**Diaspora, Defeatism, and Dignity: Ulster Protestant Reimaginations of the Self through Ulster-Scots Americanism**

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**Abstract**

The notion of an American diaspora has become increasingly salient among the minority of Ulster Protestants who ascribe to the “Ulster-Scots” ethnic identity in Northern Ireland. Especially in light of the well-established conception of an Irish-American diaspora, the effort Ulster’s “Protestant community” to construct and delineate a separate, non-Irish genealogical diaspora reveals much about their collective self-conceptions and aspirations. In this paper, I argue that the descriptions of Ulster-Scots American diaspora represent both means of recasting “their” actions and ideologies as ethnically predestined, and an attempt to regain a sense of collective dignity in light of palpable antebellum defeatism.

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**Introduction**

Ethnic diaspora is a salient notion across the world, with individuals tracing traits, culture, and language across transnational spaces (Vertovec 2001). Globally, many local narratives of “nation,” “race,” and “ethnicity” include the theme of an American diaspora. Senses of identity and collective difference can be constructed and reproduced through such stories, and are even used as explanatory variables for current group behaviours, preferences, and aspirations. Such narratives can also influence the behaviour of those identifying with the group. Diaspora has a dual effect: on the one hand, it affects members of the “ethnic group” in the “diaspora,” and on the other, the narrative of the diaspora influences those within the “motherland.”

“Ulster-Scots” is the notion that there exists in the north of Ireland a discrete ethnic group, differentiable from all others in the British Isles, complete with separate culture, language, and history. This tends to equate to the Protestant, unionist-loyalist “community” in Northern Ireland; however, for some it relates specifically to those of Scottish genealogy the province of Ulster, extending inclusion to non-Protestants and excluding Protestants/unionists/loyalists of Welsh and English descent (Gardner 2015, 2016). It has received considerable publicity in the province since the mid-1990s, especially over the claims and counter-claims of its status as a separate language. Although it is best known as an alleged language, many of its promoters and advocates whom I interviewed conceptualised it primarily as a genealogical and cultural identity, with the linguistic dimension very much secondary. As such, it is this latter meaning of “Ulster-Scots” which I use throughout this paper. Within the literature on Ulster-Scots, many contend that it represents merely a unionist-loyalist backlash, a Protestant weapon in a cultural war with Irishness (for example, see Mac Póilin 1999). Such conceptions of Ulster-Scots fail to observe the contradictions and complexities of its “revival.” While debate over whether Ulster-Scots constitutes an emergent or resurgent identity continue, Stapleton and Wilson (2004) rightly argue that the recent rise of societal cognisance of, and identification with, Ulster-Scots necessitates greater empirical engagement it as a social phenomenon.

The notion of an American diaspora has become a central motif for promoters of Ulster-Scots[[2]](#endnote-1). Especially alongside the well-established Irish-American diaspora, the notion of a separate Ulster-Scots version is comparatively novel. Since the nineties, there have been occasional clashes between the Irish government and promoters of Ulster-Scots over this diaspora (see, for example, Laird 2010). The notional Irish diaspora of over forty million in the US has been countered by claims from promoters of Ulster-Scots that more than half of these are in reality ethnic Ulster-Scots. The public dispute between the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Irish government was described by former chair of the Agency, Lord Laird, in an interview with the author as ‘the battle of America and the southern States’ (for more detail, see his book in which he discusses the matter: Laird 2010). Such claims appear to be largely based on genealogical re-categorisations of individuals and notions of ethnic false consciousness, as these figures are not borne out in statistics of self-identification. In the 2000 US census, Irish was the second most commonly stated ancestry with 30.8 million (10.8 per cent) doing so (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Conversely, “Scots-Irish,” the US identity which is commonly alleged to be unproblematically equivalent to Ulster-Scots in Northern Ireland, is the fourteenth most common ancestry, with 4.3 million (1.5 per cent).

In this paper, I contend that the notion of an Ulster-Scots diaspora in the United States is utilised such that several specific ideas about Ulster-Scots peoplehood can be developed. I draw out three such ideas: ethnic aspirations and exceptionalism, political ideology (libertarianism, laissez-faire economics, and democracy), and a space in which settler-colonial history can be reclaimed as permissible, and even victorious. I argue that such a dialogue represents not mere political expediency for those whom it is purported to describe, but, rather, an attempt to regain a sense of collective dignity in light of palpable Protestant defeatism. Throughout this paper, I use the term “Ulster-Scots Americanism” to describe the ideological usage of the theme of an American diaspora in the Ulster-Scots peoplehood narrative.

The paper is divided into three main sections. First, I outline two features of Northern Irish Protestant identification pertinent to this research: defeatism and the rise of the Ulster-Scots ethnolinguistic identity. Second, utilising and building upon the work of Hodson (1996) and Lamont (2000), I outline the definition of “collective dignity” which I adopt in the analysis of this research. After briefly outlining the research methods used, the fourth section outlines the findings from the research, describing the ethnic exceptionalism, political and economic ideology, and reimaginations of history within Ulster-Scots Americanism.

**Protestant Defeatism and the Rise of Ulster-Scots**

According to Nagel (1994:161,154), ethnic identities are ‘created, emphasized, chosen, or discarded’ through a ‘dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designations’. However, as Smith (2003:32) notes, such continuous processes of identity construction and reconstruction involve power differentials, developing out of ‘*constrained*, *asymmetrical* interactions between actual and would-be leaders of political communities and the potential constituents for whom they compete.’ Although both constituents and (potential) leaders possess meaningful agency, these interactions are asymmetrical as leaders and potential leaders have greater incentives and capabilities to institutionalise the collective identity they purport to (re)present. Concomitantly, elite narrative-creation is also constrained by the ‘great variety of senses of membership, identity, and affiliation, with entrenched economic interests, political and religious benefits, historical and cultural attachments, and animosities’ within the population which they seek to describe (Smith 2003:34). This is certainly the case in relation to Ulster-Scots peoplehood-building in Northern Ireland, with its considerable and varied array of intersectional ‘senses of identity, interests, and ideals.’

The various causal mechanisms which have led to the rise of Ulster-Scots have not, as yet, been concretely outlined. As necessary a task as outlining these mechanisms are, my aim in this paper is more limited. In this section, I elaborate upon one particular mechanism in the construction of Ulster-Scots identity; the interaction between ethno-cultural deficiency and defeatism amongst Northern Ireland’s Protestants since the 1980s. It is within the context of a shift towards cultural politics that the Ulster-Scots “revival” originated and became politically potent (McCall 2002).

The shift in ‘northern protestant’ conceptions of self from triumphalism to defeatism since the latter half of the Troubles has been well documented (see Anderson and Shuttleworth 1994; Finlay 2001; McKay 2000; Nelson 1984; Smithey 2011; Southern 2007). Utilising Northern Irish attitudinal surveys, Hughes and Donnelly (2003) describe the growing feeling of marginalisation articulated by “the Protestant community” through the nineties as the “Catholic community” grew in political confidence. Since the Good Friday Agreement, Protestant victimhood has become a key theme of unionist political elite discourses (see Ganiel 2007); as Lawther (2014:52) writes, ‘the relationship between innocence, legitimacy, and hierarchies of victimhood is integral to unionist's sense of identity and collective memory.'

For Anderson and Shuttleworth (1994:97), this sense of marginalisation is not grounded in ‘reality’, but a ‘deflated superiority complex.’ In light of Todd’s (1987) consideration of Ulster Loyalist ideology as containing the binary of domination or defeat, despite the Troubles concluding with Northern Ireland’s position within the UK retained, power sharing and other concessions to Catholics, republicans, and Irish nationalists through the conflict would appear to be a source for such defeatism. For Finlay (2001:16), this phenomenon is primarily ‘symptomatic of the fact that northern protestants did not develop a strong collective identity and, perhaps, of ongoing attempts to get one in a context where identity politics have themselves become hegemonic.’

The usefulness of the Ulster-Scots revival narrative to unionists and loyalists becomes more apparent when situated in the political context in which it arose. Ideas of a Protestant cultural-national identity deficiency became increasingly potent as the Northern Irish conflict developed, at least in interpretation, from one of irredentism and state sovereignty to one of identity politics (Finlay 2010). Whereas Irish nationalists had – and, equally important, were conceptualised and understood to have – a clear, coherent national identity complete with Irish sports, culture, traditional music, language, religiosity, and myths of origin, Protestant/Ulster-British identity was conceptualised as based merely upon the institutional-legal tie with the UK: retention of the status quo rather than cultural protection or recognition (Finlay 2001; Moxon-Browne 1983; Rose 1971). Traditional unionism stressed ‘constitutional and citizenship issues … over notions of ethnicity and culture’ (Aughey 1995; Stapleton and Wilson 2004:566). Due to this “lack” of a clear cultural-ethnic-national identity, unionism was frequently critiqued for its “inarticulateness” through the Troubles: by the eighties, this had contributed to a palpable sense of ‘Protestant defeatism’ (Aughey 1995; Finlay 2001:3; Opsahl 1993).

By the eighties, ideas of cultural identity and community relations had become increasingly central in the peace process (McEvoy, McEvoy, and McConnachie 2006). For some nationalists, this represented something of a step in the right direction: cultural parity of esteem could lead to a more inclusive Northern Ireland (the original rallying cry for Catholic civil rights in the late 1960s). For many unionists and loyalists, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 represented a betrayal of their interests by Westminster, ‘[pre-empting] the end of the historical dominance of unionists and affirmed a role for the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland’ (Aughey 1995; Níc Craith 2003:54–55). The new centrality of cultural identity it heralded was strongly opposed by many unionists, who perceived it to concede too much to Irish nationalists or even give them the upper-hand due to their more developed cultural identity (Dowling 2007). As notions of peacebuilding through the Troubles migrated from the settlement of divergent constitutional and political aspirations to communal identities and intercommunal tolerance, unionists began to shift rhetoric from shifting from king-and-country civic nationalism toward genealogy, historical relational interconnectedness, culture, and ethnic identity. In response to the political environment, many unionists turned to developing ideas of Ulster-British cultural identity (Finlay 2001, 2010; Níc Craith 2003). The Ulster-Scots Heritage Council, an assemblage of unionist political elites and cultural activists, was formed in 1995 in order to advocate Ulster-Scots rights and recognition. With the two-community model and the rhetoric of parity of esteem central components of the peace process, means of assuring symmetrical cultural and linguistic provisions became politically expedient in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement. Concomitantly, the Heritage Council was able to exercise leverage in the political sphere such that Ulster-Scots was tabled during negotiations. Inclusion in the Agreement provided Ulster-Scots with vertical legitimation and institutionalisation and has contributed considerably to its promotion and “revival” (Níc Craith 2000).

As described above, according to Finlay (2001), the shift from Protestant triumphalism to defeatism was a product of the incongruence between a palpable sense of ethno-cultural identity deficiency and a political landscape in which identity politics was increasingly central. In this paper, I argue that the Ulster-Scots movement includes and utilises a history of the Scots-Irish diaspora in the US as a narrative through which to (re)articulate a triumphant past, and reinstate a sense of (Protestant) collective dignity. Before describing the findings of the study, I first elaborate upon the notion of collective dignity.

**Collective Dignity**

According to Rosen (2012), dignity is an imprecise concept. Its breadth of meaning producing inconsistencies and inaccuracies in its application. Attempting to tie down the various meanings of the term, he outlines its four meanings is usage: as ‘rank or status’ (to be situated in the higher echelons of social hierarchy); in human rights terms, as the intrinsic value of intrinsic to all human beings; in a performative sense, as dignified manner; and, in an interactional sense, ‘treat[ing] someone *with dignity* is … to *respect* their dignity’ (Rosen 2012:114,58). Rosen separates out these four uses of dignity, arguing that ‘the failure to differentiate these separate strands’ has had nefarious consequences for its application in (human rights) law. Conversely, I argue that where Rosen calls for greater precision in the usage of “dignity,” doing so may mask the multidimensionality of the term’s use in discourse. This multidimensionality adds a depth and complexity to its usage which such “accuracy” may in fact prohibit.

Michèle Lamont (2000), in her seminal work *The Dignity of Working Men* described the ways in which working-class men invoked a sense of morality in describing their position in the world. Contrasting their own position with ‘people above’ and ‘people below,’ she contends that these men allocate dignity to their position in society, the family, and the labour market in moral terms. Lamont describes her conception of dignity as having been adopted from Randy Hodson’s (1996:722) work, in which he defines it as ‘contingent not only on protecting oneself from abuse but also on having personal space for one’s individual identity.’ Discussing dignity in the workplace, Hodson related it to notions of autonomy, collective solidarity, and self-realisation. Hence, in relation to self-identification, Lamont (2000:170) links these sensibilities in Hodson’s work such that dignity may involve not merely the construction of space in which one’s identity is permitted, but also ‘autonomy for defining’ the contours of that identity.

Connecting dignity theory to Smith’s (2003) ‘stories of peoplehood’ approach, which links the contours of collective identifications to the peoplehood narratives which accompany them, I contend that the two elements of the Hodson-Lamont conception of dignity are interlinked. Especially for Lamont, it would appear that dignity though identity is conceived of as involving the freedom to articulate and define oneself through the narratives used to describe the individual’s current position. Extending this from individual to collective identification, the writing of peoplehood narratives provides just such a space for a sense of autonomy of identity. Through self-described peoplehood narratives, the intrinsic characteristics and chronology of the collectivity can be portrayed such that potential allegations of historical or current transgressions, misconduct, dominations, inconsistencies and inauthenticity can be transcended or evaded. Hence, dignity through autonomy of collective identification can be employed as a form of protecting the (collective) self from abuse.

However, as Smith (2003) correctly notes, the capacity to write – or play a part in writing – such peoplehood stories is unevenly distributed. Political, cultural and educational elites have greater ability to express and describe the ethnic narrative than the majority of those they purport to describe. In terms of Ulster-Scots education, the Ulster-Scots Agency have much greater access to the “dignity” to define the terms of the collective narrative than teachers or, moreover, the pupils. In Rosen’s terms, the interactional definition (permitting or requesting to be treated with dignity) is itself both hierarchical (limited by position within the system) and performative (the individual acts with dignity through her/his autonomy over peoplehood narrative description). However, as Smith (2003) points out, individuals do not have unbridled agency in the construction of stories of peoplehood but are tempered by various social and normative forces.

Extending the Hodson-Lamont conception, I take the search for collective dignity to involve the search for the autonomy to define the peoplehood narrative to which the individual belongs, such that the individual can ‘[protect] oneself from abuse’ (Hodson 1996:722; Lamont 2000:170). In this paper, I describe the presentation of Ulster-Scots and its stories of peoplehood as a search for dignity. Rather than either absconding or transcending Protestant/unionist/loyalist history in post-Plantation settler-colonialism, post-Partition domination, and the legacies of “their” part in the Troubles, I contend that Ulster-Scots represents a search for collective dignity through re-narrativisation in the context of palpable Protestant defeatism.

**Methods**

This paper comes out of a larger project focused on Ulster-Scots education. The primary data utilised includes forty-two semi-structured interviews and a documentary analysis of Ulster-Scots educational texts[[3]](#endnote-2). Interviews were conducted with twelve political elites (seven unionists, two nationalists, one from the Alliance Party), seven past and present members of staff from the Ulster-Scots Agency, eighteen teachers from Ulster-Scots Flagship schools, and five other key actors involved in Ulster-Scots education. Teachers interviewed were those involved in instigating Ulster-Scots education in their respective schools. Twelve of the twenty-four schools taking part in the Ulster-Scots Agency’s Flagship Schools scheme at the time (2015) were randomly sampled. Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) self-selected in response to invitation to interview, while other interviewees were chosen due to their position with regards to Ulster-Scots education. In relation to MLA opinion, this paper draws upon the perspective of pro-Ulster-Scots unionist elites.

Interviews covered an array of topics, including approach to identity and language politics, conceptualisation of Ulster-Scots and its story of peoplehood (Smith 2003), and rationales for its inclusion into schools. Interviews were recorded and partially transcribed. The data were subsequently coded thematically in line with the research questions. Answers to the research questions were compared between the different groups of actors (politicians, educational elites, teachers, and others). In congruence with Stapleton and Wilson’s (2004) research, the US diaspora was found to be a recurrent theme. The majority of interviewees referenced the US diaspora when describing Ulster-Scots; however, it would appear that this narrative, and its perceived importance, was more developed among educational and political elites. Within the educational texts, the US was the most frequently referred to country after “Ulster,” Scotland and Ireland. The US was also the most common place outside of “Ulster” where Ulster-Scots were understood to reside. Of the sixty-four booklets analysed, forty-four mentioned the US diaspora, while twenty-two were focused specifically on the topic.

**Ulster-Scots Americanism**

Many interviewees articulated a sense that, while Irishness had been permitted social legitimacy and prominence, to express an equivalent interest in, or enjoyment of, Protestant/Unionist/Ulster-Scots culture had become taboo. Ulster-Scots education was understood many of the interviewees to be a corrective for this. As PS7 put it, unlike with ‘Gaelicculture,’

Growing up in east Belfast, my sense of who I was and sense of belonging was always, kind of, shunned – it wasn’t recognised, it wasn’t legitimised … I feel now it’s got to the time where we owe it to our children to give them that sense of what they are, where they’re from, to legitimate that and say “that’s right”, you know – there’s nothing wrong with that.

According to Gary Blair, an education officer at the Ulster-Scots Agency, one of the primary goals of Ulster-Scots education is to instigate a sense of ethnic dignity among pupils: ‘[letting] them know: you have a deep and great history.’ With its substantial emphasis upon an American diaspora, I contend that Ulster-Scots education utilises the US as a conduit for achieving this (re)instating of collective dignity.

In this section, I outline the findings, as they relate to the narrative of Ulster-Scots Americanism. In the first section, I address the idea of Ulster-Scots as primary agents in the construction of the United States, and its usage as a means of articulating a positive place in the world for Ulster Protestants. In the second section, I describe the use of the Scots-Irish diaspora in the US in the incorporation of certain notions of political ideology into the conceptualisation of innate Ulster-Scots characteristics. Finally, I outline the use of Ulster-Scots Americanism as a mechanism through which to defend and reimagine the Ulster Protestant settler-colonial past.

***The United States as Ulster-Scotch***

The notion of an Ulster-Scots-American diaspora has become a prominent theme amongst promoters of Ulster-Scots in recent years (Griffin 2012; McCarthy 2011; Radford 2001; Stapleton and Wilson 2004; Webb 2009; Wiman 1999). The growing centrality of the Scots-Irish American diaspora to the Ulster-Scots peoplehood story was reflected in the data. The triumphalism and exceptionalism of US history were absorbed into Ulster-Scots through the conceptualisation of former as being fundamentally shaped by the latter. US history was understood to be fundamentally shaped by Ulster-Scots individuals, communities, and ethnic character. They are understood to be the most influential group in the early settlement on the Atlantic seaboard, in the war of independence, manifest destiny and the western expansion, the civil war, and a smorgasbord of other events in modern history[[4]](#endnote-3). The depth of the conceptualised interconnectivity between the two is clear in the primary explanation provided for the lack of public knowledge of the importance of the Scots-Irish to US history:

The Scots-Irish were in many cases the first non-native Americans. Once they moved inland from the already-settled coastal towns into the Appalachian foothills they set up their own townlands and homes and established the lifestyle for this new land. As the first Americans, they were totally assimilated into the fabric of the nation and their principles and virtues are deeply embedded into the constitution of the United States. For this reason, it is much harder to trace Americans from Ulster-Scots backgrounds than the later Irish emigrants or those from other ethnic groups. The Scots-Irish were the Americans by the time these later arrivals came to this new land (Ulster-Scots Agency 2012g:2).

It is their very ubiquity and entrenchment within America which is to be considered the reason for having been “overlooked.” The writer(s) contend that, as earlier, more established migrants, the Ulster-Scots narrative is less well-versed or easily recognisable than the allegedly later, more familiar migrants, specifically naming the Irish. There is something of an echo of an indigeneity counter-claim here. Whereas in Ireland the Irish claim to be autochthonous to the island while the Ulster-Scots are the (colonial) settlers, the US is conceptualised as a land where the Ulster-Scots are the ‘first non-native Americans,’ and the Irish the (later) settlers. Popular Ulster-Scots performer and educationalist, Willie Drennan, described his fatigue with this rhetoric amongst elite-level promoters of Ulster-Scots:

You know, having people at concerts, like visitors and stuff, and they’re shaking their heads at some of the things being put out there – as if we invented the world! And *certainly* invented America, that’s for sure!

In this ethnic conception of history, the Ulster-Scots are reimagined as the main protagonists and agitators in US historical victories. For example, the school workbooks subscribe to a reinterpretation of the American revolution in which the Scots-Irish are its principle actors:

[The Ulster-Scots’] main contributions to the development of America were their fighting spirit which helped to open up the land; their main religion - Presbyterianism which led to church planting; and their democratic spirit which put them in the vanguard of the American War of Independence (2012h:5).

The first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve all connection with Great Britain came not from the Puritans of New England or the Dutch of New York, or the planters of Virginia, but the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians (2012i:5).

Numerous interviewees cited an allegedly innate confrontational, dogmatic, obstinate spirit in outlining Ulster-Scots ethnic character. In doing so, several used or referenced the Ulster-Scots word, “thran,” meaning obdurate, stubborn, awkward and intractable. *Thranness* was repeatedly utilised as a rationale for allegedly idiosyncratic behaviour through Northern Irish and US history, mostly articulated as being simultaneously a regrettable trait and one which has purportedly led to the great victories of their ethnic predecessors. This alleged ethnic characteristic was frequently used to explain the behaviours of particular actors and groups in the history of Ulster-Scots. As unionist MLA, Basil McCrea, explained:

There’s nothing we do better than adversity. You know, when we are under the cosh you will not erode us. And this sticking together all family and things I think was a support and was reinforced by the Troubles. You can look at it in other conflicts, you can look at the Battle of the Somme where you know it’s not that lots of people didn't suffer of course there were many, many other people’s, but certainly we are sometimes stupidly loyal. … It’s one of the reasons why when you look at even the American Defence Forces that quite a proportion of them coming from the southern states will have Ulster Scots backgrounds, you know. This idea about valour and just keeping on.

This linking of American militarism to Ulster Protestant obstinacy through the Troubles, and both to a biologically essentialist notion of ethnicity, represents something of an attempt to defer blame for collective guilt. Its logic maintains that given that actions taken are a product of innate ethnic character, the group in question is only at most partially to blame for such actions. I argue that such deferring to a US diaspora in explaining past and present actions represents an attempt to re-establish a sense of collective dignity. Whereas descriptions of a victorious Ulster-Scots past within Northern Ireland could leave its promoters open to the critique of being aligned with unionist-loyalist triumphalism (a concern which many interviewees vocalised), the rhetorical technique of foregrounding the Scots-Irish diaspora in the US appears to be employed in order to access a (supposedly) less controversial space in which a glorious ethnic past can be described.

The conception that Ulster-Scots acted as a corrective for the accusation of cultural inarticulateness of Ulster Protestants was common. As Lord Laird, the first Chair of the Ulster-Scots Agency, contended:

You think about, let’s say, a middle-class dinner somewhere in East Belfast, and they’re all having a dinner party, and all of a sudden the nationalists at the table start getting on at the unionists, saying “And what is your culture? Tell me, what is your culture?” And the unionists get very red-faced because they know they have a culture but they can’t express it. *We gave them a thing to say*. We gave it to them in in big measure. You know: “you fellas have only one President of the United States – we’ve seventeen!” … It’s the seventeen Presidents[[5]](#endnote-4). It’s the two people who stood on the moon. It’s the three major cities in Texas that are all named after Ulstermen – Dallas, Houston, and Austin – those are all Ulstermen.

Despite repeatedly describing the superiority of Ulster-Scots over Irishness, largely through the prism of Ulster-Scots Americanism, Laird insisted that it is (Irish) nationalism which is truly guilty of ‘narrow-minded' exceptionalism, perpetuating a ‘master race’ discourse. Although such forms of guarded anti-Irishness were occasionally vocalised by interviewees, the majority of the promoters of Ulster-Scots were keen to separate from sectarianism, unionist and loyalist politics, and anti-Irish sentiment. Rather than a discourse of anti-Irishness, such articulations would appear to in fact be indicative of a certain mimesis toward Irishness (Gardner 2015): a desire to gain a comparable sense of cultural authenticity. Hence, an appeal to greater and more impressive American agency may represent a desire for collective dignity, rather than simply a strategy for cultural war. As PS7 (primary school interviewee number seven), the principal of a primary school engaged in Ulster-Scots education, stated:

Everybody imagines that only Roman Catholics died in the Irish famine, and no Protestants emigrated to America. … I suppose it’s a matter of integration – so many Protestants *did* emigrate. *So many* Protestants – Ulster-Scots – moved to California area. … But they integrated – whereas the Irish that left didn’t and they set up their Irish communities. And they still have those strong communities whereas, I suppose, my people melted in and disappeared. And there’s part of me that wants to recognise that, but not recognise it as an “Orange” thing: recognise it just as a cultural root, cultural changes, and so on.

Interestingly, contrary to the claim described earlier wherein the lack of salience of Ulster-Scots in the US was to be considered a result of their earlier settlement and deep entrenchment within the US psyche, the Ulster-Scots have been forgotten due to their superior capacity to integrate. However, clearly for PS7 Ulster-Scots represents at attempt to reclaim a sense of collective dignity in Ulster Protestant identification, rather than ascribing to sectarian or anti-Irish cultural competition.

This narrative of Ulster-Scots identity constructed something of a discourse of ethnic exceptionalism, linking the victories of US history to the Ulster-Scots ethnic character. Lipset (1997:19,144), in outlining US exceptionalism, described the ‘American Creed’ as including the belief in ‘liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire,’ firmly rooted in Enlightenment philosophy and ‘classical liberalism, which strongly distrusts the state and emphasize competitive meritocracy.’ As I discuss in the following subsection, Ulster-Scots Americanism represents an ethnicisation of the American Creed, formulating and embodying its ideological positions.

***American Ideology as Ulster-Scotch Character***

The myth of Ulster-Scots ethnic character was frequently linked to, and articulated through, certain American ideological themes. For example, Basil McCrea stated:

[T]he core of what the Americans think of as being the American ideals, the American Declaration of Independence and all of these things are actually pretty close to Ulster Presbyterianism which is about the state won’t interfere, I'll do my thing, my right to hold arms, my rights, you know. All of these things, whether right or wrong, where an encapsulation of what the freedom-seeking Ulster Scots thought up as themselves.

Similarly, former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mike Nesbitt, contended that the ‘Ulster-Scots tradition … influenced the whole kind of cultural thinking in the United States.’ Such notions were also included within the educational texts, which explain that a variety of US values, including liberty (2012b, 2012i), enterprise and the free market (2006a, 2012m, 2012n), enlightenment thought (2006b, 2012a, 2012b), and liberal democracy (2012a:8, 2012b:3, 2012c:7, 2012d:5, 2012e:30), were essentially a product of Ulster-Scots character. Hence, the rhetoric of Ulster-Scots peoplehood represents an ethnicisation of the ideologies of the “American Creed.”

Conceptualised as emblematic of embodied free-market, individualistic, anti-state neoliberalism, the US was utilised as a symbolic geography through which Ulster-Scotch ethno-ideological difference could be presented and delimited. Political conservativism as an Ulster-Scotch ethnic feature is also perpetuated within the narrative of American interconnectedness, as the quote from McCrea above illustrated. Similarly, Nesbitt considered Ulster-Scots to be ‘values – this idea that the individual is not going to be dictated to. That you cannot have a top-down government – the government must be of and by the people, and it is roots up.’ The myth of Americanism thus forms a cornerstone of an Ulster-Scots story of peoplehood in which, far from merely describing “their” history, locates Ulster-Scots within particular predefined characteristics/ideologies: individualism, economic conservativism, free-market capitalism, and anti-big-government. The claim that Ulster-Scots is a discrete language and ethnic identity in its own right is highly contested in Northern Ireland, often understood to have been invented in the latter part of the Troubles as a form of cultural warfare (Görlach 2000; Mac Póilin 1999). Hence, the reinterpretation of US history as having a fundamentally Scots-Irish basis provides its promoters with an external and legitimate communal history through which Ulster-Scots can (attempt to) claim authentication.

Esping-Andersen (1999), detailing his three-fold ideal type of welfare regimes, outlined ideal individuals corresponding to each regime type. To the liberal regime, the predominantly Anglophone model characterised by self-reliance, modest welfare provisions, and free-market-centrism, Esping-Andersen allocates *Homo Liberalismus*: an individual who ‘follows no loftier ideal than his own personal welfare calculus’:

The well-being of others is their affair, not his. A belief in noble self-reliance does not necessarily imply indifference to others. *Homo liberalismus* may be generous, even altruistic. But kindness towards others is a personal affair, not something dictated from above. His ethics tell him that a free lunch is amoral, that collectivism jeopardizes freedom, that individual liberty is a fragile good, easily sabotaged by sinister socialists or paternalistic authoritarians (1999:171).

The conceptualisation that being Ulster-Scotch involved a ‘belief in noble self-reliance’ was palpable throughout the data. Most portrayed this association in a positive light; only Basil McCrea pointed to potentially nefarious outcomes as a result of this purportedly innate characteristic:

But what I do think we are able to do is, given any shape of level playing field – or even not a level playing field – Ulster-Scots people will come to the fore. Now, if you look at some of the negatives about it: if you have all of these attitudes about independence, and I should stand on my own two feet, and not take subsidies from people and things like that … you could argue that a fair amount of what they call “trailer trash” in the southern States in the US are people that have all of the attitudes of independence – of standing alone and all that – but not sufficient skills or ability to thrive in an environment like that, and that leads you to problems.

The downside of such innate individualism and ‘noble self-reliance,’ then, is the production of an underclass. The explanation for this condition is partly a belief in the amoralism of free lunches, in Esping-Andersen’s (1999) terms, and partly due to inadequate aptitude. Thus, rather than conceptualising such an outcome as a societal or market failure, it is the individual who is held responsible. Unlike American “trailer trash,” however, the Ulster-Scot is allegedly capable of success despite adversity: ‘even not a level playing field.’

In the context of Northern Irish politics, in which Irish nationalism has come to be associated with progressive politics and unionism with economic and social conservativism, the claim of innate libertarianism represents an ethnic defence from the accusation of being anti-modern and regressive. Concomitantly, it forms a defence of continued allegiance to such ideological principles through the alleged ability for (most) Ulster-Scots to thrive under the conditions of libertarian “independence.” As with *thranness* as an explanation for the group’s past violence, the American diaspora is utilised as a theme through which the culpability for allegiances to libertarian political ideology is deferred to ethnicity.

***Settler-Colonialism***

A central theme of the Irish nationalist critique of the “Protestant community” in the north of Ireland has been its settler-colonial heritage. Within Irish nationalist historiography, the Plantation is often a central explanatory event in the narrative of Ireland’s colonisation and domination by the British, as well as the origins of Protestant-Unionist hegemony in Ulster. Through their conceptualisation as settler-colonial oppressors, the legitimacy of Unionist rule past and present, the partition of Ireland, and even of the continued residence of these “settlers” by some more ardent nationalists, can be called into question. For unionists, on the other hand, association with colonialism became considerably less common with the onset of the Troubles (Clayton 1996). Clayton (1996:32) describes the triumphalism of the Northern Irish state between its creation in 1921 and the imposition of direct rule in 1972, relaying the ‘proud celebrations’ of British colonial status of the period. With questions over the legitimacy of the Northern Irish in sharper focus and the demise of British colonial empire, Ulster Protestants increasingly disassociated with the colonial narrative (Clayton 1996; Whyte 1991). Although the data for this research also contained explicit defences for, and reinterpretations of, the Ulster Plantation, implicit justifications of settler-colonial history were frequently articulated via discussions around settlers in the US. Conceptualised as a space in which settler-colonial heritage is unproblematically accepted, the US offers the Ulster-Scots narrative a means through which the critiques of domination and illegitimacy can be exuviated and a sense of collective pride in settler-colonialism reinstated.

The narrative of settler-colonialism pursued within the data depicts the Ulster-Scots settlers as existing firmly outside the sphere of the ruling class. The status of the Ulster-Scot in the within the school-based educational texts New World is unequivocal:

The Scots-Irish on the frontier generally lived on small farms. … They had little actual money and so would barter some of their crops in order to buy other basics like tea or coffee and of course to be able to buy a gun to protect their family and their property. Their homes were simple log cabins usually with just one or two rooms. There were dirt floors and the windows were shuttered. There was little furniture and what there was was mostly home-made. … This was a hard life (Ulster-Scots Agency 2012g:10).

The Ulster-Scots in the early American colonies were understood to be valiant, proactive and moralistic actors opposing the domination of the English colonial ruling class, yet without access to power. This narrative engenders and counters the critique of colonialism as domination, presenting the Ulster-Scots as both colonists and subjects of British colonial power.

Ulster-Scots were understood to have played primary roles in the enactment of the doctrine of manifest destiny. Two pupil workbooks were dedicated to this subject: one teaches of the Lewis and Clarke expedition to map the new land following the 1803 Louisiana purchase (2012j, 2012k); the other, the Battle of the Alamo in the war of Texan independence (2012l, 2012m). According to the educational texts, Ulster-Scots were not only some of the first and most significant ethnic groups to move and settle in the west, but William Clark of the Lewis and Clarke expedition (2012j:5), Davy Crockett (2012l:1) and General Sam Houston (2012m:9), were claimed as ‘great Scots-Irish Americans’ (2012n). In general, the westward expansion is portrayed unproblematically as a series of events to be celebrated, and its settlers and leaders both brave and heroic. According to McCrea:

Ulster Scots is … about individualism, it’s about self-reliance, independence of mind and action … And you can see that it transfers: I talk to my American friends when they’re over here and I try to explain to them the close ties. I always remind them, which is news to them, that Davy Crockett was an Ulsterman. You know, the idea of your outnumbered, surrounded and you know no help’s coming, to which his answer was “no surrender.” And the man that came to rescue him who didn’t make it on time was Sam Houston was also of Ulster extraction. … the cultural aspects of Ulster-Scots have spread right the way through America … to the extent of almost being what people now consider being American [is] actually Ulster-Scots.

McCrea’s connection between the loyalist slogan “no surrender” and the Texas Revolution connects further the relationship between Ulster-Scots actions (be it the Troubles or American settler-colonialism) and Ulster-Scots ethnic character.

While, within the data, the Plantation featured heavily in Ulster-Scots myths of origin, it was frequently tempered by being placed in the context millennia of population movement between Ulster and Scotland and describing it primarily in terms of family migration rather than colonialism. For example, Gary Blair described the ‘migration that predated plantation by hundreds of years’ as ‘ongoing – frae time itsel’, I suppose, was recordit, right back to the days of the kingdom of Dal Riada … [Ulster-Scots is] an embodiment o five, six, seven hundred years o history.’[[6]](#endnote-5) Participating Ulster-Scots promoters consistently vocalised a desire to be disassociated from a history of domination and the politics of hard-line unionism and loyalism. Whereas uninhibited celebration of the Ulster Plantation left Ulster-Scots open to such interpretations, a narrative of Ulster-Scots-led western expansion in the US permitted just such a freedom to celebrate colonial heritage.

For promoters of Ulster-Scots Americanism, the United States represented a settler-colonial state in which the presence of the settlers is understood to be potentially conceptualised as unproblematically valid. Assumed by the writers to be a benign settler state, the US provides an Ulster-Scots settler-colonialist dialogue in which their presence isn’t called into question but accepted as legitimate. As described above, in something of a reversal of the Northern Irish context, the Scots-Irish are presented as semi-natives or fully assimilated Americans in contrast to the arrival of the new, obtruding Irish settlers on “their” land. I contend that this reversal of a classic Irish nationalist critique of Ulster Protestants represents more of an appropriation than simple anti-Irishness. This reimagination of colonialism allows the Ulster-Scots to be interpreted as occupying a more socially defensible position in history. In doing so, its promoters can attempt to regain a sense of collective dignity, opening up the space for autonomy over the description of “their” collective past and protect the collective from critique.

**Conclusion**

Through this paper, I have argued that the notion of an Ulster-Scots US diaspora is utilised as a conduit through which Ulster Protestants can reimagine and reinterpret “their” history. Doing so represents an attempt to regain a sense of collective dignity in light of postbellum defeatism. Utilising Hodson (1996) and Lamont (2000), I describe collective dignity as the search for the autonomy to set out the peoplehood narrative to which the individual belongs through which the purported group can potentially be shielded from abuse. A sense of defeatism has been palpable amongst the “Protestant community” in Northern Ireland. For Finlay (2001), this is symptomatic of the critique of Ulster Protestants as culturally inarticulate in a situation in which identity politics had been rendered hegemonic. I contend that Ulster-Scots Americanism represents an attempt to return to triumphalism whilst shedding the anti-modern, regressive, sectarian tendencies of Ulster loyalism. This phenomenon represents an attempt to reinstate collective dignity through autonomy over self-description, a sense of communal pride, and a shielding from abuse.

The notion of a specific “Ulster-Scots history” is a relatively new phenomenon, and one with potentially nefarious consequences. As a socially constructed genealogical and cultural identity founded on a belief in absolute differentiation between communities in Northern Ireland, it holds considerable capacity for the perpetuation and deepening of senses of communal disassociation. In a region that has experienced intractable inter-group conflict, such an ethnic differentiation is indeed problematic. However, it is common both within academic and non-academic writing to disregard Ulster-Scots as merely a sectarian weapon in a cultural war with Irishness. As I have argued in this article, it would appear that its usefulness to Ulster Protestant identity is more in the means gain autonomy over the articulation of “their” identity and, in doing so, to contend for that identity to be socially defensible.

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2. I use ‘promoters of Ulster-Scots’ to refer to those engaged in promoting the idea of Ulster-Scots as an ethnic identity, culture, and language. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Available on the Ulster-Scots Agency’s website (www.ulsterscotsagency.com). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. See, for example, Ulster-Scots Agency (2012f, 2012h, 2012i, 2012j, 2012l, 2012n). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Such (frequently anachronistic) identity ascriptions usually involve the inclusion of all whose genealogy includes at least one member who resided for any length of time in Ulster. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Where interviewees considered themselves to be speaking in Ulster-Scots, I transcribed using common Ulster-Scots spelling forms. This was done in order to permit the interviewee to be recorded in their own terms, rather as a means of legitimising Ulster-Scots as a language. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)