

## **“Low-life scum” vs. “the embodiment of the modern Irish language?”: Kneecap’s Use of the Irish Language to Disrupt Oppression<sup>1</sup>**

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Amid the politicized Irish-language debates about the declining use of the language, Belfast group Kneecap creates a popular, yet controversial brand of Irish language hip-hop music. As self-proclaimed “Good Friday agreement babies,” Kneecap acknowledges they are more detached than their parents from the violence of The Troubles, yet they still live with the intergenerational trauma that affects the entire community. Due to their open discourse around drugs, sex, and violence their music has been banned on RTÉ, while other more idealized Irish-language pop/rock groups such as Seo Linn have received commissions from the same broadcaster to perform at the 1916 Centenary. Both groups maintain a significant audience but there is the larger question of who gets to speak for the Irish, in Irish. This study analyses Kneecap’s music, videos, social media presence and audience response while using similar examples from Seo Linn to provide contrast. It also explores how Kneecap is viewed objectively by potestant/unionist groups in Northern Ireland, citizens in The Republic of Ireland and their audience in the Irish diaspora and around the world. An analysis of Kneecap’s music using decolonial theory reveals the use of satire and humour to disrupt oppression and create a subjective voice and space for Catholics/republicans in Northern Ireland. Kneecap distances the Irish language from the formality of academia and state affairs, embracing the roots of hip-hop music, bringing it to the people in a form that encourages dialogue, creativity, and free expression—internalized colonial thinking around language ‘ownership’ will only further alienate speakers and open-discussion.

Matthew Tran-Adams is currently a PhD Candidate at York University in Toronto, Canada studying ethnomusicology. As a former Lecturer at OISE/University of Toronto in Education and a secondary teacher/department head in the Toronto District School Board, Matthew specialized in developing equitable and anti-racist music curriculum. He is an Associate Composer of the Canadian Music Centre and his most recent composition won first in the North American Guild of Carillonneurs Arrangements and Transcriptions Competition. Matthew has studied the Irish language in various Gaeltachts and universities and plays Irish harp.

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<sup>1</sup> “Low-life scum” is a term Kneecap uses in their song H.O.O.D