Tiocfaidh Ár Lá, get the brits out, lad: masculinity and nationalism in Irish-language rap videos

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ABSTRACT
While the Irish language has long been closely tied to Irish national identity and political nationalism, it has also been strongly associated with the perceived rural, traditional lifestyle of those regions where it remains the everyday community language. These associations have been disrupted with the emergence of Kneecap, bilingual (Irish/English) rappers from West Belfast whose lyrics and visual imagery contain sexual innuendo, references to illicit drug-taking and the IRA, jokes at the expense of the police (P.S.N.I.) and established political parties (notably the Democratic Unionist Party), as well as calling for Irish reunification and an end to the British presence on the island of Ireland. We draw on a theoretical framework which integrates “everyday nationhood” – how “ordinary citizens” perform nationalism in everyday life – with Banerjee’s “muscular nationalism”, which draws attention to the gendered history of Irish Republicanism. Adopting a multimodal critical discourse analytic approach to the study of gender and language, we analyse four music videos self-published by Kneecap on Youtube. We argue that these everyday texts reproduce and disseminate Irish Republicanism while centring normatively masculine identities, although in a way which sets Kneecap apart from previous incarnations of “muscular nationalism”.

KEYWORDS
Gaeilge; Irish rap; nationalism; masculinity; YouTube

Introduction
Since releasing their first music on YouTube in 2017, Belfast rap group Kneecap have drawn acclaim for their outspoken rap in a mixture of Irish and English, as well as causing controversy. Consisting of three young West-Belfast men going by the stage-names Mógláí Bap, Mo Chara and DJ Próvaí, Kneecap’s lyrics – often comedic and always political – target figureheads of British authority in Northern Ireland such as former First Minister Arlene Foster and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), while celebrating a party-boy lifestyle of recreational drugs and drinking, for which they were banned from Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), the Irish national broadcaster (Barter 2017). Despite this mainstream snub, their self-published videos on YouTube have been a hit with young Irish people at home and abroad, their fans catapulting
them to a series of sold-out concerts on tour in Ireland and Britain, and rescuing them by donating to a £14,000 crowdfunding when they were left stranded in the US after their first American tour was suddenly ended by the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020.

We identify a novel form of Irish Republicanism in Kneecap’s YouTube videos, one which combines traditional elements of nationalist ideology (e.g. aspirations for a United Ireland and an emphasis on masculinity) with taboo subjects traditionally considered at odds with this ideology (e.g. sex, drugs and ironic humour). This unusual “remix” Republicanism (Williams 2017) mirrors how the group “update” the indexicalities of the Irish language: by rapping about selling drugs to your granny and having sex with (both male and female) pensioners in inner city Belfast, Kneecap challenge the language’s naturalised association with some “pure”, traditional and rural Irishness, instead grounding it in the everyday realities of urban, working-class (Northern) Irish life in the twenty-first century. By self-publishing their music on YouTube and circumventing conventional routes of public broadcasting dictating which expressions of Irishness or which perceptions of the language remain canon in the public consciousness, Kneecap force their audience to confront new perspectives on both the Irish language and Irish Republicanism.

Basing our analysis on a theoretical framework integrating “muscular nationalism” (Banerjee 2012) and “everyday nationhood” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), we analyse four YouTube videos to examine how Kneecap’s gendered Irish Republicanism connects overarching political structures to everyday life. While it is by no means a novel observation that nationalism has a gendered dimension (Yuval-Davis 1997), we argue that Kneecap’s specific brand of muscular nationalism is a new “iteration” which draws more on “protest masculinity” (Connell 2005) than on more traditional forms of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), distinguishing them from previous generations of Irish Republicans.

We begin with brief overviews of the Irish language and post-colonial theory as it relates to Ireland, muscular nationalism, everyday nationhood and social media, followed by a description of data selection and analysis procedures. Our analysis focuses on three key aspects of Kneecap’s texts relevant to gender and nationalist ideology: conflict within and between ethno-national communities in the North of Ireland, the construction of Kneecap’s masculinity in relation to women and gay men, and finally, the role of alcohol and drugs in shaping a Republican ideology which foregrounds opposition to (various forms of) authority.

**An Ghaeilge (The Irish language) & decolonisation**

Irish has no legal status under Northern Irish law, though a currently proposed Irish Language Act has represented a key source of tension in Northern Irish politics in recent years (Burke 2018). According to the 2011 Northern Irish census, Irish is the “main language” for only 4,200 people (0.2% of the Northern Irish population), ranking fourth behind English, Polish and Lithuanian (Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency 2013). 11% of census respondents claimed “some ability” to read, write, speak or understand Irish, although only 3.7% could do all four competently (Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency 2013). Despite relatively low levels of usage on a day-to-day basis, Irish remains an important marker of (Catholic-Irish) ethno-national identity,¹ as well as political nationalism, particularly in the North (Mac Ionnrachtaigh...
Therefore, Irish occupies an ideologically powerful yet practically precarious position in the North of Ireland.

Irish use in an urban, West Belfast setting must be considered in the context of the language’s traditional association with the *gaeltachtai*, the predominantly rural areas mostly located on Ireland’s west coast such as Gaoth Dobhair (Gweedore, Co. Donegal), Conamara (Connemara, Co. Galway) and Corca Dhuibhne (Dingle Peninsula, Co. Kerry) where Irish is still the primary community language (at least in theory, if not in practice [see Moriarty 2014]). In the national consciousness these rural *gaeltachts* are ideologically positioned as the natural home of the Irish language, and thus as the repository of some essential Irishness, defined in rural, traditional terms (O’Rourke and Brennan 2019), and native Irish speakers thus as quaint and conservative. Meanwhile, new speakers of Irish outside of the *gaeltachtai* contend with a host of negative attitudes and anxieties that they are hobbyists speaking a “bookish”, overly standardised form of the language (O’Rourke and Walsh 2020). In 2018, Belfast was designated one of five new *líonraí gaeilge* (“Irish language networks”), effectively urban *gaeltachtai* which have emerged in recent years (Foras na Gaeilge 2018). These emergent Irish-speaking communities may be playing a role in redefining Irish speakers “as loud and brash, sexy and exciting, everything you don’t expect them to be” (Ni Dhuinn 2017). In West Belfast, where the Irish language revival began in the 1980s, impetus for the revival originated in the “jail-tachts”, Irish learning communities which sprung up among Republican prisoners, thus ideologically linking the language to Republicanism on a political level (Mac Giolla Chriost 2012).

Previous sociolinguistic research has looked at these ideologies around Irish through the prism of “authenticity” and “anonymity” (Woolard 2016). Irish is framed as the authentic or natural language proper to the fulfilment of a traditional vision of Irishness, whereas English is somewhat bleached of meaning, the “language from nowhere” (O’Rourke and Brennan 2019). Ideologies of linguistic authenticity can be rooted in two distinct types of “authentic” experience, one stereotypically rural and another stereotypically urban:

> [A] speech variety must be perceived as deeply rooted in social and geographic territory in order to have value. For many European languages, these roots are in the mountain redoubts of peasant folk purity. For non-standard varieties such as African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the United States, the roots are often located in the soulful streets of the inner city or the barrio, where real people are said to be “keeping it real”. (Woolard 2016, 22)

Thus by taking Irish from the “mountain redoubts of peasant folk purity” to the “barrio”, Kneecap are “updating” the language while maintaining the strong association between the language, Irish national identity and Republicanism.

The invocation of AAVE as one type of urban (linguistic) authenticity is particularly relevant in the context of Irish-language rap. Kneecap trace their music influences to both Irish rebel songs, a branch of Irish folk music espousing Irish Republican politics often combined with humour, and African-American rappers N.W.A. (Mullally 2019). Both musical lineages centre resistance to police authority and issues stemming from colonialism and discrimination. This influence of American rap on their music is primarily felt as a protest genre; linguistically, because Kneecap are Irish-English bilinguals hailing from Belfast, a majority Anglophone city, their creative use of English is unlike the Hip Hop
New Language or Global English described in previous multilingual global hip hop literature (see Terkourafi 2010). Rather, this is a product of the specific linguistic circumstances of Irish. As is typical for a minority language, the colloquial register of Irish features regular code-mixing and switching to the majority language English (Ni Laioire 2012), and much of Kneecap’s lyrics appear to faithfully reflect this. However, although hip hop lyrics in particular closely emulate colloquial speech, they are nevertheless carefully crafted texts intended for public performance and must be studied “as an outcome of strategic styling decisions within specific social and historical contexts” (Androutsopoulos 2010, 20). The Irish-speaking community is very small, and its hip hop wing even smaller, so it is likely that the majority of Kneecap’s fans are English speakers with limited or no Irish who may struggle to decipher Kneecap’s Irish lyrics and for whom those lyrics are primarily symbolic (Cheshire and Moser 1994), meaning they rely on English code-switches and paralinguistic cues to structure their understanding of the text.

The nationalism which Kneecap advocate is based upon a “partitioned” national identity (Todd 2015). From the partition of Ireland in 1920, Irish national identity has been fractured, simultaneously post-colonial (in the Republic of Ireland) yet still under British colonial occupation (in the North), leading to different ways of “doing” national identity:

In the Republic, respondents speak as if there is an achieved and assumed nation that is all-encompassing. In Northern Ireland, they speak as if the nation is unachieved, a project whose trajectory remains unknown. (Todd 2015)

Mac Ionnrachtaigh (2013) argues that the revival of the Irish language, aimed at restoring not only political but also cultural and linguistic sovereignty, was halted once political independence was achieved in the Republic of Ireland. Ongoing British political control in the six counties of the North led to a push for more thorough decolonisation, including attention to cultural, linguistic, political and socio-economic issues. Therefore, we might expect issues of class, culture and language to be more prominent in nationalist ideology in Northern Ireland, where British colonial structures can be more readily linked to everyday concerns, particularly those of the minority Catholic-Irish population.

**Muscular nationalism**

The gender dimension(s) of Irish nationalism must also be taken into account. In this article, we draw on recent work on the multimodal construction of identities at the intersection of gender and sexual norms with those of national and ethnic belonging (e.g. Cashman 2019; Milani et al. 2018). National independence movements often serve to install (heterosexual) men in the position(s) of power formerly occupied by the coloniser, particularly at the expense of women (Yuval-Davis 1997). Ireland’s history of being framed as the appropriate (female) partner to the (masculine) coloniser Britain led to an assertion of Irish masculinity as part of the resistance to colonisation (Banerjee 2012). The gendered dynamics of national and ethnic identities in the North of Ireland mean that proving one’s manhood is often framed in terms of protecting one’s own (Irish-Catholic or British-Protestant) community (Holland and Rabrenovic 2018; Ashe 2012).

We argue that the Republicanism in Kneecap’s texts can be characterised as “muscular nationalism”: “the intersection of a specific vision of masculinity with the political doctrine
of nationalism” (Banerjee 2012, 2). Banerjee (2012, 2) identifies a heteronormative binary whereby an “adult male body poised to sacrifice and kill for the nation” is juxtaposed with “a chaste female body that both symbolises national honour and provides a moral code for the lives of women in the nation”. This binary of “martial man versus chaste woman” (Banerjee 2012, 2) proves a delicate balancing act, as any (visible) politicisation or militarisation on the part of women reveals its fragility, threatening the basis upon which the nation is ideologically constructed. Although Kneecap’s texts are not entirely free of gender and sexual stereotypes, they are far less invested in heteronormative binaries than traditional muscular nationalist ideologies (for example, among older generations of Republicans) and are largely free of the crude misogyny and homophobia which can still be found in the lyrics of some Irish rappers.2 Hegemonic masculinity, upon which muscular nationalism was traditionally constructed, is defined through differentiation from and subordination of women and other masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, this seems less crucial to Kneecap’s performance of masculinity. They also express markedly different social attitudes compared to older Republicans, embracing recreational drugs (both taking and selling) and adopting a more progressive and playful approach to gender and sexual politics. In a study of Belfast teenagers who engage in sectarian violence, Lysaght (2004) frames their masculinities as “protest masculinities”. As “a marginalized masculinity, which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty” (Connell 2005, 114), protest masculinity may therefore be a better fit for Kneecap’s particular performance of masculinity. We are less concerned with classifying Kneecap in terms of a particular “type” of masculinity than with how this production of masculinity is achieved, and how it intersects with Republicanism. Overall, Kneecap’s more playful and subversive way of “doing” Republicanism distinguishes them from the stoic iterations of muscular nationalism which came before them. Therefore, while we argue that Kneecap’s Irish Republicanism is still a gendered ideology rooted in masculinity, theirs is an “updated” version of muscular nationalism moulded by a twenty-first century context, mirroring their “updating” of the Irish language by situating it in an urban setting alongside references to sex and drugs.

**Everyday nationhood & social media**

Whereas Banerjee’s (2012) perspective on muscular nationalism is based in political science, our approach focuses on the ideological work which specific semiotic resources carry out at a more micro level (see Data and Methods). With this in mind, we combine muscular nationalism with an “everyday nationhood” framework (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Everyday nationhood “arose out of a desire to correct a top-down bias in the scholarship on nationalism” (Fox 2018, 862). According to proponents of everyday nationhood (e.g. Fox 2018), Michael Billig’s (1995) influential *Banal Nationalism* presented nationalism as a top-down ideology emanating from news media and passively lapped up by the masses. By contrast, everyday nationhood pays attention to how ordinary citizens reproduce or re-affirm the relevance of the nation, with a focus on nationalism “from below”, arguing that “[t]he nation […] is not simply the product of macro-structural forces; it is simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in routine activities” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 537). Social media presents an ideal medium
through which to analyse the bottom-up reproduction of political ideologies by “ordinary people” in a way relevant to their everyday experiences. In other words, we ask how Kneecap are taking up a gendered Republicanism, re-working and then re-circulating it via music videos, rooted in the everyday experiences of drinking, drug use, sex and humour.

Previous research on music videos has addressed political ideology, for example Way’s (Way 2019, 2016) analyses of party political communication in Turkish parliamentary and presidential campaign videos, or the construction of “the people” pitted against an “elite” in videos produced during the Gezi park protests in 2013. Lindsay and Lyons’ (2018) study of the construction of a “playboy” persona in music videos through performers’ conspicuous consumption of alcohol and the objectification of women provides a useful blueprint for the study of masculinity in music videos, yet Anderson and McCormack highlight that “the centrality of the Internet is still under-theorized in much masculinities research” (2018, 557). Social media platforms can create spaces for bottom-up production outside of the structures of party politics, large record companies or state broadcasters. In allowing users to upload their own videos, YouTube provides a space for users to either contest or reproduce superordinate ideologies connected to national belonging on their own terms (see Way 2016), particularly when a group has been banned from radio play for their explicit content, as in Kneecap’s case.

Data and methods

Data selection

We analyse four publicly available music videos, self-produced and self-published by Kneecap on their YouTube channel. While all Kneecap’s videos deal with themes of alcohol and drug use, for example, these four videos were selected because they explicitly discuss politics in Northern Ireland and issues of gender and sexuality, as well as showcasing a variety of tones, from the humorous to the darker and more aggressive. The videos also cover a timespan of almost two years, from their earlier texts (C.E.A.R.T.A.) to their more recent (Get Your Brits Out), meaning they constitute a representative sample of Kneecap’s texts.

C.E.A.R.T.A. (“RIGHTS”; December 2017, 675k views) centres on Kneecap’s confrontations with the police and the group’s enjoyment of narcotics. In 2017, the song was banned by Irish national broadcaster RTÉ for its references to drugs and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (Barter 2017).

H.O.O.D. (April 2019, 316k views) paints a picture of a night out for a working-class “hood”, revolving around drink, drugs and violence. The video mainly features footage from Kneecap’s energetic live performances.

Gael-Gigolos (“Irish-speaking Gigolos”; May 2019, 229k views) sees Kneecap hatch a plan to pay back a dissident Republican gang through sex work, “attending to” both male and female Belfast pensioners to earn money.

Get Your Brits Out (October 2019, 345k views) tells the (probably) fictional story of Kneecap on a drug-fuelled night out with prominent Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) politicians, healing the political divide following a controversial incident in March 2019 when Kneecap made headlines for chanting “Brits Out” onstage at Belfast’s Empire Bar,
only 24 hours after Prince William and Kate Middleton had spoken there, for which they were condemned by the DUP (Earley 2019).

**Data analysis (procedure)**

The data was analysed according to principles of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). If Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) “seeks to reveal buried ideologies in texts” (Machin 2016, 322), MCDA seeks to reveal how multiple modes accomplish this (not just language, but also visuals, music, space, etc.). Ledin and Machin (2018, 60) characterise the fundamental question driving MCDA as follows: “What semiotic resources are drawn upon in communication, or discourse, in order to carry out ideological work?” In terms of a critical multimodal approach to gender, language and discourse, the aim should not be to simply elaborate a descriptive account of the system by which different modes combine to create meaning, but rather “to understand what affordances are used by communicators in each context of usage, and what ideological purpose they are meant to accomplish” and “how these affordances and their canons of use have ideologies built into them, in particular those related to gender” (Machin, Caldas-Coulthard, and Milani 2016, 305).

We analysed Kneecap’s music videos along three modes: visuals, music and lyrics. In terms of visual semiotics, we analysed the clothing worn by the performers, props used (e.g. bottles of Buckfast), as well as the use of the performers’ bodies, including gesture and posture (Baldry and Thibault 2006); the use of colour (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002); and the locations or landscapes in which the videos were set (Scollon and Scollon 2003; Machin 2010). Music was analysed insofar as it was relevant to a song’s tone or to the intersection of nation and gender (Van Leeuwen 1998; Machin 2010). Finally, the lyrics were analysed, both in terms of the themes recurring in the texts (e.g. drug use, police) and the language used (i.e. English or Irish), characterised by frequent code-switching and code-mixing (Muysken 2000).

Rather than analysing each of the four videos or each of the modes in turn, we follow Machin, Caldas-Coulthard and Milani’s (Machin, Caldas-Coulthard, and Milani 2016) integrated approach, that is, how various modes at once are used to accomplish particular ideological goals. This involves a three-step analytic progression: the first section analyses how Kneecap draw boundaries between (as well as within) ethno-national communities in the North of Ireland; building on this understanding of how Kneecap “do” nationalism, the second section then seeks to understand how this nationalism is gendered (i.e. the “muscular” in “muscular nationalism”); finally, the third section specifies how Kneecap’s muscular nationalism differs from that of older generations of Republicans by looking at the role of drink and drugs in their videos.

**Tinn tuirseach of these fake provies (“Sick and tired of these fake provies”)**

Kneecap’s choice of political language and visuals in their music videos presents the conflict in Northern Ireland – often framed as a religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants – as a struggle between Irish-identified Republicans and British-identified Unionists in which national identity and sovereignty are the primary stakes. For Kneecap, any reference to a religious foundation to their Irish identity is infrequent and ironic:
Instead, they opt for political signifiers of national identity: they spray-paint CEARTA (“RIGHTS”) around Belfast, calling for the Irish language to be granted official status – a red line issue for the DUP during the collapse of the power-sharing Stormont Assembly in 2017 (Burke 2018). Kneecap frequently wear balaclavas, a highly politicised visual symbol drawing on the Troubles-era imagery of the IRA. The group’s third member, DJ Próvaí – jokingly named after the Provisional IRA (or “Provies”) – is never seen without a balaclava; see Figure 1.

Yet while the balaclava symbolises a radical, paramilitary Irish republicanism, there is also a common strain of facetious, knowing humour towards the IRA among Kneecap’s generation who came of age following the Peace Process in the 1990s. Mullally (2019) refers to Kneecap as “Good Friday Agreement babies” for whom “even the Troubles are fair game”: this twenty-first century detachment from the Troubles arguably allows for the co-existence of post-modern (or post-Good Friday Agreement) humour alongside nationalist claims. This layer of irony acts as a buffer, whereby the radical symbol of the balaclava is softened and made more palatable and humorous to Kneecap’s intended audience, and the extent of their real investment in radical Republicanism becomes unclear.

In our dataset, “Brits” appear as one of three types of character: members of the PSNI, the DUP, and the Queen. Notably, Kneecap target limbs of the British state and not individual British-identified citizens. The PSNI is a particular target of hatred and ridicule, as heard in the opening stanza of Kneecap’s first single, C.E.A.R.T.A.:

Fuck me, ní fhaca mé na bastardaí […]
Seans ar bith go bhfaighidh siad mo mhála MD

Fuck me, I didn’t see the bastards […]
No chance they’ll get my bag of MD[MA]

Figure 1. (Gael-Gigolos).
The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force in the North from 1922 until its rebranding as the PSNI in 2001, was often accused of institutional sectarian police brutality and collusion with unionist paramilitaries (O’Loan 2007). While the Irish matrix language of the verse symbolically constructs Kneecap as indigenously Irish, the English insertions *Fuck me, MD, RUC* and borrowing *bastardaí* strategically provide their primarily English-speaking audience with anchoring points of understandable lyrics, ensuring maximum audience engagement with the more pointed political critique on offer, especially in the North where the number of Irish speakers is lower but the political message is of more immediate relevance to people’s lives. The politically charged pre-police reform name *RUC*, in particular – repeatedly inserted in English and therefore recognisable to all listeners – constructs the modern police as a continuation of the colonial police force and the embodiment of British law, while Kneecap presuppose that the English-speaking listener will be sympathetic enough to their Republican politics to connect the dots that the *RUC* are *bastardaí*. Later in the video, a policeman confronts Mo Chara in a car park and threatens him with arrest:

*Young man, we caught you damaging public property
And you are coming to the station so we can talk properly*  
(C.E.A.R.T.A.)

The policeman character speaks in English – as Kneecap do elsewhere – but with a faux-Southern-English accent, a form of parodic voicing (Bakhtin 1981) which constructs him as British-beyond-British, entirely foreign to Ireland. His desire for Mo Chara to *talk properly* places their identities at even further extremes, highlighted by Mo Chara’s refusal in Irish:  
*Tá tú ag labhairt le Kneecap, is cuma linn sa tioc* (“You’re speaking to Kneecap, we don’t give a damn”).

The comedic tone of *C.E.A.R.T.A.* affords Kneecap an ironic distance from the political subject matter at hand, whereas in *H.O.O.D.*, Kneecap’s criticism of the police is much more pointed; the video’s tone is decidedly not humorous, but much darker. The song describes the young, Irish-Catholic men of West Belfast locked in a cycle of mundane violence and brutalisation by the PSNI:

| Troid eile, he’s beating some fella | Another fight, he’s beating some fella |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Tá an RUC anseo and it’s for sure seo siúd is eile | The RUC is here and it’s for sure this that and the other |
| Fucked into the back of a jeep, he falls asleep | Fucked into the back of a jeep, he falls asleep |
| He does it every week | He does it every week |

(H.O.O.D)

The choice of indefinite determiners and pronouns – *troid eile* (“another fight”) with just *some fella*, and police intervention for *seo siúd is eile* (“this, that and the other”) – offers a vivid social commentary in few words: for Kneecap, violence is commonplace among young men in the community and those who partake in it are unremarkable for doing so, and the police are just as quick to use violence on this faceless underclass themselves. This mundane, colonial violence between young West Belfast men and the “RUC” is historicised through references to curfews (*Fuck you, curfew*), looking back to the 1970 Falls
Road Curfew, where the Republican Falls Road area was sealed off by the British Army following weapons searches, rioting and skirmishes with the IRA. The lyrical references to violence are matched by the dark visuals, with shots of the group performing in a dimly lit club where the crowd and performers are illuminated only by flashes of strobe lighting. Varying degrees of brightness carry differing meaning potentials, with darker tones associated with subjects such as violence or death (Machin 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002). The minor key of the music, according to van Leeuwen (Van Leeuwen 1998), functions as the marked option (in contrast to the unmarked major key) and suggests a scepticism regarding prevailing ideologies of societal progress. Lyrics, music and lighting combine here to emphasise a brooding malevolence directed towards the British state and the forces of law and order.

Just as these historical relations of violence are framed as continuously relevant in the contemporary context, so too is the retaliatory violence aimed back at the colonial state:

'Nois, cúpla ceist, do ya want it in your chest?  
Or your knees, or your head?  
DJ Próvaí’s got the lead  
You can beg, you can plead
You can tell us what we need
You can change your name
But you’re all the fuckin’ same

Now, a couple of questions, do ya want it in your chest?  
Or your knees, or your head?  
DJ Próvaí’s got the lead  
You can beg, you can plead
You can tell us what we need
You can change your name
But you’re all the fuckin’ same

(H.O.O.D)

Here, Kneecap’s expression of a commonplace rap discourse – “fuck the police” – is specifically loaded with Troubles-era political imagery. Footage of the RUC practising drill marches appears, and later the video cuts away to grainy film footage from the Troubles of an RUC Armoured Land Rover stationed on an empty street corner among the rubble and dust of recent action. The role of DJ Próvaí as the group’s imagined gunman connects this modern tension with the police to the real-life PIRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) attacks on RUC servicemen. Linguistically, it is noteworthy that English is the matrix language of almost the entire verse, and indeed most of H.O.O.D. is in English. Irish-speakers are well accustomed to code-switching to English in public domains to achieve communicative goals with strangers (Ní Laoire 2016). Thus, the English here draws the listener into the violent scene and privileges the widest possible dissemination of the song’s political message over the audience’s symbolic consumption of Irish. As such, Kneecap present a Northern Ireland where the peace process reforms of the police (including the RUC’s re-branding as the PSNI) have failed (You can change your name / But you’re all the fuckin’ same). The use of the term “RUC” constructs the police as still an avowedly British colonial institution while simultaneously othering and homogenising its supposedly Protestant officers. Elsewhere in the song this Protestant police outgroup is positioned in a simple sectarian dichotomy: as Billy versus our poor Mickey, purely Protestant and Catholic, respectively, with no crossover, an issue the police reforms have actually had some (albeit limited) success in addressing (PSNI 2020). For Kneecap, the modern political concern of over-policing of petty drugs offences along sectarian lines is a legacy of the Troubles, while the haunting imagery of past violence serves to remind the viewer that British state violence is still the violence that the North can’t seem to shake off.

However, Kneecap also comment on the current state of the Republican cause – specifically, the Republican gangs that have spawned from the PIRA post-peace
process. Before the ceasefire(s) of the 1990s, the PIRA would enact informal community policing to prevent drug-dealing in Catholic communities (Boland, Fox-Rogers, and McKay 2020). Post-ceasefire, new violent dissident Republican groups which emerged in opposition to the Good Friday Agreement continued to enact this community policing, carrying out punishment beatings and kneecappings on suspected drug dealers, and these are still common occurrences in Derry and Belfast (Hourigan et al. 2018). There are allegations that these groups or their members are involved in the drugs trade themselves, and that this community violence in fact serves to cement their privileged position in drug distribution networks (Boland, Fox-Rogers, and McKay 2020). As Mo Chara comments:

Cunts, ag cur amú mo chuid ama  
Buachaíli beaga dána  
Sa tóir ornin cheana  
Tinn tuirseach of these fake Provies  
Ach gheobhaidh siad faic uaim agus Móglai

Kneecap must repay money owed to the fake Provies or, as Móglai Bap warns Mo Chara, before long [their] knees will be full of lead. Thus Kneecap position two kinds of post-peace process Republican identities against each other: their own, speaking the language of the nationalist cause and whose drug-taking is harmless fun, and then the tainted fake Provies, who have strayed from the true Republican cause to harm the Irish-Catholic community in the North. In the finale of Gael-Gigolos, when Kneecap meet the gang in a graveyard to hand over the money, a comedic retribution is in order for the “fake Provies”:

‘Nois beagnach déanta och tá trup mór callán  
DJ Próvaí agus a mhac on a tandem  
“Caidé an craic, boys?” and he whips out his handgun  
Sin an deireadh leis na RA men

Now almost done but there’s a big clatter of noise  
DJ Próvaí and his son on a tandem  
“What’s the craic, boys?” and he whips out his handgun  
That’s the end of the RA men

Kneecap – and quite fittingly, DJ Próvaí again – turn the community policing back on the former policers, and in doing so further position themselves as the inheritors of the true Republican cause. Again here, the comedic buffer they use makes it difficult to discern if Kneecap want to criticise the “fake Provies” from a moderate standpoint for being violent drug-lords, or from a more radical standpoint for abandoning armed resistance against the British state. Taking this version of the (post-)conflict landscape as our backdrop, the next section of our analysis discusses how these issues of inter- and intra-community boundary-policing are interwoven with a particular style of gender and sexual politics.

Get Your Brits Out

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stress that masculinity is fundamentally relational; there is always a play of difference from some Other involved in the construction of masculinity (hegemonic masculinity, for example, defines itself in opposition to women and subordinate masculinities). There is a well-documented history of both misogyny and homophobia in hip-hop and rap, which scholars have interpreted as a response on the part of African-American men, generally seen as originators of the genre, to feminisation and subordination by white men (see Oware 2011, 23–25). There are clear parallels here
with muscular nationalism’s emphasis on heteronormative gender and sexual roles as a response to colonialism.

However, Kneecap’s flirtation with sex work in *Gael-Gigolos* (Irish-speaking Gigolos) arguably sees them playing with gender roles and sexuality, describing their sexual escapades with both men and women:

Gael-Gigolos, ag freastal ar na mammy hues,  
na daddy hues  
[...]
Old Dick? I just lick it and spit  
Sean-phit? Mate for airgead I eat that shit  
[...]
Any age, any sex

Gael-gigolos, tending to the mammy-hoes,  
the daddy-hoes  
[...]
Old Dick? I just lick it and spit  
Old-pussy? Mate for money I eat that shit  
[...]
Any age, any sex

(Gael-Gigolos)

Mo Chara and Móglai Bap’s quest to raise money through sex work is intercut with scenes of the two in green and orange underwear and unbuttoned white shirts – the colours of the Irish flag – flirting and frolicking with Belfast drag-queen, Dolly Grip; see Figure 2.

Such gender and sexual heterodoxy are seldom found in rap but are also at odds with the heteronormativity and “purity” found in previous iterations of muscular nationalism. By pointedly “sexing the flag”, Kneecap are laying down a challenge to the traditional banishment of (overt) sexuality from the national public arena, not to mention the fact that, in Figure 2, it is male bodies that are simultaneously sexualised and “nationalised”, whereas muscular nationalism has conventionally focused on regimenting female bodies and sexuality.

We must ask, though, whether the humour of *Gael-Gigolos* derives from the incongruity of the premise: whereas straight men turning to sex work to pay off a debt to dissident Republicans seems so far-fetched as to be comical, the video might lose much of its

Figure 2. (Gael-Gigolos).
humour if performed by a woman or gay man, whose bodies are more readily sexualised. There are also instances of apparently straightforward “lad humour” (Kehily and Nayak 1997), such as Móglai Bap’s request that his clientele abair le do chairde about my erection (“tell your friends about my erection”), which Dolly Grip, whispering with breathy voice, informs the viewer is massive, massive. Although the implication that (drag queen) Dolly Grip is familiar with Móglai Bap’s erection is not straightforwardly heteronormative, boasting of sexual prowess is a typical tactic used by straight men to cement their masculinity (Kehily and Nayak 1997), while the possibility of being labelled a “slut” carries less risk for men than for women (Flood 2013). The humour lies in Kneecap’s debasement from their privileged heteronormative position to desperate, bisexual sex work, all the while this debasement is qualified by masculine bravado, boasting about penis size and sexual conquest. While this does in a way subvert the tropes of music videos whereby men are aggressors and women are sexual objects (Wallis 2011), the comedy’s reliance on the tacit impossibility that Kneecap would really have sex with men or a drag queen remains rather heteronormative.

Gender and sexual politics are made salient elsewhere in how Kneecap relate to the British state, particularly in references to gay men. In H.O.O.D., Kneecap seem to take offence at being labelled a “fruit” (a derogatory slang term for a gay man) by a police officer:

Throw a hook, a jab and a boot
I sneak a quick toot then I fire another boot
For callin’ me a fruit
For tryna take the loot
But Billy won’t be bothering anymore hoods
(H.O.O.D.)

While Kneecap do not themselves use the term as a label for someone else, the offence taken at being called a “fruit” appears rooted in an interpretation of homosexuality as a challenge to one’s masculinity, particularly in the context of a fight with Billy (a name synonymous with a Protestant ethnic identity, and thus an ethnic and political “enemy”). On the other hand, in Get Your Brits Out Kneecap condemn DUP Member of Parliament Jeffrey Donaldson’s homophobia:

Donaldson has started with his homophobic chat
So everyone has started on him: “That’s enough of that”
(Get Your Brits Out)

Although there is a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards issues of sexuality in these texts, this certainly distances Kneecap from the outright homophobia often associated with rap. More relevant to our argument is that issues of gender and sexuality are tied to (negative) encounters with “Brits” (as symbolised by Billy and DUP politicians), which becomes clear when looking at women in Kneecap’s texts.

In general, women do not feature heavily in Kneecap’s videos; this is not necessarily intended as a criticism, but distinguishes Kneecap’s videos from those where male performers cultivate a powerful, masculine persona through the conspicuous subordination of women (Lindsay and Lyons 2018). Nevertheless, there are instances where women appear to be objectified or sexualised in these texts. In Get Your Brits Out, women (two birds) are
framed as little more than an accessory to adorn the male body, of the same order as shoes or jewellery:

It’s your fellas with the Nike Air shoes
Two chains, two birds, and we know what’s good
(Get Your Brits Out)

Later in the song, Arlene Foster, the only woman involved in the night out, is the only DUP politician presented as getting touchy (flirtatious) and revealing sexual fetishes:

Ar ais ag an teach and things are getting crusty
Arlene ar mo chlé and she’s getting touchy
Must be just mar gheall ar na yokes
‘Cause she whispered in my ear, “I like to be choked”

Back at the house and things are getting crusty
Arlene on my left and she’s getting touchy
Must be just because of the yokes (drugs)
‘Cause she whispered in my ear, “I like to be choked”
(Get Your Brits Out)

The visuals of Get Your Brits Out also objectify the female body, with the Queen’s outer clothes removed to reveal her cleavage, above which a tattoo reads Brits Out; see Figure 3.

Lindsay and Lyons (Lindsay and Lyons 2018) note how male performers objectify women by deconstructing their bodies into specific body-parts, focusing on the “booty” while demoting parts of women’s bodies which suggest agency, such as the face. It could be argued that the same dynamic is at work in Figure 3, with the framing of the Queen’s cleavage – to the exclusion of her face – presenting the Queen as a sexual object first and foremost.

However, Arlene Foster and the Queen are satirised specifically as women in positions of authority and symbolic of the British state apparatus. Within the broader context of Get Your Brits Out, Arlene Foster’s sexual adventurousness and taste for illicit substances fit the general portrayal of DUP politicians engaging in taboo behaviours at odds with their

![Figure 3. (Get Your Brits Out).](image-url)
conservative ideology, such as Member of Legislative Assembly Christy Stalford showing everyone his old [presumably sectarian or paramilitary] tattoo on his back and licking coke off a plate, or Arlene throwing shapes [dancing]. Likewise, the sexualisation of the Queen and the suggestion that she might have a tattoo reading Brits Out undermine the ideological pedestal upon which she sits, as a figure revered by “Brits” and whose honour is to be defended at all costs. In parallel with the lyrics and visuals, the regular, metronomic beat of the BBC News theme tune in Get Your Brits Out represents a form of hegemonic authority (Van Leeuwen 1998) – that of British state television – which Kneecap subvert by re-purposing it as a backing track for a song rebelling against the authority of the British state. Kneecap’s target here is not so much “women” as “your women”, with the emphasis on belittling the (political, national and ethnic) Other.

Kneecap’s muscular nationalism relies on defending their (heterosexual) masculinity and denigrating the Other (particularly the women in the Protestant-Unionist community). However, this is not the only way in which Kneecap “do” muscular nationalism; to fully understand their specific brand of Republicanism, we must also analyse the role of drink and drugs in their texts.

Raithneach dleathach in focan Éire Aontaithe (“Legal weed in a fucking United Ireland”)

The prevalence of drinks and drugs in Kneecap’s videos is particularly relevant when considering issues of masculinity and nationalist ideology. In C.E.A.R.T.A., Kneecap boast of their consumption to potentially excessive degrees, whereby tolerance of large quantities of alcohol and/or drugs becomes a badge of masculinity:

*Is gan dabht, tá mise ar bís*  
*Le dhul síos ar an snaois arís is arís*  
*Is ní stopfaidh mé go maidin mar nach socraím síos*  
*Agus fuair mé mála mór Ket in ionad mo chíos*  

No doubt, I’m buzzin’  
To go down on the blow again and again  
And I won’t stop ‘til morning ‘cause I never settle down  
And I got a big bag of Ket[amine] instead of my rent  

(C.E.A.R.T.A.)

They consume alcohol and drugs with carefree abandon, boasting of spending rent-money on drugs, a care-free, low-investment stance contributing towards a persona of “masculine ease” (Kiesling 2018). Visually, there is an affinity between the male body and alcohol throughout the texts: bottles become phallic symbols, as when DJ Próvaí sprays a bottle of champagne over Móglaí Bap, Mo Chara and Dolly Grip as they lie on a mattress in Gael-Gigolos, while H.O.O.D. is “bookended” by a bottle of Buckfast, which appears at the beginning of the video in Móglai Bap’s hand, and then again at the end of the video as he pours its contents over his naked torso in front of the crowd. Cover (2003) points out that the body, when naked, is not “pre-discursive”: nakedness is not simply “the absence of clothes” or a “natural state”, it is also a form of social performance; both wearing a balaclava and appearing bare-chested are performative uses of the body, symbols of Republicanism and masculinity, respectively.

As with Lindsay and Lyons’ (2018) aspirational, “jet-setting” hegemonic males, here alcohol foregrounds the male body (and its capacity for consumption). However, Kneecap use drink and drugs to construct masculine, working-class personas. Buckfast, a tonic-wine associated with working-class youth and violent or antisocial behaviour
(Leishman 2014), is a recurring visual trope in Kneecap’s texts. At the start of H.O.O.D., as we see the bottle of Buckfast in Móglaí Bap’s hand, a voice-over asks: *Who’s the most violent person you know except our wee’n?*, followed by cackling laughter. At the same time, the word *KNEECAP* appears on the screen, fading in and out of focus with flares of colour suggesting the double-vision brought on by over-consumption of drink or drugs, followed by *H.O.O.D.* in stylised type suggestive of graffiti. Machin (Machin 2010) notes that angular letterforms such as these index a harsh, abrasive masculinity (as opposed to more rounded letterforms, which soften the text). Later in the video, another combination of lyrics and type emphasises this complex of violence, substance abuse and class. The song’s chorus links class to over-dosing on drugs:

*I’m a H – Double – O – D
Low life scum, that’s what they say about me.*

As we hear the first burst of the chorus, we see Mo Chara brushing his teeth in a bathroom mirror and the word *SCUM* appears on the screen in gold, Celtic lettering; see Figure 4.

Although such lettering often denotes a connection with Celtic tradition (Machin 2010), here the invocation of tradition is at odds with the modern context of substance abuse and class disadvantage being presented in the video, and so instead functions as an ironic nod to the ethno-national dimension of class disadvantage, which the Celtic lettering implies remains relevant even today. On a musical level, an aggressive, high-tempo drum-and-bass beat plays, a marked departure from the playful, laid-back hip-hop style of *C.E.A.R.T.A.* or *Gael-Gigolos.* This combination of visuals, music and lyrics indexes the protest masculinity embraced by disaffected, working-class youth.

References to drugs, in particular, underscore Kneecap’s opposition to the police. As discussed in the previous section, the “RUC” are the enemy on a political level, as representatives of the British colonial state in Ireland, but also on an everyday level, as an
obstacle to Kneecap’s consumption and sale of recreational drugs. The balaclavas worn by
the group link these two levels, being an immediately recognisable visual symbol of para-
military violence while simultaneously providing anonymity (i.e. while dealing drugs),
which Mo Chara claims to be the real reason for wearing one:

Duirt mé leat cheana
I told you already
Seo an chúis le balaclava
This is the reason for a balacla
Is féidir siúl ar shiúl
You can walk away
Is ní aithneoidh siad tada
And they won’t recognise a thing

(C.E.A.R.T.A.)

Moreover, Kneecap’s glorification of recreational drugs also puts them on a collision
course with dissident Republican groups and older generations of Republicans, for
whom drugs are a “scourge” affecting their communities. Following the showdown in
Gael-Gigolos and DJ Próvai’s assassination of the RA men, Móglái Bap breaks the fourth
wall to directly address the viewer – what Kress and van Leeuwen (Kress and Van
Leeuwen 1996) call a “demand gaze”, used to challenge or engage the audience – in a
bid to sell us drugs (You lookin’ yokes [drugs]? ‘Cause I have them), before the final
scene shows the group frolicking with a drag queen, both of which are antithetical to
the traditionally-oriented muscular nationalism of the fake Provis.

This is where the ideological significance of drugs in Kneecap’s texts comes into play.
Kneecap use drugs to link Irish (psycho-)geography, national identity, political nationalism
and opposition to authority, themes brought together in their demand in C.E.A.R.T.A.
for Raithneach dleathach in focan Éire Aontaithe (sic) (“Legal weed in a fucking United
Ireland”), a political slogan which encapsulates Kneecap’s particular brand of nationalist
ideology at odds with all forms of authority, whether police or dissident Republican
groups. In colloquial Irish, one might expect an English insertion weed in this slogan, a
neologism from English (Ní Laoire 2012). The choice of the Irish word raithneach (lit.
“fern”), an Irish native coinage used by in-the-know speakers, allows Kneecap to integrate
gaelicised marijuana into their manifesto, while the deliberate avoidance of code-mixing
provides a humorous moment of political commentary to the Irish-speaking audience
alone. As part of their “update” of the Irish language, Kneecap implicitly link iconically
rural and urban Irish-speaking communities (e.g. Connemara and West Belfast) via drugs:

Tá an “gear” is fearr in Iarthar Bhéal Feirste againn le fada
We’ve the best gear seen in West Belfast for a while
Cóc, speed, E’s agus moll marijuana
Coke, speed, E’s and a heap of marijuana
Ag teacht isteach go ciúin fríd sliabhte Chonamara
Coming in quietly through the Connemara mountains

(C.E.A.R.T.A.)

Here, Kneecap reference locations across the island of Ireland where they flout authority
and sell drugs, but – significantly – without any mention of borders or states. While
rapping about the rural gaeltachtai such as Connemara, Mo Chara and Móglái Bap walk
through several graffiti-covered underpasses iconic of West Belfast’s urban setting; see
Figure 5.

Scollon and Scollon (Scollon and Scollon 2003) characterise graffiti as “transgressive
semiotics”, writing or signage that it is unauthorised in the place where it appears. There-
fore, not only is Figure 5 representative of the inner-city setting which contributes to
Kneecap’s brand of urban authenticity (Woolard 2016), but the shots of graffiti-covered
underpasses also point to the “transgressive” or rebellious character of inner-city Belfast – and of Kneecap themselves, given that C.E.A.R.T.A. begins with Móglai Bap and Mo Chara fleeing from the police after spray-painting CEARTA (“RIGHTS”) on a wall. Kneecap seek to break down the ideological “purity” of the Irish language by rapping about sex and drugs in Irish, and in this transgressive urban setting. They spatialise this (im)purity by locating drug consumption and distribution in Connemara – perhaps the most iconic gaeltacht area, perceived as an Irish-speaking, rural idyll at odds with Class A drug use (cf. O’Rourke and Brennan 2019) – as evidenced by the reference to importing drugs through Connemara in C.E.A.R.T.A., or their claim in Gael-Gigolos that [they] made a mint off the baggies in Conamara (“[they] made a mint off the baggies [bags of drugs] in Connemara”). Rapping about drug use in Irish challenges traditional understanding(s) of Irish Republicanism, based on language and national identity and their “purity” as the ideological foundations of “muscular nationalism”.

**Conclusion**

Nadia C.’s essay Your Politics Are Boring As Fuck (1997) ridicules politics stuck in a quandary of high theory, setting out principles for a politics relevant to everyday life: politics must be relevant to our everyday life experience, new political approaches and methods must be created, and political activity should be joyous and exciting. Kneecap would appear to meet these criteria. Not only do they weave high-level political issues into scenes of everyday life, but their use of an independent medium as their primary outlet is itself a result of the “everyday” content of these texts, given that it was the ban which forced the group to publish their videos on YouTube in an effort to circumvent the constraints of traditional media institutions. While for RTÉ, referring to the PSNI as the “RUC” was so radical as to be worthy of censure, Kneecap defended their lyrics as a faithful representation of the everyday political
language of the Belfast they know (Barter 2017), and elsewhere calls for legal weed and a united Ireland are so commonplace among Kneecap’s generation of young Irish people as to be unremarkable.

For much of their audience – whose experience of Irish as a school subject in the South has often been quite negative and depersonalised, or those in the North who often feel denied the opportunity to study Irish as a proper school subject – it is clear that it has been genuinely exciting to witness this marriage of the symbolic national language with their liberal attitudes to drugs and growing desire for a united Ireland in the tense aftermath of the UK Brexit referendum. Nevertheless, as political musicians Kneecap have attracted controversy precisely because of their strategically ambiguous views towards British-identified people in the North. The arguably sectarian “Brits Out” chanting incident at their Belfast concert, or violent lyrics in H.O.O.D, versus the satirical follow-up song Get Your Brits Out – meant as reassurance (or a taunt) to the critics that they mean no harm – ensured that Kneecap did not commit to perhaps their most radical and sensitive position, staying idir shúgradh agus dáirire, “half in earnest and half in jest”.

In this tongue-in-cheek departure from the conventional foundations of muscular nationalism, we have demonstrated that Kneecap’s decolonial ideology retains its basis in a (heteronormative) masculinity which is not always benign (as far as women and gay men are concerned, at least). They are simultaneously “punching down” by satirising women, in particular, from a position of (heterosexual) male privilege, while “punching up” by using this satire as a way to undercut the authority and purity which forms the ideological basis for British colonialism (cf. Earley 2018). This highlights the complex dynamics involved in the intersection of gender and nationalist ideology, where opposition to one form of authority – for example, the apparatus of the British colonial state – often ends up falling back on appeals to another – in this case normative regimes of gender and sexuality.

Notes

1. 90% of those claiming some competency in Irish were brought up Catholic and 68% identify as Irish only, as opposed to British, Northern Irish, or some combination of the three identities (Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency 2013).
2. Notably, Dublin rappers Versatile have been criticised for gratuitous misogyny, homophobic slurs and racial stereotypes in their lyrics (Earley 2018).
3. By contrast, there has been comparatively more work on digital femininities (e.g. Abidin and Gwynne 2017; Abidin and Thompson 2012). At the time of writing, however, there are upcoming volumes on digital masculinities (Lawson forthcoming, in preparation), which would suggest that increasing attention is being paid to this topic (see also Lawson 2020).

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