherjee, P.C., Rath, A., 2015. ‘Practicing’ cosmopolitanism in knowledge spaces, cityscapes and marketplaces. J. Hum. Val. 21, 87–98.
Müller, F., 2011. Urban alchemy: performing urban cosmopolitanism in London and Amsterdam. Urban Stud. 48, 3145–3431.
Murphy, D., 2015. What awaits refugees in Ireland? The Irish Times p 3, 24 May 2015.
Neal, S., 2002. Rural landscapes, representations and racism: examining multicultural citizenship and policy-making in the English countryside. Ethn. Racial Stud. 25 (3), 442–461.
Neal, S., 2012. Rural Identities: Ethnicity and Community in the Contemporary English Countryside. Ashgate, Farnham.
Neal, S., Agyeman, J. (Eds.), 2006. The New Countryside? Ethnicity, Nation and Exclusion in Contemporary Rural Britain. Policy Press, Bristol, pp. 99–126.
Neal, S., Walters, S., 2008. Rural Be/longing and rural social organizations: conviviality and community-making in the English countryside. Sociology 42 (2), 279–297.
Nelson, K.A., Marston, C., 2020. Refugee migration histories in a meatpacking town: blurring the line between primary and secondary migration. J. Int. Migrat. Integrat. 21, 77–91.
Noble, G., 2013. Cosmopolitan habits: the capacities and habitats of intercultural conviviality. Body and Society 19, 162–185.
Nowicka, M., Vertovec, S., 2014. Comparing convivialities: dreams and realities of living-with-difference. European Journal of Cultural Studies 17, 341–356.
Popke, J., 2011. Latino migration and neoliberalism in the U.S. South: notes toward a rural cosmopolitanism. SE. Geogr. 51, 242–259.
Radford, D., 2016. ‘Everyday otherness’: intercultural refugee encounters and everyday multiculturalism in a South Australian rural town. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 42, 2128–2145.
Radford, D., 2017. Space, place and identity: intercultural encounters, affect and belonging in rural Australian spaces. J. Intercult. Stud. 38, 495–513.
Robbins, B., 1998. Actually existing cosmopolitanism. In: Cheah, P., Robbins, B. (Eds.), Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 1–19.
Schaub, M., Gereke, J., Baldassarri, D., 2021. Strangers in hostile lands: exposure to refugees and right-wing support in Germany’s eastern regions. Comp. Polit. Stud. 54, 686–717.
Schech, S., 2014. Silent bargain or rural cosmopolitanism? Refugee settlement in regional Australia. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 40, 601–618.

Shiel, T., 2001. Mayo-based asylum-seekers repay locals for their hospitality. The Irish Times 15, p 3. October 2001.
Sklair, L., 2001. The Transnational Capitalist Class. Blackwell, Oxford.
Skrbis, Z., Woodward, I., 2007. The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness. Sociol. Rev. 55, 730–747.
Stead, V., Butler, R., Mayes, C., 2022. Race and place-making in the rural global north. J. Rural Stud. (in press).
Torres, R.M., Popke, E.J., Hapke, H.M., 2006. The South's Silent Bargain: rural reconstructing, Latino labour and the ambiguities of migrant experience. In: Smith, H., Furuseth, O. (Eds.), Latinos in the New South. Ashgate, Burlington, VT, pp. 37–68.
Vogiazides, L., Mondani, H., 2020. A geographical path to integration? Exploring the interplay between regional context and labour market integration among refugees in Sweden. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 46, 23–45.
Wagner, G., 2019. Helfen und reziprozität: freiwilliges engagement für geflüchtete im ländlichen raum. Z. Soziol. 48, 226–241.
Weidinger, T., Kordel, S., 2020. Access to and exclusion from housing over time: refugees' experiences in rural areas. Int. Migrat. early access.
White, A., 2012. 'Every Wednesday I am happy': childhoods in an Irish asylum centre. Popul. Space Place 18, 314–326.
Whyte, Z., Larsen, B.R., Olwig, K.F., 2019. New neighbours in a time of change: local pragmatics and the perception of asylum centres in rural Denmark. J. Ethnic Migrat. Stud. 45, 1953–1969.
Wilding, R., Nunn, C., 2018. Non-metropolitan productions of multiculturalism: refugee resettlement in rural Australia. Ethn. Racial Stud. 41, 2542–2560.
Wise, A., 2009. Everyday Multiculturalism: transversal Crossings and working class cosmopolitans. In: Wise, A., Velayutham, S. (Eds.), Everyday Multiculturalism. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 21–45.
Woods, M., 2018. Precarious rural cosmopolitanism: negotiating globalization, migration and diversity in Irish small towns. J. Rural Stud. 64, 164–176.