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Introduction

Bob Birrell and Virginia Rapson (2002, p.11), in an article for *People and Place*, claimed that Sydney and Melbourne, and to a lesser degree Perth, constituted Australia's multicultural heartland and that the rest of Australia was distinctive for its relative absence of ethnic diversity. This, they speculated, had contributed to a profound fissure between the city and the bush. Sydney and Melbourne, they claimed, contain the generators and transmitters of the multicultural and cosmopolitan ideals which are now so influential in intelligentsia circles, and rearguard resistance to these images is largely based in regional Australia (Birrell and Rapson 2002, p. 21). As this paper foregrounds, not only are there parts of regional Australia that are notably culturally diverse, multiculturalism as a way of understanding this diversity may indeed be embraced by these communities.

The town of Griffith, located in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, in the Riverina region of New South Wales, is the focus of this study of multiculturalism in regional Australia. The town is approximately 600km west of Sydney, on Wiradjuri land, and has a population of around 15,000 in a Local Government Area (LGA) of around 24,000. The local government authority is Griffith City Council. The local economy is based largely on agriculture and related industries.
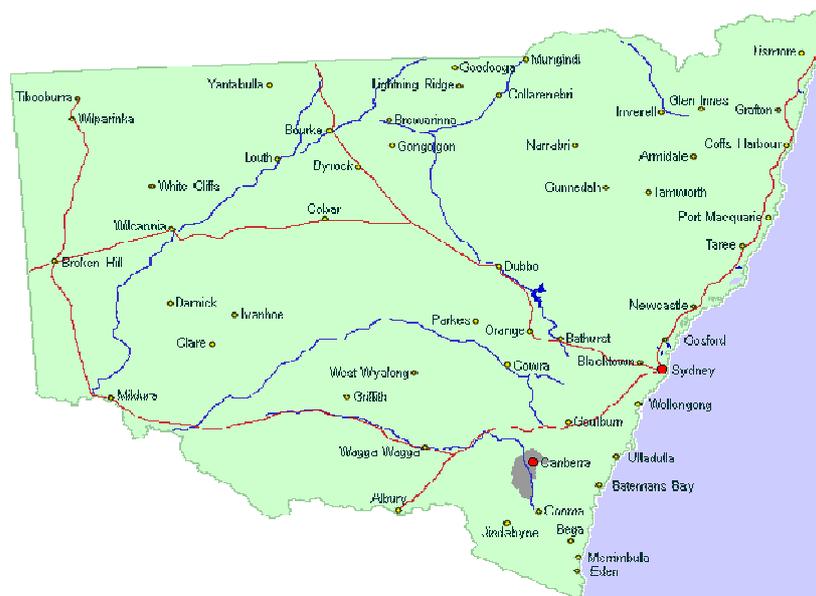
About 17% of the population were born overseas, a much higher percentage than many other regional LGAs. The main countries of birth are Italy, India, New Zealand, England, Fiji, Turkey, Tonga and Samoa. The main countries of ancestry of

residents are Australia, Italy and England, in similar quantities. 3.6% of the population are Indigenous, a figure which is higher than the NSW average.

Griffith LGA Main Countries of Origin and Ancestry from 2001 Census

Birthplace	No of People	% of Total Overseas Born
Australia	18,331	
Overseas	3,989	
Italy	1,626	40.8
India	491	12.3
New Zealand	381	9.6
England	253	6.3
Fiji	149	3.7
Turkey	147	3.7
Tonga	104	2.6
Samoa	95	2.4
Ancestry	**Total Number**	
Australian	7,946	
English	6,275	
Italian	6,207	
Irish	1,960	
German	628	
Indian	579	
Scottish	367	
Turkish	188	

Source: Adapted from Community Relations Commission (nd)

I spent much of 2004 living in Griffith with extended family conducting fieldwork for a PhD study. Research material was derived from a range of textual sources, participant observation, and interviewing. Interviews were conducted with community leaders as well as with individuals from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Much of the material discussed below is drawn from interviews with the latter group and these individuals remain anonymous.

The research material is analysed within a theoretical framework influenced by the work of several respected scholars of Australian multiculturalism. Following Sneja Gunew (2004), the present study of Griffith describes a situated multiculturalism, based on local understandings and dynamics. The study is driven in part by Bob Hodge and John O'Carroll's (2006) suggestion that multiculturalism in Australia needs to be revised, but not discredited and removed.

The analysis draws on the work of Ghassan Hage and particularly his *White Nation* thesis (1998) to gain critical insight into the Griffith situation. In this important text Hage describes how both 'white multiculturalism' and 'white racism' reproduce the same power dynamic in relation to those constituted as ethnic others. He argues that both White racists and White multiculturalists 'share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around a White culture' (Hage 1998, p.18). He calls this belief a 'White nation' fantasy.

The present study also problematises Hage's thesis to the extent that the kind of multiculturalism lived in Griffith can be said to be both positive and progressive,

having resulted in a situation where there is genuine power-sharing between Griffith's older migrant groups, those from the United Kingdom and from Italy, as well as a willingness to engage more recent migrant groups. The most serious shortcoming of multiculturalism as it is lived in Griffith is its seeming failure to have improved the situation of Wiradjuri and other Aboriginal people. This is something that is still being grappled with in the context of a larger doctoral thesis and will not be considered in this paper.

The case of Griffith complicates the urban-rural dichotomy constructed by Birrell and Rapson, among others and seriously challenges their claims about rural resistance. Rather, close examination of Griffith suggests not only an embracing of so-called multicultural and cosmopolitan ideals, but a collective identity based on cultural diversity and a situation of changed power relations. Indeed the people of Griffith might well be described as living, in Ien Ang's (2001) terms, together-in-difference.

Griffith: 'The Birthplace of Multiculturalism'

Multiculturalism in the Australian context has a number of meanings (see for example Vasta 1996, Lopez 2000 and Ang et al 2002). Pertinent here is multiculturalism as both descriptive, and as an ideology, and the implications of this for everyday interactions as well as conceptions of a local collective identity. There are tensions evident in the analysis, as indeed is the case with multiculturalism more generally, and I do not attempt to resolve these here. Rather, the attempt is to give voice to the citizens of Griffith and to allow room for multiple readings.

There are various overlapping discursive formations which collectively construct multicultural Griffith. Significant among these is the notion of Griffith as a pre-eminent example of the Australian multicultural vision. We can get a sense of this from the inaugural speech to the NSW Parliament by Griffith MLC Tony Catanzariti (2003), in which he claimed that Griffith was the birthplace of multiculturalism. Others too have described Griffith in similar terms. For the late Al Grassby, multicultural Griffith was 'a lesson as to what can be achieved and how it can be achieved for the whole of Australia' (Grassby 1985, p.11). And in a 1981 study of the welfare needs of Griffith's population produced for the local council, Phillips claimed that Griffith could 'easily become the model for an Australian multi-cultural community' (Phillips 1981, p.12).

Such observations are both influenced by local realities, and are themselves influential, and the dominant collective identity of Griffith articulated publicly is increasingly one that is based on cultural diversity. This can be seen in relation to: tourism representations, where Griffith is referred to frequently in relation to its cultural diversity; local history and heritage, an arena in which even local museum Pioneer Park refers to a multicultural heritage and within whose grounds an Italian Museum has been established; inscriptions on the landscape in the form of sculptures dedicated to cultural diversity; an annual multicultural festival; and the proclamations of Griffith City Council, who include as part of their vision for Griffith the demonstration of 'pride in our cultural diversity' (GCC nd).

It is most overt in the declarations of a range of individuals who call Griffith home and it is these that largely inform this paper. One interviewee was an older Anglo-

Celtic woman and her words encapsulate the broad general sentiments many in Griffith expressed about multiculturalism. She said of multiculturalism in Griffith:

> I would hate to think what we'd be like without it…we wouldn't nearly have the wealth, and wealth in so many ways…its brilliant…it is what has made Griffith…without it we'd be nowhere…we can be a landmark for that, to the rest of Australia for that matter, and for the rest of the world perhaps, to say look, it works, look at it…its not utopia, but it works (Interviewee 3, 6 Oct 2004).

Many other participants also attributed what they described as Griffith's success to cultural diversity. By success they generally meant its relative prosperity, social cohesion, and rich social and cultural life. Throughout the study, individual responses to questions about how multiculturalism in Griffith was working, and what Griffith was like as a place to live, were overwhelmingly positive. Participants were generally comfortable and happy with the description of Griffith as 'multicultural' and described multiculturalism as both a positive and distinctive feature of the town. By multiculturalism they meant that Griffith was culturally diverse and that cultural differences were or should be acknowledged, accepted and respected.

The notion of 'acceptance' was used by several different participants to describe multiculturalism in Griffith. The word acceptance as it was used by participants implied something beyond the notion of tolerance which Hage (especially 1998) has so effectively critiqued. While acceptance does not necessarily imply an unequivocal embracing of cultural diversity, it carries with it a sense of the inevitability of multicultural Griffith, and a certain resignation to the fact.

Multicultural discourse in Griffith also goes beyond a sense of resignation and, as Hodge and O'Carroll (2006, p.3) claim in relation to Australia as a whole, many in Griffith are delighted with multiculturalism. Overwhelmingly, local people were proud of what they perceived had been achieved in Griffith, saying things like 'it's made us so strong…I would hate to think what we'd be like without it. We'd be narrow, we'd be paler, we'd be little…we'd be back to the pommy thing' (Interviewee 3, 6 Oct 2004). For this person, who described themselves as 'Australian' and whose ancestry includes a range of British elements, multiculturalism was a definite strength and was indeed 'what has made Griffith'.

Not only do many local people seem delighted with multiculturalism, they use it as a way of distinguishing themselves collectively from elsewhere in Australia. Several participants compared Griffith favourably with other places, including cosmopolitan Sydney. An older Anglo-Celtic woman claimed that Griffith was 'better than other areas. The face of the whole place has changed, and that's for the better, not for the worst…we've got a wealthier place…we have had this wonderful growth…the impact has been all good…and we haven't lost that country feel' (Interviewee 3, 6 Oct 2004). Another participant went further, describing Griffith as 'quite an exceptional town'. This person, Australian-born and whose parents had migrated from Italy, had travelled extensively throughout Australia and expanded on this point by comparing Griffith with other towns that she had spent time in. She said 'we've come to realise how good Griffith is in so many different ways- in the obvious acceptance of different races, in the food availability, in our mentality, we're quite

open in our acceptance of other races' (Interviewee 6, 11 Oct 2004). She described other country towns in Australia as 'quite insular' by comparison.

Several participants who were not born in Australia had spent time in Sydney before coming to Griffith. In the experience of one of these people, who described herself as a Cook Islands Maori, Griffith had been 'welcoming'. She said 'it's quite different down here and I hardly hear of any problems' (Interviewee 7, 8 Oct 2004). For another participant, who was born in Fiji, Griffith was better than Sydney because 'here when you go into town and you see someone, its just like you knew them before … people talk to you' (Interviewee 8, 12 Oct 2004).

Participants from a range of backgrounds who were born in Griffith also used Sydney as a point of comparison. Contemporary Griffith was seen as more progressive than Sydney in terms of 'accepting other cultures' and 'intermarriage'. One man, whose parents had migrated from Italy, thought that multiculturalism had 'developed more quickly here because it's more isolated, you're out in a country town and its right in your face, day in day out, without being able to escape from it' (Interviewee 5, 7 Oct 2004). He described Sydney as 'much more segregated'. Another participant claimed that 'we all get along well in Griffith…as well as any other community…I think we're all content with the way we live and we're tolerant of one another' (Participant 5, Group Discussion, 16 Oct 2004).

Local people had a range of theories of why they thought multiculturalism in Griffith had been the success they described it as. For many it was because both the diversity and the number of what one participant called 'people from other backgrounds' were relatively high. The size of the town was seen as important because it facilitated greater engagement with different individuals and groups. One 'Indian' person thought that Griffith had 'done better than many other places…because it has had that gradual changeover' and everyone has gradually 'mingled with each other' (Interviewee 10, 6 Oct 2004). Participants also claimed that country towns were friendlier than places like Sydney and that this had also helped. Several participants, from various backgrounds, gave significant weight to the precedent set by earlier Italian migrants, claiming that this had meant that more recent migrants were easily accepted. A younger Tongan male interviewee outlined how the dominant groups, which he named as Anglos and Italians, 'have accepted it because there's so many groups out there…they have to because I think they've realised that they can't do anything about it' (Interviewee 9, 19 Oct 2004). We might speculate then that in this sense Griffith's dominant groups are less wedded to what Hage (1998) has called the white nation fantasy and may indeed have a sense of the precariousness of their positions of relative power.

One participant was surprised at the cultural diversity that had developed. Describing himself as an Australian of Italian background, he said 'I always thought that Griffith would be exclusively an Italian town. I never thought Griffith would become such a multicultural town, which is great, it's a fantastic thing, I'm all for it' (Interviewee 5, 7 Oct 2004). The people of Griffith, 'even Anglo Saxons' he said, were more caring and accepting of other cultures because of multiculturalism. We can see in these comments how multiculturalism is valued and how positive outcomes are attributed to it. Also evident is the intimate relationship between Italian migration and multiculturalism in Griffith.

Power Relations in Multicultural Griffith

Multicultural Griffith at present appears to be most heavily influenced by Anglo-Celtic and Italian peoples and cultures. People from these backgrounds dominate on a range of fronts including in local government, where 'Italians' in particular are over-represented proportionally. They play a powerful role in setting the local political agenda and in decision-making at the local level. One observer, having moved to Griffith from Sydney about six years earlier, described it as a 'partnership' in which Italians are 'at least equal, if not stronger' (Rev. P. Gobbo, personal communication, October 18, 2004). This has of course not always been the case, as several earlier studies of Griffith revealed (see for example Pich 1975 and Huber 1977). People born in Italy and their descendents have at times faced significant xenophobia and discrimination in Griffith, particularly in the middle decades of the twentieth century, so and this is a notable shift.

There was a tendency for those from the dominant groups to conceive of themselves as spatial managers in relation to Griffith and to enact what Hage (1998) has called a governmental mode of belonging. This was manifest at times as an anxiety around the ongoing tenure of their positions of power. Griffith has a relatively large and visible Punjabi Sikh population. Many members of the dominant groups perceived this 'group', whom they called 'the Indians', as a threat to their dominance. This sometimes took the form of derogatory or racist comments and stereotypes. Other more recent migrants were viewed as being relatively benign. Pacific Islanders in particular were acceptable because 'they are just here to have a better life' (Interviewee 4b, 22 Oct 2004). Some other recent migrants were generally viewed with sympathy, as was the case with local refugees from Afghanistan. Indeed part of the discussion about refugees in the public arena in Griffith in 2004 was not about whether or not their presence was desirable, but about whether or not signs welcoming them should be erected in the town (*Area News* 2004).

The dominant groups' experiences of governmental belonging, and the associated presumption of managerial rights, are derived in the main from the histories of Anglo-Celts and Italians in Griffith, as they are understood locally. For those of Anglo-Celtic descent, even if not directly descended from earlier local settlers, legitimacy is derived from and conferred by the familiar Australian 'pioneers and settlers' narrative which legitimises those associated with this heritage (see for example Hirst 1978 and Curthoys 2000). For Italians it is derived from a range of factors most notably the length of time Italians have been in Griffith compared to other migrant groups, the size of the Italian diaspora, and the commonly held image of Italian migrants as having 'made Griffith'. Although Griffith's Italians have at times faced significant racism and discrimination, by 2004 Italian culture in Griffith had essentially become 'mainstream' or 'ordinary', and was very much part of everyday life in Griffith.

Those most comfortable talking about what multicultural Griffith was like, how they felt about the Griffith they described, what the problems were and what should be done about them, also tended to be longer-term Australians from either Anglo-Celtic or Italian backgrounds. This cluster of interviewees and participants generally spoke confidently about both themselves and their perceived group, as well as about

others. Participants who had migrated to Australia and Griffith more recently, in contrast, tended to speak more hesitantly.

On the whole there was both a broad general support for cultural diversity and multiculturalism, as well as a desire to see it 'succeed'. The key to establishing and maintaining a well-functioning multicultural community was deemed by many to be about individuals getting to know each other. Several interviewees claimed that there were generational differences in accepting and embracing multiculturalism. They said that attitudes had changed over time and that younger people in Griffith were more comfortable with cultural diversity because it had always been part of their lives. They saw the education system as playing a critical role in fostering and furthering multiculturalism, as well as local sport and church groups.

In *White Nation* Hage (1998) describes how multicultural tolerance reproduces the same power relation that exists when individuals or groups are intolerant. The point he emphasises is that tolerance results from a re-assessment by the dominant of their ability to dominate based on a change in the balance of forces between dominant and dominated. The notion that the dominant group 'tolerates' is a mystification of their actual loss of power. The difference in Griffith is that there is an acknowledgement of this loss of power and it is therefore not appropriate to describe them as merely engaging in a white nation fantasy of multicultural tolerance. It is in the engagement and embracing of multiculturalism that Griffith's white nationalists, in Hage's terms, go beyond the enactment of a white nation fantasy of dominance and control. It is more obvious in the acknowledgment of the diminishing hegemony of Anglo-Celts, which is overt in relation to those named as Italian, and tacit in relation to people from India.

Conclusion

Participants generally agreed that Griffith was 'a success story' in relation to multiculturalism, indeed it was held by many to be a model of tolerance, harmony, equity and community. On the whole participants believed that Griffith was largely free from the kinds of problems and tensions that they thought multiculturalism had led to elsewhere, often using Sydney as a case in point, reinforced by events at the beachside suburb of Cronulla in December 2005. The larger study of Griffith from which this paper is derived suggests that there is some basis to these claims.

Multiculturalism, in its Griffith specificity, is embraced by many individuals, community groups and organisations and within local government to the extent that it seems quite robust. This is quite a contrast with metropolitan media reports that frequently refer to Australian multiculturalism using words like flawed, failure and irrelevant. Everyday multiculturalism in Griffith goes beyond current conservative understandings and multiculturalism in Griffith remains not only relevant; it also provides a framework for people to make sense of their community of Griffith and to be together-in-difference (Ang 2001).

The interviewee who claimed that it was not utopia was right (Interviewee 3, 6 Oct 2004). But what we can see in Griffith is a substantial and seemingly pervasive embracing of multiculturalism that suggests it is far from having been a failure. And

Griffith may potentially, as Grassby (1985) claimed it did, provide lessons for elsewhere in Australia.

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