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Experiences of Racism in the Australian Body Politic: Extent, Spheres, and Cultural Unevenness [1]

The literature and reports on racism: expectations

Anti-racism agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) have consistently concluded that racism is a significant problem across a range of social spheres in the Australian body politic (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 1995; Jones, 1997). The most notable reports have been those produced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (1991; 2001; 2004) and the state-based anti-discrimination boards (see for example Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW [A-DB], 1996). These reports indicate the systemic and structural nature of racism in Australia. Reports from NGOs have included annual reports assembled by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (see Jones, 1997), and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (see 1995), as well as infrequent reports from groups such as the Committee of Arab Australians, the Islamic Council of NSW (ICNSW) (2005) and the NSW Community Relations Commission. However, these reports have tended to identify the problems for specific cultural groups, and during specific periods of tension. As reviewed below, researchers have directed attention to how racism is manifest within particular spheres of activity such as Australian workplaces, education, the criminal justice system, housing, in media representations and official discourse, and in everyday social life including public spaces and sporting events. Thus, the first aim of the research reported here was to gather data on the experience of racism across the body politic.

Our second aim was to demonstrate the culturally uneven experience of racism. There is a now substantive literature on the problematic representations of minority cultural groups in media and other forums. These portrayals are partly linked to historic constructions of national identity, and of who is and is not an Australian. Australia has a still strong legacy of an Anglo-Celtic national norm, to which Asian-Australians, Muslims, and Indigenous people are Others (Forrest and Dunn, 2005; Hamilton, 1990; Rajkowski, 1987; Rizvi, 1996:176-7). The construction of some groups as Other, and nefarious community perceptions of them, are a form of cultural imperialism that underpins racist acts against members of such groups.

Over the last few years, reports of racist violence and ethnic discrimination in Australia have grown. In the wake of the USA 11th September 2001 and the Bali 12th October 2002 terror attacks, reports of racist violence against Australian Muslims dramatically escalated (ICNSW, 2005; Poynting and Noble, 2004). There were a series of attacks against mosques, including the complete destruction of a mosque in Brisbane. There were 40 formal reports to NSW Police in the week following the Bali bombings (Lipari, 2002:6). The Commissioner noted "even more incidents are going unreported", and he had instructed police to step up surveillance of mosques and schools across NSW (NSW Police Service, 2002). The Executive Council of Australian Jewry reported that racist violence against Jews had also expanded since September 2001, with over 500 documented acts each year. An expectation of this project was that racism is not experienced evenly across the body politic. Finally, our

research has an over-riding interest in the means by which racism across the body politic can be best engaged. Our paper ends with discussion of the merits of 'racism research', and specifically its commensurability with anti-racism ambitions.

Method

Between October and December 2001 a telephone survey was undertaken of 5056 residents in Queensland and NSW. The questionnaire gathered data on 'racist attitudes'[2]. The results from those attitudinal questions have been outlined elsewhere (Dunn et al., 2004). The survey also included questions on the experience of racism. Respondents were asked how often, if ever, they had experienced discrimination because of their own ethnic origin, across nine spheres. Four of these spheres were what can be called settings for the experience of 'institutional racism' and included: the workplace; in educational settings; when seeking to rent or buy a house; or, in dealings with the police. The other spheres embraced what have been referred to as the settings of 'everyday racism'. These included whilst in shops or at a restaurant, and at sporting or other public events. Respondents were also asked how often they felt that, because of their ethnic origin, they had been treated less respectfully, not trusted, or called names or insulted. Collection of data on the experience of discrimination is the most innovative approach to developing indicators on the extent of racism, and is based on work conducted by a research team at the University of Michigan, USA (The University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research, 2001). This form of indicator on the extent of racism had never before been empirically applied in the Australian circumstance. Our survey questions have served as a pilot for a much more comprehensive survey of the experience of racism, which we outline later in this paper. Of course, surveys cannot gather the depth of insight available from other forms of method, such as from ethnographic approaches. And this is recognised among scholars in the field of racism and anti-racism (see Lamont *et al.*, 2002:395). However, surveys do provide advantages of scope, allowing assessments of breadth. Tariq Modood (2000:180), when commenting on the *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, observed that the "survey has the potential to offer what small-scale ethnographic studies, armchair theorising, and political wishful thinking can not". Surveying the experience of racism facilitates a grasp of the extent and variation of this scourge in the Australian body politic.

The racism survey was available in six community languages, but despite these efforts the sample is a little under-representative of LOTE respondents; it also over-represents women and under-represents indigenous Australians (Table 1). Almost all respondents stated their age, gender, educational, and cultural background. For instance, only 30 respondents refused to answer the education question.

Table 1: Characteristics of the telephone survey sample, compared to ABS Census 2001.

Total persons		Racist attitudes survey, October-Dec 2001	ABS Census, mid-June 2001
		n: 5056	n: 9,896,807
Gender*	Male	41.3%	49.4%
	Female	58.7%	50.6%
Ethnicity indicators*	Aboriginal or TSI	1.9%	2.4%
	Australia-born	76.5%	73.1%
	English only at home	85.8%	80.3%
Age	18-34	25.6%	31.7%
	35-64	54.8%	51.1%
	65 +	17.2%	19.6%

* These ABS Census figures refer to all people enumerated in NSW and QLD, whereas the Survey
    excluded people aged under 18 years.
Sources: The UNSW/MQU Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001; Australian Bureau of
    Statistics (ABS) Census, 2003.

The experience of racism in the workplace

The experience of racism in institutional settings impacts upon close to one in six
Australians (Table 2). Well over half of all formal complaints of racism in NSW come
from incidents in the workplace (see A-DB, 1996:18-20). It was therefore anticipated
that the workplace would be one of the key spheres for the experience of racism in the
Australian body politic. Of survey respondents, 16% reported having experienced
racism within their workplace, while reports for other institutional spheres were less
(Table 2).

**Table 2: Experience of racism in institutional settings (work, education, housing
and policing), by ethnicity, NSW and Queensland, 2001**

Ethnicity		Experience of racism*			
		The work-place (%)	In education (%)	In housing (%)	In policing (%)
ATSI background	ATSI (n:94)	28.7	36.2	21.3	23.4
	Non-ATSI (n:4957)	15.9	14.5	6.1	6.1
LOTE background	LOTE(n:718)	35.7	29.8	16.3	15.9
	Non-LOTE (n:4338)	12.9	12.5	4.8	4.9
Birthplace	Overseas (n:701)	35.1	24.5	16.0	15.0
	UK/NZ (n:474)	21.7	10.8	6.3	5.7
	Australia (n:3869)	11.9	13.6	4.6	4.9
All (n: 5056)		16.2	14.9	6.4	6.4

Source: The UNSW and MQU Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001
Notes: LOTE (Language Other Than English). ATSI (Aboriginal n:84 and Torres Strait Islander n:10).
    UK (United Kingdom n:352) / NZ (New Zealand n:142)
* Question wording: How often have YOU experienced discrimination because of your OWN
    ETHNIC ORIGIN in the following situations? Response options were: never; hardly ever;
    sometimes; often, or; very often. Those responding 'Never' were counted as 'Not' having
    experienced racism, and those in the other four categories were tallied as a positive response.

There is a considerable literature pointing to cultural discrimination within the labour
market in Australia. Migrants have been found to consistently experience higher rates

of unemployment than the Australian-born, especially during recessions and periods of restructuring (Castles *et al.*, 1988:8-11, 29). Castles *et al.* concluded that there were:

> processes of labour market segmentation which lead to a long-term marginalisation of certain groups. ... The main indicators of disadvantage are gender and membership of specific ethnic groups, particularly those from Southern Europe, the Middle East and Indo-China. (1988:28-29)

Collins (1988:241-242) warned that unless migrant disadvantage was addressed in a much more systematic manner, through labour market and education programs, then non-English speaking background (NESB) Australians would become entrenched as "second-class citizens". The first *State of the Nation* report on NESB Australians concluded that continuing labour market injustices suggested "systematic discrimination on the grounds of race ... [was] ... at work" (Moss, 1993:264). Moss (1993:171, 258-259, 261) found that communities from Vietnam, Lebanon and Turkey were still not faring well in Australia, and suffered particularly from labour market segmentation and shrinking government support for English language tuition. Labour market segmentation, racism, and the non-recognition of qualifications gained overseas have long been identified as problems (see Jayasuriya, 1990:55). The nature and extent of discrimination also varies across different workplace sectors. Loosemore and Chau (2002:96) pointed to the strong levels of reported racism within the construction industry, where 40% of Asian-Australian respondents reported discrimination on some aspect of their employment rights. The HREOC Isma ع inquiry (2004:60-64) heard evidence of considerable discrimination and 'race talk' against Arab and Muslim Australians when applying for jobs or within their workplaces.

A key explanation for the high rates of racism experienced in the workplace may be the greater degree of cross-cultural contact in that sphere of the body politic. Our survey included questions on the degree, if any, of cultural mixing that respondents had with members of other cultural groups in three key categories of setting (workplace, social life, sporting). The workplace was clearly the most important sphere of inter-communal contact, especially of high frequency exposure to cultural difference. 52% of respondents reported often, or very often, cross-cultural contact in the workplace. Social life gave rise to less frequent contact of that level (23%), especially contact that was very frequent (< 1%). Sport was also less likely to be a setting for frequent encounters with members of other cultural groups (only 30% of respondents).

The experience of racism in the workplace for LOTE respondents reported to the survey was 36%. The LOTE attribute provides an indicator of the experience of non-Anglo-Australia. Extrapolating our results suggests that while one-in-eight Anglo-Australians may experience racism within the workplace, the ratio among non-Anglo-Australians is greater than one-in-three.

The rate of racism experienced by Indigenous Australians in the workplace was more than double that for non-indigenous people (Table 2). This reflects a now well established literature on the higher levels of racism experienced by indigenous people in Australia (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991; HREOC, 1991; 2001; Mellor, 2003). Experiences of racism in the workplace were reported by

29% of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (Table 2). The workplace is clearly a key site of racism within the Australian body politic, and unevenly so.

The experience of racism within education

The experience of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity was also strong within the education sector, which includes schools, the technical training sector and higher education (HREOC, 1991:158-9; 348-354; HREOC, 2004:57-60). Fifteen percent of respondents had experienced racisms in educational settings. Educational institutions, much like workplaces, are sites of compulsory cross-cultural contact. They are also important settings for developing inter-communal understanding and anti-racism.

36%, or just over one-in-three, of Indigenous respondents reported experiences of racism within education. Indeed, education was the most significant of all the institutional settings for experiences of racism reported by indigenous people. This contrasts with a ratio of one-in-seven for all non-indigenous respondents. The experience of racism among LOTE respondents was dramatically higher than for those who spoke only English. For most of the spheres and forms tested the rates were almost three times higher amongst the LOTE group (Table 2).

The experience of racism in dealings with police

Just over 6% of respondents reported an experience of discrimination from their dealings with the police. The police are responsible for community safety as well as law enforcement. That one-in-fifteen people have experienced racism in their dealings with police, and associated degradation of their citizenry, is a cause for deep concern. Problems with relations between police and various ethnic communities have been well established (see EAC, 1979; HREOC, 1991:388; Office of the NSW Ombudsman, 1994:1, 46-7). Various external reports on policing in Australia have raised concerns regarding cultural sensitivity of State police. For example, in NSW this key institution was able to effectively ignore the requirement to produce an Ethnic Affairs Policy Statement for many years (see Chan, 1992; Office of the NSW Ombudsman, 1994:14-25). This recalcitrance neglected a number of reports that had identified Police Services as a key agency where community relations training was required (see Morrissey and Mitchell, 1993:17-8, 103).

Over a fifth (23%) of indigenous respondents reported experiences of racism in their dealings with police (Table 2). Indigenous respondents had by far the highest rates of such racist experiences. This confirms official reports on the problematic relations between police and Indigenous Australians (see Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody, 1991:21-30, 193-249; HREOC, 1991:79-113; 2001:16-17). Some of the abovementioned reports have examined relations between police and other non-Anglo communities, including Asian-Australian communities such as the Vietnamese (see Office of the NSW Ombudsman, 1994). More recently, the emphasis of inquiry has been in regard to relations between police and Arab-Australians, and especially youth (Collins *et al*., 2000:171-198; HREOC, 2004:66-67; ICNSW, 2004:12-13; Poynting *et al*., 2004:52-78). The percentage of LOTE respondents from our survey who reported experiencing discrimination from their dealings with police was over three times the rate of non-LOTE respondents (16% against 5%) (Table 2). The LOTE variable is too

blunt to identify the specific communities that are experiencing problematic relations with police. However, the data affirm the general level of concern regarding policing-based racism in the Australian body politic.

The experience of racism when seeking accommodation

Just over 6% of respondents reported an experience of discrimination while seeking accommodation. This is an indicator of racism within a key service provision sector. A key to social justice in an ethnically diverse society lies in transformations of the billion dollar institutions concerned with housing, and also health, education and social security (Castles, 1992:42). Access to housing across the range of sub-markets as a factor in urban social inequality was first assessed by Rex and Moore (1967). Since then, the experience of minority groups has been the focus of a growing number of studies, as illustrated in recent general issues of *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* (1997) and *Urban Studies* (1998). In Australia, investigations of the links between racism and accommodation have focused on the concentration of racism within certain localities, and specifically public housing estates, and tensions between racist tenants and members of minority ethnic groups (HREOC, 1991:162-163, 337-343). However, there has been relatively little investigation of racism within housing allocation in Australia, whether in the private or public spheres (for a small exception see HREOC, 2001:15).

Indigenous respondents were much more likely to report experiences of racism in this sphere. One-in-five reported racism while seeking accommodation, whereas for non-indigenous respondents the ratio was closer to one-in-sixteen (Table 2). This indicates a radically varied likelihood of experiencing racism. Even more dramatically, LOTE respondents reported experiencing discrimination in housing at almost four times the rate of non-LOTE respondents.

Everyday racisms

Respondents were also asked about everyday forms of racism, suffered in restaurants, at sporting and other public events, in the streets and in other everyday transactions and activities. The experience of these everyday racisms feed into the construction of fearful social environments. Threats of violence and ambient incivility can deprive people of their freedom of movement, expression and affiliation. It can fundamentally undermine citizenship and can be a driver of (non)belonging. The National Inquiry into Racist Violence (HREOC, 1991:387-388) pointed out that racist violence was of a level to cause concern and was generally manifest in the form of a "threatening environment", with "visibly different" groups, such as hijab-wearing Muslim women, made subject to racist intimidation and harassment. More recent reports suggest that such incivilities in public places are too common (HREOC, 2004:54-57; Poynting and Noble, 2004:7-8). Poynting and Noble (2004:6) found that 75% of their Muslim survey respondents had experienced higher rates of racist abuse or violence since 11th September 2001.

In our survey results the frequencies of everyday racisms, such as disrespectful treatment and racialised insult, were generally higher than for the institutional forms. The reported experience of racism in settings such as shops (17%) and sporting events

(15%) were about the same as for the institutional contexts of the workplace and in education (Table 3). Again, sporting events and shopping centres can be places of compulsory cross-cultural contact. All four are sites in which everyday discourses of 'race', nation and racism are continuously repeated and reinscribed in the Australian body politic. They are contexts in which these discourses are largely peer regulated, beyond the scrutiny of any formal, regulatory or anti-racist mechanisms.

Table 3: Experience of everyday racisms, by ethnicity, NSW and Queensland, 2001

Ethnicity		Experience of racism (%)				
		In a shop or a restaurant*	At sport or other public event*	You are treated with dis-respect**	People treat you with mistrust**	You are called names or insulted**
ATSI background	**ATSI***	33.0	31.9	42.6	30.9	37.2
	Non-ATSI	16.2	14.4	21.6	13.7	24.4
LOTE	**LOTE**	30.9	27.7	42.5	32.9	44.3
	Non-LOTE	14.1	12.7	18.7	10.9	21.5
Birthplace	**Overseas**	29.4	26.1	39.1	29.1	41.5
	UK/NZ	11.4	15.6	20.5	9.3	30.4
	Australia	14.7	12.6	19.1	11.8	20.9
All (n: 5056)		16.5	14.8	22.1	14.0	24.7

Source: The UNSW and MQU Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001
* Question wording: How often have YOU experienced discrimination because of your OWN ETHNIC ORIGIN in the following situations? Response options were: never; hardly ever; sometimes; often, or; very often.
** Question wording: How often do you feel that because of your own ETHNIC ORIGIN…? Response options were: never; hardly ever; sometimes; often, or; very often. Those responding 'Never' were counted as 'Not' having experienced racism, and those in the other four categories were tallied as a positive response.
*** For the **sizes of the sample components** see Table 2.

It should also be noted that the workplace and other spheres within the body politic are important sites for the experience of these everyday racisms. Loosemore and Chau (2002:98) found very high rates of racist experiences by Asian-Australians in construction workplaces, including 'racist name-calling' (66%), 'racist jokes' (67%), ' racist material' (64%), 'segregation' (56%), 'offensive gestures' (49%) and 'physical abuse' (56%). Our most noteworthy findings are the generally higher levels of racism experienced in the form of disrespectful treatment and name-calling. These two forms of 'everyday racism' are by far the highest. Between one-in-four and one-in-five respondents from NSW and Queensland reported having experienced disrespectful treatment or abuse on the basis of their ethnicity. Extrapolating from these results indicate that almost a quarter of Australians experience these forms of 'everyday racism'.

The reported rates of everyday racisms experienced by Indigenous Australians were high, with 43% responding that they had been treated with disrespect on the basis of their indigeneity, and 37% the recipient of racist abuse (Table 3). Close to one-in-two LOTE respondents reported being treated disrespectfully or abused on the basis of their ethnicity (Table 3). This should be seen as an alarming finding. Amin and Thrift (2002:292) observed that "What is seen and heard in schools, neighbourhoods … shapes understandings of self". At its worst, such incivility can become expected, unquestioned or tolerated. For example, Loosemore and Chau (2002:97) concluded

that "racism is seen [by their respondents] as an inevitable consequence of working in the construction industry, one that is largely ignored by managers and accepted and tolerated by workers". This is another marker of what has become called 'everyday racism' (Essed 1991 cited in Vasta, 1996:49, 70). This might also manifest at sporting arenas, and other public forums, where racialised and racist discourse (as well as misogynist and homophobic discourses) can be considered 'normal'. These are crucial mechanisms by which racism, and racist perspectives, are reproduced within the Australian body politic.

The Anglo overseas born (UK and NZ)

The experiences of the United Kingdom and New Zealand born were generally closer to those of the Australia-born than those of respondents born in other countries. For three spheres the experience of racism was slightly lesser than for the Australia-born – in education, in shops and mistrustful treatment. However, in the workplace, and in regard to insults and name calling, and to a lesser extent at sporting events, the rates of racist experience were significantly higher than for the Australian born. These racisms may be linked to 'sheep shagging jokes' about New Zealanders and references to whinging POMs and Pommy bastards (directed at English immigrants) that are given airings in the workplace and at sporting events. It is also likely that Maori people would have composed some of the 142 New Zealanders who were surveyed. Their experiences of racism would follow the pattern of other people of colour, such as indigenous Australians as discussed above.

Conclusion

The data above are indicative of the extent and targets of racism, and racist violence, in Australia. An extrapolation of our results would suggest that racist insult and name-calling in public places is experienced by a quarter of all Australians, and by 40% of non-Anglo- and Indigenous Australians. The reported rates of everyday racism experienced by Indigenous Australians, those born overseas, and those who speak a LOTE were often double those for the non-indigenous, Australia-born and non-LOTE respondents. The variation in the experience of racism in institutional settings was even more dramatic. Generally, those who spoke a Language Other than English at home, and Indigenous Australians, experienced much higher rates of all types of racism. These findings confirm the evidence collected by HREOC, anti-discrimination agencies, and NGOs (HREOC, 2001:16-18). Australians of a non-Anglo background and indigenous Australians are more likely to experience racism.

The next stage of the UNSW and Macquarie University Racism Project involves a much more detailed analysis of the experiences of racism. We have drawn upon a range of research on racism to develop novel survey questions, especially in regard to everyday racisms. Some of the categories include: race talk, exclusions, unfair treatment, and physical attack. We will also collect data on the context of racist incidents, relating to location, (re)actions of victim, feelings of victim, outcomes (sense of belonging, disposition, regret), as well as opinions on anti-racism. Examples of some of the questions we have devised are provided in Box 1, and we encourage other researchers to replicate such questions in varied contexts and using varied method.

Box 1: Asking questions about the experience of racism, samples on 'race talk' and 'exclusions'.

Race talk
Have you ever been called an offensive slang name for your cultural group?
Ever been a target of racist jokes, songs, or teasing?
Heard or read comments that are stereotypical of your cultural group?
Ever heard talk or read anything that portrays your cultural group in a poor light?
Has anyone sworn at, or verbally abused you, because of your cultural background?
Made offensive gestures towards you because of your cultural background?

Exclusions
Has anyone suggested you do not belong in Australia, that you should 'go home', 'get out' and so on?
Ever felt segregated or left out because of your cultural background?
Ever felt people avoid you because of your cultural background?
Has anyone treated you as less intelligent, or inferior, because of your cultural background?

Source: The Experience of Racism National Survey, UNSW and Macquarie University, 2005.

Speaking about racism in the Australian body politic is a fraught exercise. Clearly there is a need for the realities of racism to be acknowledged. This is essential for enabling public policy responses to racism. However, the suggestion that a significant section of the body politic may be racist, in one way or another, can generate antagonism. This could have the effect of making people, including policy makers, opinion leaders and ordinary people, less disposed to a critical engagement with the issues around racism. But 'racism' also has an important semantic power. The repeated identification and public critique of racism remains a valuable tool of anti-racism. This is revealed by the recent and evolving discourse that has attempted to contain this aspect of anti-racism. Hall (2000:222 see also Hesse, 2000:5-10) and Warren (2000:145-54) have noted how there is an emerging form of political correctness that proscribes the discussion of racism. Those researchers or activists who locate and discuss racism are accused of 'playing the race card', or of being racist. Through a clever discursive turn the opprobrium associated with racism is shifted from the perpetrator to the accuser. This reveals the sensitivity to the critique of racism, as well as the inherent power of the term.

In recent times in Australia, concern has been expressed that anti-racist politics has been too insensitive of the 'battlers'. The 'battlers' (variously defined) are nonetheless a section of the body politic particularly influenced by racist discourse (see Dunn *et al.*, 2004). There is a concern that anti-racism will simply be perceived as an initiative of the political elite, imposed in a disparaging away upon the battlers. Of course, precisely this perception is purposefully constructed by pro-Anglo assimilation voices. Prior to his election as Prime Minister, John Howard's election promise was to lift the "pall of censorship" (Howard, 1996:4). Political correctness does inhibit reiterations of racist commentary in public life. The attack on political correctness has been well waged and is now a key tool for conservatives who are engaged in the discursive battles on history, national identity, and racism. However, neglecting to identify the sectionally varied presence of racism only gives support to the conservative attempt to silence public discussion of racism. Warren (2000) outlined how 'conflict avoidance', power and 'race' evasiveness, and the downplaying of racial inequality are key means by which a racialised body politic is reproduced. The

most effective way in which to negotiate the public discussion of racism, and of how it effects particular sections of the body politic, is to talk of racism as a trap, rather than as a sin (Roy, 1999). The historical circumstances of racism among the body politic, the important spatial and social divides, and the other key structural influences, are appropriately the focus of critical research. These are the forces that imprison large sections of the body politic within racism.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] This paper was presented at the UQ Australian Studies conference, 'The Body Politic' in Brisbane, 24-26 November 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the authors who retain copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

[2] The survey included attitudinal questions that gauged: a respondent's tolerance (or comfort) for specific (out) cultural groups; their opinions on the desirability of cultural diversity; belief in racial hierarchy and separatism; belief in racial categories (racialism); their self-identification as prejudiced; perceptions of Anglo-Celtic cultural privilege; and, ideologies of nation.