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**‘Better Way to Live’: race, gender, and challenging hegemonic
postcolonial ideology in discursive constructions of KNEECAP
via Irish and British state media**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the extent to which and how non-hegemonic identities are discursively constructed in terms of race and gender in postcolonial contexts, as well as the implications thereof for hegemonic state ideology. KNEECAP, a music group from Northern Ireland, has been the subject of media controversy over the past two years for protesting the ongoing genocide in Gaza during its live performances. In light of Ireland's colonial history under British rule, KNEECAP's pro-Palestine advocacy speaks to a longstanding tradition among Northern Irish (Catholic) Nationalists of expressing solidarity with Palestinians, whose experiences of oppression are understood in parallel to their own. Grounding its framework and approach in Postcolonial, Postcolonial Feminist, and Discourse Theories, the research uses poststructuralist discourse analysis to identify key elements and signifiers used by Irish and British state media that serve to construct KNEECAP's identity in racialised and gendered terms. It finds that British state media discourses in particular tend to racialise KNEECAP as a (Catholic) Nationalist Other, demonstrating the power of Ideological State Apparatuses in upholding the postcolonial hegemony of (Protestant) Unionism in Northern Ireland. Yet, the research also shows how certain aspects of KNEECAP's non-hegemonic identity, such as its protest masculinity and use of *Gaeilge*, can serve implicitly to challenge hegemony by disrupting the ideological status quo in the Northern Irish context.

Key words: KNEECAP, postcolonial, race, protest masculinity, ideology

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Overview.....	4
Research problem.....	6
Signposting the thesis.....	8
I: Theory and context.....	10
Key concepts and definitions.....	10
Postcolonial Theory.....	12
Postcolonialism, race, and gender.....	14
Orientalism and the Other.....	15
Hegemony, masculinity, and the Other.....	19
II: Literature review.....	25
Ideology, gender, and protest: the role of state media in constructing discourses.....	26
Race, masculinity, and nationalism: KNEECAP and the Northern Irish context.....	29
III: Methodology.....	33
A qualitative, poststructuralist approach.....	33
Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis as method.....	35
Selection of empirical material.....	38
Coding and analysing the texts.....	39
Towards a Feminist, poststructuralist methodology: positionality and reflexivity.....	41
Ethical considerations.....	42
IV: Analysis.....	45
Place, race, and gender: 'West Belfast' as signifier.....	46
KNEECAP: a 'security threat'?.....	49
KNEECAP, <i>Gaeilge</i> , and constructing the Other.....	53
Signifying race and gender beyond words: visual elements.....	57
Parallels with Palestine I: KNEECAP and discourses on antisemitism.....	63
Parallels with Palestine II: challenging hegemony.....	66
V: Discussion and conclusion.....	69
Orientalist logic and (post)colonial legacies: KNEECAP and the BBC.....	69
Challenging hegemonic state ideology I: the (in)visibility of protest masculinity.....	70
Challenging hegemonic state ideology II: language as power.....	71
Advocating a 'better way to live': avenues for future research.....	73
References.....	76

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Finally, I thank the members of KNEECAP, whose fine art and advocacy inspire me to be proud of my Irish heritage and always to centre love, inclusion, and hope in everything I do.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir as ucht gach rud. Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Introduction

Guess who's back on the news
It's your favorite Republican hoods
It's your fella with the Nike Air shoes
Two chains, two birds and we know what's good

- KNEECAP
'Get your Brits Out'
(2019)

Overview

This thesis is fundamentally interested in how race, gender, and ideology become contingent on one another in discursive constructions of identity. To better understand the implications of discursively constructing identities through race and gender, I turn to the role of state media in producing and perpetuating discourses around the pro-Palestine advocacy of KNEECAP, a music group from Belfast, Northern Ireland. The title of this thesis borrows from the group's 2023 single 'Better Way to Live'. This song in particular espouses themes of self-integrity and authenticity which I think align suitably with the topic of my research. Active since 2017, the three core members of KNEECAP are Liam Óg Ó hAinle (stage name 'Mo Chara'), Naoise Ó Cairealláin (stage name 'Móglai Bap'), and J. J. Ó Dochartaigh (stage name 'DJ Próvaí'). KNEECAP's fast, upbeat rap music and bilingual lyrics ironically and often subversively convey themes of Irish Nationalism, Republicanism, and anti-Imperialist sentiment. Irish Nationalism and protest masculinity are central aspects of KNEECAP's identity and reflect the key, intersecting roles of race and gender in constituting meaning in the group's music and

art. KNEECAP's provocative performance style has increasingly stirred debate in the media regarding art, the right to protest, and freedom of speech. Furthermore, the attention KNEECAP has received from state authorities for its political advocacy in various respects speaks to potential implications for the hegemony of state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland, currently a constituent state of the UK.

On the complex issue of identity in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts, the ethno-religious divisions that define the postcolonial landscape of Northern Ireland under British rule are often understood in parallel with those which define life in Palestine. Being from a postcolonial state with a similar history of settler colonialism, ethno-religious sectarianism, state oppression, and paramilitary violence, (Catholic) Nationalists in Northern Ireland often express solidarity with the Palestinian cause, often through protest demonstrations and painted murals criticising state repression and celebrating resistance across both Irish and Palestinian contexts (Arar 2017, p. 866).¹ Similarly, (Protestant) Unionists draw parallels between their ongoing struggle to maintain ideological dominance in Northern Ireland and the struggles of Israelis to exercise their self-proclaimed right to what they call the "promised land" of Palestine (Arar 2017, p. 862). The latter parallel is rooted in an ethnonationalist understanding of Protestantism as the hegemonic state ideology in Northern Ireland, much in the same way as Zionists view Judaism as ethno-religiously superior to Islam in the Middle East (Said 1984).

Given the historical parallels between Northern Ireland and Palestine, it is no accident that many people in Northern Ireland have been especially vocal in advocating for the Palestinian cause, dating back from long before the October 2023

¹ I use parentheses throughout this thesis when describing the ideologies of Nationalism and Unionism as 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' respectively. The dichotomy of these religious denominations is not the focus of my research, nor reflective of the nuanced internal variations therein. However, it is nevertheless necessary to highlight the inextricable links between ideology, religion, and race in Northern Ireland in order to contextualise its history and politics more clearly (Ruane and Todd 2009).

Hamas attacks on Israel and the subsequent orchestration of the ongoing genocide in Gaza (Albanese 2025). KNEECAP have taken centre stage in media discourses on the Israel-Palestine conflict by adopting a clear, pro-Palestine stance. Regarding their political position, the group's members refer explicitly to the sectarian roots of their hometown and the postcolonial climate of their upbringing in West Belfast. A traditionally working-class and (Catholic) Nationalist area, West Belfast experienced high levels of mass displacement and sectarian conflict during the period known as the 'Troubles', which began in the 1960s and spanned three decades (Commins 2025, p. 86). Over the past three years, KNEECAP has frequently called out the similarities between the historical plight of Irish Catholics under British state rule in Northern Ireland and that of Palestinians under Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank today.

Research problem

By communicating its message of protest both online and during live performances, KNEECAP has both created and advanced its subversive performance style as an aesthetically bespoke form of protesting the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Now regarded as advocates of a radically pro-Palestine position on the issue by Irish and British state authorities alike, KNEECAP's deliberate mixing of art and protest has been met with much condemnation and criticism in the media. Calls for censorship, festival cancellations, travel bans, and terrorism charges against one of KNEECAP's members in the UK are among the numerous controversies the group has faced as a result (Manning 2025).

Foregrounding KNEECAP's identity in Irish Nationalist and masculinised terms, this thesis is concerned with how the state media in Ireland and the UK have discursively constructed and framed the group amid these controversies. It is also

concerned with state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland and how these constructions and framings might serve to either uphold or challenge hegemony in this respect. I thus pose the following research questions for guiding my forthcoming analysis and discussion:

1. *To what extent and how do British and Irish state media discursively construct KNEECAP's identity through race and gender in relation to the group's pro-Palestine protests?*
2. *In what ways might these constructions suggest a perceived challenge to hegemonic state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland?*

When referring to British and Irish state media, I mainly refer to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ). The BBC functions as the official public service broadcaster and primary state media apparatus in the UK. As a state institution, its productive output is directly tied to and legitimised by the political and ideological status quo of the state under the current regime (Hall 2006, p. 153). Alongside the main BBC media news channels, broadcasting divisions for Northern Ireland (BBC News NI) and Scotland (BBC Scotland News) are cited in this thesis. Similarly to the BBC in the UK, RTÉ functions as the main public service media organisation in the Republic of Ireland (Raats, Donders, et al. 2024). Notably, RTÉ and the BBC have both played a key role in documenting political dynamics on the island of Ireland, particularly regarding the development of Northern Ireland as a postcolonial state under British rule over the past century (Ivory 2013; Miller 2002).

As state apparatuses mediated by the will of governing authorities, the state media's capacity for controlling political and cultural discourses assists in upholding hegemonic state ideology through the dual lenses of consent and legitimacy (Hall 2006, pp. 152–153). In Althusserian terms, the media also functions as an Ideological

State Apparatus (ISA) that serves to uphold the ideological status quo in society. From this perspective, I tentatively posit that state media in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland is more likely to favour the institutional, political, and economic hegemony of (Protestant) Unionism over non-hegemonic (Catholic) Nationalist identities and masculinities such as those represented by KNEECAP. The antagonistic foundation of state ideology in the postcolonial North derives from contemporary struggles between the UK and Ireland to reconcile issues of identity, nationalism, language, and culture caused by British imperialism and colonial practices on the island of Ireland historically (McVeigh and Rolston 2009). As such, it is important to critically analyse British and Irish state media representations of individuals or groups, such as KNEECAP, who actively protest the genocide in Gaza and Israel's settler-colonial project in Palestine.

Signposting the thesis

The thesis is divided into five main chapters. Chapter I establishes and contextualises the key concepts of the research problem and constructs a Postcolonial theoretical framework for the purpose of elucidating my methodological approach. Using this framework, Chapter II examines the existing empirical literature in order to justify my research focus and foreground my overall argument. Chapter III then elaborates upon my chosen methodology and method for conducting the research, clarifying their applicability to the research by expounding their qualitative, poststructuralist, and Feminist aspects. I also outline the practicalities of my research design, such as my use of empirical material and ethical considerations regarding the research. Chapter IV is where I apply my theoretical and methodological frameworks to conduct the analysis proper. I primarily address the first of my two research questions and present my findings in a way that demonstrates both reflexivity and close adherence to my chosen method. The final chapter uses the second research

question as a springboard from which to discuss the implications of my findings for Postcolonial research on race, masculinities, hypervisibility of identity, and language. I conclude this thesis by outlining the need for continued research on issues of race, gender, and hegemony in postcolonial discourses and contexts.

I: Theory and context

It's back to basics, a scumbag hood I'm shameless
Take more than that to tame us
All your fault cause you made us famous

- KNEECAP
'It's Been Ages' (2023)

Adopting a Postcolonial perspective, the theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in two main concepts. The first is Edward Said's (1978) articulation of the Other within his Postcolonial Theory of Orientalism. The second is the concept of hegemony, developed by Raewyn Connell (2005) in gender and masculinity studies and by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) within Discourse Theory. Beforehand, I clarify my understanding of race and gender as analytical categories, as well as define and contextualise the terms 'ideology', 'Ideological State Apparatus', and 'postcolonialism' in relation to Northern Ireland and Palestine. I then present the respective concepts of hegemony and the Other as interrelated, theoretical cornerstones of the research puzzle.

Key concepts and definitions

The problem at the core of this thesis concerns ways in which constructions of race and gender in media discourses reflect, challenge, or otherwise impact hegemonic state ideology in a postcolonial context. Extrapolating this problem as part of a poststructuralist Feminist methodology, I understand race and gender as

intersectional, mutually constituted, and unfixed categories (Acker 2000).² As this thesis will investigate discursive state media constructions of KNEECAP through a poststructuralist lens, it is necessary to accept the intersectionality, unfixity, and interpretational ambiguity of these categories. My reading of race and gender in these constructions will be informed by the view that their categorisations are constituted “in and through relation to each other” (McClintock 1995, p. 5). Their discursive inseparability underpins any emergent discourses on subaltern identities characterised by political, socio-cultural, and ethno-religious hierarchies, including hierarchised masculinities, within the Northern Irish context.

My understanding of ideology is derived from Louis Althusser’s (1971) theory of the Ideological State Apparatus and the relationship between ideology and social order. Althusser (1971, pp. 106–107) defines ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group”. Its primary function is to interpellate individuals as subjects, leading individuals to personally identify with conventional social norms and values (Althusser 1971, pp. 115–118). Accordingly, ideology represents yet another unfixed concept susceptible to different discursive iterations and interpretations in the poststructuralist sense (Althusser 1971; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In Northern Ireland, ethno-religious, socio-political, and cultural differences are generally accorded to the following ideologies: Loyalism/Unionism, rooted historically in Protestantism and reflecting the political and cultural interests of the ruling British establishment; and Republicanism/Nationalism, representing a predominantly Catholic political and cultural identity. Many facets of contemporary Northern Irish society continue to be mediated by the antagonistic relations between these ideological positions (Ruane and Todd 2009, p. 84).

² The poststructuralist and Feminist aspects of my chosen methodology are outlined in detail in Chapter III.

Althusser (1971) also defines the concept of the Ideological State Apparatus, the function which is twofold. Primarily, Ideological State Apparatuses serve to uphold the dominant ideology of the state via institutionalised power. Secondly, they have the capacity to repress social or political movements that might pose a threat to the hegemonic state ideology (Althusser 1971, pp. 97–98). Ideological State Apparatuses can be found at every level of society, from religious and educational institutions to media outlets and even within the private realm of family life (Althusser 1971, p. 96). Whereas Repressive State Apparatuses – prisons, courts, government, and security and police forces – are explicit in their function, the power of Ideological State Apparatuses proves more difficult to pinpoint. This is due to their plurality and omnipresence across both public and private spheres, identifiable only by their function in upholding hegemonic state ideologies (Althusser 1971, p. 98). Althusser's (1971) conceptualisation of the Ideological State Apparatus helps furnish my theoretical investigation into how hegemonic ideology operates in postcolonial contexts such as Northern Ireland, a phenomenon which the forthcoming discussion on Postcolonial Theory and hegemony expands upon.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial Theory is a means of critically analysing Western colonialism, from historical legacies to ideological and cultural influences that remain dominant in many former colonised parts of the world today. It aims to deconstruct and reframe so-called 'universal' knowledges and meanings by decentering colonial perspectives and calling the Western worldview into question (Said 1978). As such, Postcolonial Theory is a useful starting point for theorising and contextualising the political, social, and cultural complexities that define the post-conflict state of Northern Ireland. While Said (1978) is considered by many as one of the foremost Postcolonial scholars of the twentieth century, this thesis also acknowledges the work of Feminist theorists such

as Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) who seek to anchor Postcolonialism firmly within the Feminist tradition. Postcolonial Theory and Feminist Theory share similar aims within research, such as critiquing hegemony, analysing agency, and deconstructing the meanings of the identity categories of race, class, and gender (Mohanty 2003). Furthermore, important interventions made by Postcolonial Feminist theorists also critique Postcolonial Theory itself. Many Postcolonial Feminists note a lack of intersectional analyses of colonialism, gender, and class, arguing that these categories cannot be treated in isolation (Mohanty 2003, pp. 2–4). Spivak’s (1988) seminal essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, which questions the position and agency of marginalised voices and the aforementioned ‘subaltern’ identity within discourses, merits particular acknowledgement regarding the discursive treatment of KNEECAP by state media apparatuses in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland. Together, Postcolonial Theory and Postcolonial Feminist Theory provide an apt lens through which I can bring my own theoretical framework into view.

Articulating both Postcolonial Theory and Postcolonial Feminist Theory with respect to the Northern Irish context speaks not to a temporal demarcation in the history of colonialism, but rather to a critical evaluation and rereading of knowledges formed within former colonial contexts (Hall 2002). I echo Said (1978) and Spivak (1988; 1999) in my endeavour to dually employ these theoretical lenses, through which so-called ‘universal’ knowledges, binaries, and power relations between different social actors can be challenged and subsequently destabilised. When I describe contexts or state ideology as ‘postcolonial’, I mean that they are contemporarily informed by a legacy of colonial norms, beliefs, and conventions that were established, universalised, and institutionalised under imperialist and colonial processes. State ideology in Northern Ireland under British rule is therefore postcolonial in the sense that the consequent political, economic, and ideological dominance of (Protestant) Unionism has coincided with the ongoing marginalisation

of indigenous cultural practices among (Catholic) Nationalist communities, including the use of *Gaeilge* (the Irish language) (Lloyd 2001).

Postcolonialism, race, and gender

Aside from its theoretical application, I also use the term ‘postcolonial’ to describe the contemporary ideological positioning of Northern Ireland as a constituent state within the UK today. The UK and Ireland’s long colonial history culminated with the establishment of an Irish Free State in 1922 and the retention of six northern counties by the British, marking a formal Partition between North and South. Before the Partition, Ireland as a whole had been under British colonial rule since the Tudor-era Plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (McVeigh and Rolston 2009). Systems of oppression enforced under the British colonial project marginalised the indigenous Irish people through the legal and administrative hierarchisation of religion, language, and cultural practices (McVeigh and Rolston 2009). A restructuring of the gender order formed a core part of these marginalising processes. Historically, Ireland was feminised within British colonial narratives, which exploited the nation’s gendered representation as a means of further justifying its subjugation of the Irish people (Nash 1997, pp. 108–112). Regarding masculinities, Catholic Irish men were continuously subordinated and emasculated in the British colonial record on account of their religious beliefs and agrarian lifestyles in contrast to the higher status and privileged economic positions of British and Anglo-Irish Protestants (Barr et al. 2019, p. 8). Northern Ireland in particular was subjected to what human geographer Brian Graham (1997, p. xii) describes as a “crude and masculine ethnic division”, which reflected the increasing irrelevance of women within opposing, yet similarly masculinised Unionist and Nationalist narratives.

In light of this history, Northern Ireland represents a unique postcolonial context wherein everything from its politics and culture to the physical geography of the state is defined by British colonial legacies and anti-colonial struggle (Lloyd 2001, p. 23). Sectarianism, among other British colonial practices, continued in force in Northern Ireland throughout the twentieth century, with significant consequences for the racialised and gendered hierarchies of different social groups (Rooney 2009, p. 207). As a result, ideological fissures emerged in Northern Ireland along ethno-religious lines, namely between (Protestant) Unionists who expressed their loyalty to the British Crown and (Catholic) Nationalists who favoured independence from British rule (Ruane and Todd 2009). Race and gender operated as sites in which the values and interests of emergent hegemonic ideologies became imbued, as evidenced by the hierarchisation of both Nationalist and Unionist masculinities among Northern Irish men (Graham 1997, p. 6). Although myriad social, political, and cultural nuances exist beyond this binary, it is nonetheless reasonable to argue that the historically informed antagonisms between these two ideological positions remain a defining aspect of the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland today (Ruane and Todd 2009, p. 9). It is upon this historical understanding of postcolonialism and its effects on the intersections of race and gender in the Northern Irish context that the concepts of hegemony and the Other will be developed in due course.

Orientalism and the Other

Continuing in a Postcolonial vein, Said (1978) articulates Orientalism as a theory of power relations between different cultural entities that highlights the role of discourse in constructing knowledge binaries, identities, perceptions, and power imbalances, all of which affect how social realities come to be understood. He argues that Western knowledges and perceptions of non-Western or 'Oriental' cultures are created through their discursive construction as inferior, irrational, uncivilised, and

underdeveloped by Western standards (Said 1978). Historically, these constructions emerged as part of Western colonial processes which sought to justify and legitimise imperial expansion, thereby creating a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1978, p. 5). The historical trajectory of Orientalism in Western thought has led to a hegemonisation of Western political and academic discourses globally today. Orientalist logic continues to weave and influence contemporary narratives within Western politics, media, and culture regarding Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, particularly in discourses on migration and globalisation (Sa'di 2021). Postcolonial research on Palestine in particular is foundational in this respect as it directly challenges the Orientalist logic that has reinforced hegemonic Western and Zionist discourses for nearly a century (Said 1984). Its applicability to the Northern Irish context also proves to be theoretically sound and, in fact, historically informed. Many Postcolonial scholars agree that Ireland was likely used as a blueprint by the British Empire to trial colonising tactics such as the displacement of indigenous peoples, the criminalisation of indigenous linguistic practices, sectarianism, and racialised hierarchisation between colonisers and the colonised (Gershon 2022). Orientalism contributed to the success of the British colonial project on a global scale only after being tried and tested closer to home – on the island of Ireland.

The concept of the Other also warrants critical attention within Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism. The 'Other' refers to the articulation of a constructed binary that positions Western and non-Western cultural entities in opposition to each other, thereby producing a hegemonic actor and its relatively inferior Other(s) within social relations. The concept is based on purportedly neutral and objective observations made by Western state actors to conceive of differences between them and their non-Western counterparts (Said 1978, pp. 47–48). 'Othering' thus becomes a process through which complex power relations between the colonising powers and the colonised are established, resulting in the marginalisation of indigenous identities that

fail to conform to hegemonic ideological narratives dictated by the former. These power relations range from the intellectual and political to the religious and socio-cultural (Said 1978, p. 12). A notable example of Othering can be found in the longstanding idealisation of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition and consequent demonisation of Islam via Orientalist discourses (Said 1978). This is particularly pronounced in the case of Palestinians, who have long been discursively constructed as the Muslim or Arab Other to facilitate the Zionist ideological agendas of Israel, the US, the UK, and other Western state actors throughout the twentieth century (Said 1978, pp. 26–27).

Although Said (1978) writes almost exclusively on the construction of the Other in Western Orientalist discourses in Middle Eastern and Asian contexts, the versatility of the concept within Postcolonial Theory makes it applicable to contextual analyses beyond this particular West-East binary. Within my own theoretical framework, I apply the concept of the Other to the historical emergence of ideological divisions in Northern Ireland. Othering was a key process during the Troubles, a prolonged period of ethno-religious conflict between (Catholic) Nationalists and (Protestant) Unionists in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to the late-1990s. During this period, daily life was dictated by the forces of state oppression, sectarianism, and paramilitary violence on both sides. Irish Catholics were marginalised, coerced, and controlled en masse by British institutional as well as paramilitary means, which sought to establish and uphold the ideological dominance of (Protestant) Unionism (Mitchell 2011, p. 32). The state-sanctioned Othering of (Catholic) Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland reflected a longstanding legacy of racialising and dehumanising colonised groups as part of the British colonial project, evident in numerous colonial practices such as legal differentiation and the advancement of scientifically-informed “civilising” ideologies in state institutions (Ruane and Todd 2009, p. 11). Indeed, dominant colonial narratives continued to draw racialised parallels between the Irish and other colonised groups long into the twentieth century:

“No blacks, no dogs, no Irish” was a common sign in public spaces in the UK as late as the 1950s (Zacek 2023, p. 325). Although the Troubles were brought ostensibly to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, those who identify as Catholic or Nationalist in Northern Ireland are still subjected to a racialised Othering on account of their ethno-religious status in contemporary Northern Irish politics and society (Mitchell 2011, p. 33). As such, the Othering of marginalised groups in Northern Ireland has become embedded in a broader, postcolonial state ideology that continues to reinforce a hegemonic narrative wherein (Protestant) Unionism is held as ideologically superior to (Catholic) Nationalism.

As a (Catholic) Nationalist Irish-language music group of the post-Troubles era, KNEECAP identifiably represents an Other in the eyes of the British state in a Northern Irish context. Leaning into this subaltern identity, the group challenges dominant ideological narratives in Northern Ireland by centering subversive themes of drug culture, hedonism, and dissident Republicanism in its music. KNEECAP is frequently criticised in the media as a result, with broadcasters across the UK and Ireland often framing them as a controversial act (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021).

Most importantly for this thesis, it is necessary to consider this pre-established aspect of KNEECAP’s public identity in relation to the group’s public advocacy for Palestine. The group regards its own identity as similar to that of Palestinians, whom they perceive as living under a parallel system of colonial oppression in the Occupied Territories (Manning 2025, p. 3). In the case of Palestine, Israel is the hegemonic colonial power under which the Palestinian people have been subjugated historically (Rolston 2025). KNEECAP’s advocacy for the Palestinian cause is not a new phenomenon among Irish people, but one that represents a longstanding solidarity between the two communities. Palestine and Ireland share similar histories of settler colonialism, with the Munster and Ulster Plantations in Ireland mirroring modern-day Israeli settlement projects in Palestine (Rolston 2025). Solidarity with Palestine is

present even at government level in Northern Ireland, with Republican and Nationalist parties such as Sinn Féin often expressing support for Palestinians during parliamentary proceedings (Lohr 2016). Thus, KNEECAP's continued protests of the UK government's alleged complicity in the ongoing genocide in Gaza is an example of how the group uses its identity as a tool for practicing solidarity with the Palestinian people, whose Othering within similar systems of oppression strikes a familiar chord among Irish people.

Hegemony, masculinity, and the Other

To further reinforce the theoretical relevance of the Other to my research problem, it is imperative to discuss its convergence with the concept of hegemony. Connell (2005, p. 77) defines hegemony in Gramscian terms as “the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life”. Regarding hegemony as a crucial aspect of formations of masculinity, Connell (2005) presents a theory of masculinity that is integral to a wider social theory of gender that critically centres hegemony, discourses, and power relations. She understands masculinity not as embodying “a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 841). Connell's (2005, p. 76) theory of masculinity is also fundamentally intersectional, arguing that the “interplay between gender, race, and class” cannot be overlooked when considering the complex construction of masculinity as a category. For instance, there is no way of interrogating the masculine identity of KNEECAP without also addressing the group's (Catholic) Nationalist and working-class identities in a Northern Irish context. Similarly, the parallels that can be drawn between Irish and Palestinian masculinities are rooted in their comparable experiences of racialised subordination and abjection under settler colonialism (Campbell 2020, p. 21).

Most notably for this thesis, Connell (2005) consolidates the respective roles of hegemony and power relations in her theory of masculinity through her conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (2005, pp. 76–77) defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy”. In other words, it is the dominant form of masculinity that most adequately and legitimately fits with the (patriarchal) narrative of a given social context. This is made clear in the trajectory of gender politics in Western Europe over the past two hundred years, which have been guided by ongoing struggles to institutionalise and control certain forms of masculinity (Connell 2005, p. 194). In the historical context of colonial and postcolonial processes in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, the construction of masculinities helped to produce the racialised and gendered hierarchies which were crucial for exercising social control among colonised groups (Connell 2005, p. 197).

Hegemonic masculinity forms an intrinsic part of a dominant, postcolonial state ideology rooted in (Protestant) Unionism and Loyalism in contemporary Northern Ireland. The gender orders of these fundamentally patriarchal traditions became a site for masculinities to compete along ethno-religious lines following the Partition (Brady 2013, p. 220). Hegemonic masculinities developed in accordance with Protestant militarism and paramilitarism and have continued to define a masculinised and racialised gender order in Northern Ireland in the decades since (McGaughey 2010). Within this gender order, KNEECAP’s non-hegemonic identity can be articulated in the terms of what Connell (2005, p. 116) calls a “protest masculinity”. The group’s identity is constructed within a class context “where the claim to power that is central to hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated by economic and cultural weakness” (Connell 2005, p. 116). The members’ (Catholic) Nationalist and working-class backgrounds, alongside their subversive attitude to hedonism and anti-establishment sentiment, undoubtedly inform this particular image of protest masculinity. In Postcolonial terms, the foundation of KNEECAP’s gender

identity in protest masculinity excludes them categorically from hegemonic masculinities in a Northern Irish context, while simultaneously Othering them as a subaltern group opposed to the hegemonic ideology of the postcolonial state. The same can be argued in the case of Palestine, where Islamic and Arab masculinities are readable as protest masculinities by virtue of their exclusion from the “masculine culture” of Israeli state apparatuses (Sa’ar and Yahia-Younis 2008, p. 312).

Poststructuralist theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) conceptualise hegemony as a process of social meaning production that is constituted through the tensions or ‘antagonisms’ within discourses. They argue that these antagonisms exist because a social entity can only ever be fully constituted in relation to an existing Other (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 125). No social entity can fulfil its full potential while an Other exists, nor can either exist at all without being socially related to the other (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 125–126). The consequent, antagonistic nature of social relations result in the emergence of a hegemon, around and with which all social entities become related on the basis of equivalence. Equivalence, or the “common differentiation” shared by social actors vis-à-vis the hegemon, is communicated via ‘signifiers’, which can be terms, concepts, images, or anything else that can take on meaning within discourses (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 127). Signifiers are integral to establishing meaning in discourses as their existence is based on their equivalence to each other. To put it simply, hegemony is the part which comes to represent the whole, founded upon the antagonistic struggles to signify different meanings in social relations.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 13), hegemony emerges within a context “dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations between different struggles and subject positions”. As a postcolonial, post-conflict state that lies at the crossroads of Irish and British cultural influences, Northern Ireland is undoubtedly “dominated by the experience of fragmentation”

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 13). Palestine reflects a relatively parallel situation in this respect as Palestinians endure ongoing political, social, and cultural fragmentation under Israeli settler colonialism (Hilal 2015). It is within these culturally and socio-politically fragmented contexts that difficulties arise for social relations when articulating the “different struggles and subject positions” to which Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 13) refer. The hegemony that emerges as a result is represented in a postcolonial state ideology – (Protestant) Unionism – that endeavours universally to constitute the identities of groups who have historically held the most power in Northern Irish society: Protestants, Loyalists, Unionists, and other political identities which support Northern Ireland’s status as a constituent part of the UK (Ruane and Todd 2009; Mitchell 2011). Whether antagonistic or congruous, all chains of equivalence that exist within and among social entities in Northern Ireland are inevitably constituted by their relationship to the hegemonic state ideology. On account of its identity as Other, KNEECAP’S relationship to hegemonic state ideology in Northern Ireland is fundamentally antagonistic. It is signified through various political and cultural discourses, which in turn reinforce the hegemonic status of the state ideology to which KNEECAP is opposed (Manning 2025, p. 3).

On categories of the subject and social identity, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that social relations do not originate from subjects. Rather, social identities are articulated on account of particular “historico-discursive formations” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 114–115). They come into being through discourses, where their conditions and meanings are constituted in relation to the socio-historical context. It is crucial to note that the authors emphasise the inherent instability of these categories, with neither representing any sort of totality in the social world (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 121–122). This follows the poststructuralist logic of the social that rejects the universality or essentialism of knowledges and discourses.

KNEECAP's non-hegemonic social identity within the Northern Irish context is an intellectually compelling subject in this sense. The group can neither be a fully politicised advocacy group nor a legitimate and respected musical act because these categories remain unstable across the various different social arenas in which they operate. Yet, this “unfixity” is precisely what grants KNEECAP the ability to perform multiple identities at once: for example, revering urban drug culture and hedonism in working-class Belfast while simultaneously protesting state complicity in the Gaza genocide during live performances (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 85). Although the precarity of social identity makes groups like KNEECAP vulnerable to different constructions and articulations in hegemonic state media discourses, this could be regarded as advantageous by spreading their message of protest beyond just one mode of discourse and therefore posing a challenge to hegemony in this context.

The social identity of KNEECAP's members, defined largely by their masculinised image as young, working-class “hoods” and subversive treatment of dissident Republicanism in their music, can be read as an antagonistic response to the subordination of Irish masculinities under the hegemony of British state ideology in the postcolonial North (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 471). Though socially and geographically diverse, different demographic groups such as UK-based British nationals and Northern Irish Unionists have formed chains of equivalence through a shared support for the postcolonial state ideology in the UK which reinforces their “common differentiation” from groups like KNEECAP, who represent an ideological Other on account of their cultural, ethno-religious, and socio-political position (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 127). Equally, chains of equivalence can be seen between different social groups who counter hegemonic narratives in their support of KNEECAP's protest against the Gaza genocide, the influence of which on discursive media constructions of the group will be forefronted in the analysis. KNEECAP's social identity thus represents a number of different subject positions, depending on the perspective or ideological position from which it is interpreted. Nationalists,

Gaeilgeoirí (Native Irish speakers), and young people in Northern Ireland might regard KNEECAP positively for advocating the Irish language and reviving urban youth culture (Commins 2025, pp. 82–85). Meanwhile, Northern Irish Unionists, Ulster Scots, or others who are otherwise more politically or culturally aligned with the British establishment might consider political themes in KNEECAP’s music an affront to their ideals and to hegemonic state ideology in Northern Ireland generally. This is likely, given the group’s critical and satirical treatment of the British monarchy and the ubiquity of anti-establishment rhetoric in its songs (Kane 2025, p. 2).

From ideology, Orientalism, and the Other to hegemony and masculinity, I have drawn a Postcolonial thread through the writings of Althusser (1971), Said (1978), Connell (2005), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) as a way of grounding the key concepts of my own theoretical framework. The different theories presented in this chapter serve to justify my methodological approach to media discourses around KNEECAP and its pro-Palestine protests, to be elaborated upon in Chapter III. Furthermore, grounding these theoretical concepts in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland and the hegemonic ideology therein is both important and necessary for examining discursive constructions of KNEECAP’s identity in poststructuralist terms. The very conditions for the emergence of hegemony in discourses and, subsequently, challenges to these discourses are shaped and reshaped constantly by the precarity of meanings and categories within different contexts (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 121–122). This is very much the case in the Northern Irish context, where meanings within discourses around KNEECAP’s political stance are signified through a multiplicity of antagonisms and equivalences that speak to power relations in terms of race, masculinity, hegemony, and state ideology. My analysis will apply these theories to media discourses around KNEECAP’s protests in order to examine the extent to which they are constructed in these terms and what this might mean for postcolonial state ideology in Northern Ireland today.

II: Literature review

You don't know what's going on,
nobody knows what's going on, fuck it!
Sílim go gcaithfidh mé dúid,
mar níl aon rud níos deise ná fear ar an bhfliút

*You don't know what's going on,
nobody knows what's going on, fuck it!
I think I need a joint
Because there's nothing better than a man on the flute*

- KNEECAP, Manchán Magan
'Drug Dealín Pagans' (2024)

In this chapter, I examine some of the existing literature on numerous thematic and analytical aspects of my thesis through a Postcolonial theoretical lens. First, I critically review an array of writings that address ideology, gender, protest, and discourse. I then move on to a more select literature which focuses more closely on race, masculinity, nationalism, Northern Ireland, and KNEECAP, with a view to providing warranted insight into the existing research around my thesis topic. Overall, this review serves to legitimise my analysis of the extent to which discursive constructions of KNEECAP as pro-Palestine protesters by Irish and British state media are racialised and/or gendered, as well as the implications that this may have for hegemonic state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland.

My argument centres on hegemonic state ideology within a postcolonial context and the supports, constraints, and challenges posed by the construction of various discourses therein. In a 1988 essay on ideology, cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2006) articulates a seminal understanding of the relationship between ideology, state media institutions, and the signification of constructed meanings in discourses. He recognises ideology as a “site of struggle” for the constitution of signified meanings, agreeing with Laclau’s (1977) suggestion that ideology itself cannot be determinably fixed to categories such as class (Hall 2006, p. 137). Hall’s (2006) argument for the unfixed nature of meanings, signifiers, and categories aligns with the theoretical approach outlined in the previous chapter. Considered an early linchpin in the field of Critical Media Studies, this essay offers an important insight into how state media institutions produce and reproduce hegemonic political ideologies while maintaining a sense of journalistic freedom and independence (Hall 2006, p. 152). In other words, the tendency of state media institutions to favour hegemonic discourses reinforces their function as the Ideological State Apparatuses theorised by Althusser (1971). Although Hall (2006) follows Althusser (1971) in approaching ideology and state institutions from a structuralist school of thought, his contribution to the literature on the role of the media in producing and sustaining hegemonic discourses allows room for a poststructuralist perspective, as this thesis intends to adopt when examining discursive constructions of KNEECAP in state media with respect to the postcolonial hegemony of (Protestant) Unionism in Northern Ireland.

A much more recent journal article by Martin Naunov (2025) examines the role of gender in the context of state power and protest. By quantitatively analysing public reactions to varying expressions of gender identity among protesters in Russia, Naunov (2025) argues that certain gender expressions are more likely to experience state repression than others. One of his main hypotheses concerns the perceived

propensity for violence among protesters and how this changes in the public eye depending on the gender identity of the protesters in question: “Considerations regarding protesters’ conduct – whether they are peaceful or violent – play a crucial role in determining how the public reacts to a government’s decision to repress protests” (Naunov 2025, p. 137). The overall findings of the research show that state repression of male-dominated or “patriarchy-defiant” protest groups is more likely to be tolerated by the public than female-dominated or “patriarchy-compliant” protest groups, especially in cases where there is a perceived propensity for violence (Naunov 2025, pp. 143–146). Importantly, it notes that this propensity for violence need not be actualised but merely pedalled by state media propaganda as a means of painting a negative image of protesters and legitimising state repression in the public eye (Naunov 2025, pp. 146–147). This insight is useful for analysing discursive media constructions of KNEECAP, whose image of protest masculinity is at once “patriarchy-defiant” and historically associated with dissident Republicanism and a perceived propensity for paramilitary violence (Ruane and Todd 2009).

Kasia Anderson (2005) also contributes to the literature with her analysis of celebrity political advocacy and protest in media discourses. Anderson (2005, p. 306) focuses on the Dixie Chicks, an American all-female country music group whose protest of the Iraq war in 2003 created “a discursive space to consider how ideas about patriotism, public dissent and popular influence are constructed and contested” in US media. Anderson’s (2005) analysis warrants attention on a number of fronts. For one, its understanding of the celebrity as a floating signifier reinforces the theoretical foundation of my analysis. Recognising the capacity for reading a celebrity figure as both a “real person” as well as a “walking advertisement” for the field of celebrity they represent, Anderson (2005, p. 306) echoes Laclau (1990) in arguing that the meanings of floating signifiers differ depending on the discourses in which they are found. Moreover, political advocacy and protest among celebrity figures represents a complex phenomenon whereby the meanings of both celebrity and

protest are co-constituted across numerous different fields of discourse (Anderson 2005, pp. 306–307). The controversy caused by the Dixie Chicks for speaking out against the Bush Administration during a live performance in March 2003 led to nationwide, conservative-led boycotts against their music, demonstrating their effective role as a floating signifier in political as well as cultural discourses (Anderson 2005, pp. 307–308). Although Anderson (2005) draws on the structuralist writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1993) to explain the framing of the Dixie Chicks’ protest in media discourses, her analysis demonstrates the potential for applying Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) poststructuralist theory of discourses to an analysis of celebrity protesters by highlighting their construction through floating signifiers across different discursive fields. Furthermore, Anderson (2005, p. 310) points out that media discourses around celebrities can be paradoxical in the sense that negative media coverage of their allegedly inconsequential politics can actually provide an unprecedented platform for celebrities to garner further support. This will be important to note when proposing and contesting signified meanings in my analysis of state media discourses around KNEECAP, now a definitively ‘celebrity’ group in political as well as cultural discourses.

Anderson (2005) also engages gender in the framing of celebrity advocacy and protest. Regarding widespread criticisms of the Dixie Chicks and their anti-war protests in the media, Anderson (2005, p. 309) suggests that “gender plays a key role in how their ‘betrayals’ were interpreted and criticized”. She argues that media discourses around the protests were framed negatively because of how the group “exposed the ideological constructions dictating how they are expected to act as women, country stars, celebrities and patriots in post-9/11 America” (Anderson 2005, p. 310). By defying feminine norms and speaking out against the US war in Iraq, the Dixie Chicks opposed the hegemonic ideologies dictating the gendered hierarchisation of power in the American media and political discourses. Similarly, KNEECAP’s protest masculinity may be viewed as an identity which defies the

masculine norms and ideals underpinning the structural and ideological tenets of (Protestant) Unionism in Northern Ireland, thereby potentially challenging its hegemony (Ruane and Todd 2009, pp. 139–142). Investigating the transferability of this argument to hierarchised masculinities in contemporary Northern Ireland will form part of my analysis and discussion.

Race, masculinity, and nationalism: KNEECAP and the Northern Irish context

It is worth contextualising the categories of race and gender as they relate to discourses around KNEECAP using the writings of Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd (2009), whom I refer to continuously throughout this thesis. In their book *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Ruane and Todd (2009) provide a comprehensive and multi-layered analysis of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Drawing on history, politics, ideology, and other cultural signifiers, they clarify the systemic roots of conflict and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in order to demonstrate how the Northern Irish context continues to be constituted and transformed by these terms today. Importantly for my own analysis, Ruane and Todd (2009, p. 109) address the key role of ideological traditions in dictating the emergence of hegemonic Northern Irish identities along ethno-religious and gendered lines, such as the (masculinised) ideology of (Protestant) Unionism. In a similar vein, they elucidate the historical roots of non-hegemonic identities via their antagonistic positioning under British colonial rule, such as the working-class (Catholic) Nationalist identity represented by KNEECAP (Ruane and Todd 2009, pp. 92-93).

In their respective works, Joane Nagel (1998) and Sikata Banerjee (2012) both address the relationship between race, gender, and ideological tradition further by analysing the objects, processes, and subjectivities that constitute state power, ideology, nationalism, and militarism in different contexts. Building on Connell

(1995), Nagel (1998) seeks to rectify the lack of masculinity-oriented analysis in feminist scholarship. In a 1998 article on the relationship between masculinity and nationalism, she conceptualises religiously and ideologically rooted identities such as Christianity as “masculine” by nature (Nagel 1998, p. 243). Among Nagel’s (1998, p. 244) main arguments in this article is that “nationalist politics is a masculinist enterprise”. Although her analysis lacks further critical definition of these concepts, Nagel’s (1998, p. 249) establishment of the link between muscular Christianity and nationalist ideology has implications for Postcolonial research on the development of British nationalisms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is especially important for understanding (Protestant) Unionism in Northern Ireland as a masculinist enterprise and its reinforcement through British state power and ideology in a postcolonial context.

Banerjee (2012) expands upon Nagel’s (1998) argument with an in-depth Postcolonial analysis of gender, race, and nationalism in her book *Muscular Nationalism*. Although her work focuses primarily on India, Banerjee’s (2012) intersectional writing on the concept of ‘muscular nationalism’ draws heavily on the complexities of the Irish context. She asserts that “Ireland disturbs the neatly defined binary of oppressive colonizer and oppressed colonized”, representing a grey area in the eyes of the British Empire for defining what is ‘Other’ about an indigenous people who are otherwise ethnically similar to them (Banerjee 2012, p. 14). Importantly for this thesis, Banerjee (2012, pp. 15–16) demonstrates the analytical applicability of Othering as a process by which Irish people have been marginalised in terms of gender and race under British colonialism. The feminisation of the Irish people through the masculinised, colonial state practices of the British establishment led to the emergence of gendered nationalisms, both hegemonic (British) and non-hegemonic (Irish). These included the practice of ‘muscular nationalism’ among Catholic Irish men, who opposed the hegemony of British Protestantism by drawing on Irish mythos and folklore to exert embodied ideals of strength and military

prowess within their communities (Banerjee 2012, p. 74). Overall, Banerjee's (2012) work provides an ideal analytical foundation for applying Postcolonial concepts of the racialised Other and gendered nationalisms to contemporary constructions of Irish groups like KNEECAP in British state media.

Having only formed in 2017 in Belfast, KNEECAP is a relatively new musical phenomenon. However, some literature already exists on the group. In a 2021 research article, Liam Ó hÍr and Louis Strange offer a critical discourse analysis of the interrelated issues of identity, masculinity, and nationalism in KNEECAP's music videos. They argue that KNEECAP represents an identity which is normatively masculinised through its subversive and symbolic expressions of Irish Nationalism, Republicanism, and anti-colonial sentiment (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021). Drawing on Banerjee (2012), they describe KNEECAP's masculinity as a new iteration of muscular nationalism with roots in antagonistic reactions to British state colonial hegemony but which also subverts this version of nationalism by celebrating taboo subjects such as drugs, sex, and hedonism (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 470). This serves to uphold the group's provocative image as illicit "hoods", thereby reinforcing a masculinised association between Irish Nationalism and criminality (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 478). Echoing Connell (2005), this "protest masculinity" is formed from a marginalised, working-class identity position in response to hegemonic masculinities underpinning postcolonial state ideology in Northern Ireland today (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 470).

In a similarly anti-colonial vein, Ó hÍr and Strange (2021, pp. 468–469) also note the ideological significance of KNEECAP's paralinguistic use of language in its songs. The group uniquely combines *Gaeilge* and English to create music that is both intelligible and symbolic for certain marginalised groups in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland, as well as further afield (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 469). This, combined with the group's image of protest masculinity, allows KNEECAP to employ

identity as a means to “undercut the authority and purity which forms the ideological basis for British colonialism (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 484). While not a Postcolonial analysis per se, the authors’ exploration of the gendered and linguistic dimensions within KNEECAP’s subversive brand of Irish Nationalism supports my argument that protest masculinity is a key aspect of the group’s postcolonial identity. Alongside the work of Nagel (1998) and Banerjee (2012), Ó hÍr and Strange’s (2021) contribution to the literature helps to justify my analysis of gendered and racialised elements in discursive constructions of KNEECAP in Irish and British state media, explicit or otherwise.

The literature reviewed in this chapter serves the dual purpose of further contextualising my research problem and demonstrating the analytical gaps I intend to fill by exploring discursive constructions of KNEECAP in terms of race and gender within the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland. It also serves to enrich and nuance the foundational substance of this thesis, which lies at the Postcolonial intersection of race, gender, and ideology in contemporary Northern Irish politics, culture, and society.

III: Methodology

Fan socair, bí díograiseach is cloígh le do phlean mucker
There'll be push backs but relax siocair, gur seo do thriailse
Do shaol atá ann brother
It's a philosophy

*Chill out, be diligent and stick to your plan mucker
There'll be push backs but relax easy, this is your trial
It's your life brother
It's a philosophy*

- KNEECAP
'Sick in the Head' (2024)

This thesis will expound its research problem by adopting a poststructuralist and qualitative methodology that is Feminist at its core. In this chapter, I outline all aspects of the methodological design that will serve to guide the research. I trace the methodology from its ontological and epistemological positioning to my choice of method for the empirical analysis. I also outline my ethical considerations and briefly address the issue of language with respect to the overall research design.

A qualitative, poststructuralist approach

I have chosen to approach this research problem through a poststructuralist lens, with the use of 'post' as a prefix denoting not a chronological aspect but rather a response or critique to traditional structuralism (Mease 2016, pp. 1–2). Ontologically

speaking, poststructuralism considers social relations to be discursively constructed and social realities constituted through discourses. Discourses are understood here as the systems of knowledge and language in and through which everything exists, wherein meanings are signified through various means (Belsey 2022). This constitution is “historically specific and socially regulated” and can lead to a blurring of distinctions between identifiable values and facts (Davies and Gannon 2009, p. 36). Feminist poststructuralists also posit that the construction of meaning in research is contingent with the subjective and agential positionality of the researcher (Davies and Gannon 2009). It therefore follows that the epistemological position of my research design is founded in the centrality of discourses and recognises the importance of embracing subjectivity and self-reflexivity in the research approach. This position is more suited to my analysis than alternative methodological positions as it takes into account the constitutive instability of key concepts and categories such as postcolonialism, ideology, race, and gender. Ultimately, my aim is “not to establish a final ‘truth’ but to question the intelligibility of truth/s we have come to take for granted” (Graham 2011, p. 666).

My research design is qualitative in the sense that it seeks to analyse language and discourses based on the understanding that these have been produced, shaped, employed, and constituted within particular social realities. While qualitative research in general is not necessarily poststructuralist, my own poststructuralist research design necessitates a qualitative angle for analysing the productive and constitutive role of language in discursively forming the meanings which underpin our entire social reality (Belsey 2022, pp. 8–10). Paying particular attention to the subjectification of social entities to systems of power therein, this thesis will qualitatively examine empirical material in the form of state media discourses documenting the controversies associated with KNEECAP’s pro-Palestine advocacy. I do not intend to measure nor represent concepts quantitatively, but rather interrogate their imbued meanings through language and uncover the underlying elements,

signifiers, and power dynamics at play via a poststructuralist discourse analysis. Furthermore, I wish to present my findings in a manner that acknowledges the context-specific subjectivity of knowledge and language and allows space for nuance, contingency, and critique in my conclusions.

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis as method

In accordance with theories of discourse put forth by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), a poststructuralist discourse analysis is my method of choice for conducting the research. The centrality of discourse in this thesis is what makes the focus on language and meaning construction so pertinent to the research problem. It also raises questions in regard to employing a Feminist method. In Feminist research, critical engagement with different concepts and categories is made easier by acknowledging the subjective, value-laden, and often latent nature of social relations as it is constituted by the interconnectedness of language and reality (Hekman 2010). Moreover, Feminist thought forefronts the interaction between research, knowledge, and power when considering the construction of discourses (Hekman 2010, p. 67). All questions posed throughout this thesis regarding discursive constructions of identity through race and gender remain within these Feminist epistemological parameters. Thus, describing my poststructuralist approach and overall research design as Feminist is justified by virtue of my critical attention to discourses and the power relations and subjectivities that shape them.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985), whose theoretical articulation of hegemony I have discussed previously, also provide a useful roadmap for using discourse analysis as a social scientific research method. Specifically, they conceptualise key signs in discourses which they refer to as *elements*, *nodal points*, and *floating signifiers*. These signs, which I outline below, form the blueprint for my own analytical approach.

Additionally, I will subsequently analyse the relations or *chains of equivalence* that form between the various elements, nodal points, and signifiers within a given discursive field as part of my analysis (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

In Discourse Theory, *elements* are “the signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed; signs that have multiple, potential meanings” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 27). In media discourses relating to KNEECAP, key recurring terms such as ‘West Belfast’, ‘conflict’, ‘postcolonial’, ‘political’, and ‘protest’ are intelligible but nevertheless remain contingent on the context in which they are used. Discourses are constantly seeking to stabilise elements by fixing their meaning contextually. However, this can never be fully achieved due to the inevitable unfixity of meanings within discourses generally, which Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 192) view as emulating the “open, unsutured character of the social”. This is important to bear in mind when examining discursive constructions of KNEECAP’s racialised and masculinised identity in state media, where the potential for a multiplicity of meanings and articulations “between different struggles and subject positions” is inevitably high in British and Irish contexts alike (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 13).

Complicating the basic definition of elements slightly, *nodal points* are “privileged signifiers” around and through which other signs can form connections (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 112). This type of signifier is particularly useful for tracing the roots of relations between signifiers and the chains of equivalence that form as a result. ‘Controversy’, ‘solidarity’, and ‘oppression’ may be understood as nodal points connecting different signifiers relating to KNEECAP’s political stance vis-à-vis the ongoing genocide in Gaza, namely drawing parallels between the group’s own identity as Other and that of the Palestinian people.

Floating signifiers are signs that are open to having different meanings, depending on the particular discourses in which they are constituted (Laclau 1990).

Their meanings can never be truly fixed or assured in this sense, hence their description as ‘floating’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 141). Floating signifiers are particularly significant in the context of discourse analysis, wherein the ambiguity of their intelligibility is theorised in terms of the “unfixity” of meanings (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 85). Terms such as ‘truth’, ‘anti-semitic’, ‘hate speech’, and ‘terrorist’ may be considered floating signifiers as their meanings can differ greatly between various media discourses. For instance, using the term ‘terrorist’ within the context of Northern Ireland is likely to have a different meaning than in other contexts due to the legacy of the Troubles, during which Northern Irish communities bore witness to acts of terrorism and paramilitary violence on both sides of the conflict (Ruane and Todd 2009, p. 134). Similarly, an interpretation or reading of KNEECAP’s pro-Palestine protests as ‘anti-semitic’ depends on how language within the discourse in question is constituted and subsequently interpreted, especially in the context of mainstream media discourses on Israel, Zionism, and anti-semitism across Western contexts (Said 1984).

Finally, *chains of equivalence* are the relationships that form between different signifiers based on a mutual opposition to a given hegemon. They are a means of constituting both the hegemon and the non-hegemonic Other and can vary depending on power relations between different signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 63–64). Moreover, chains of equivalence are key to understanding identity formation in terms of discursive representation (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 21). This is significant in regard to group identity formation in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland, where chains of equivalence underpinning political and sectarian divisions formed historically along ethno-religious lines (Ruane and Todd 2009).

Together, elements, nodal points, floating signifiers, and chains of equivalence form the quintessential toolbox for applying poststructuralist discourse analysis as method in this thesis (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 50).

Selection of empirical material

The empirical material for analysis consists of a selection of state news articles published digitally online via the social media platforms of state broadcasting channels in Ireland and the UK. The analytical focus will remain on the main state broadcasters from these regions, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), BBC Northern Ireland (BBC NI), and Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ). All empirical material used in the analysis has been sourced from these online state media platforms and is publicly accessible. In terms of timeline, I will focus on articles published between 18 April and 26 September 2025. These dates are significant for marking the trajectory of media coverage of KNEECAP and its political protests in support of Palestine. 18 April 2025 was the date of KNEECAP's second performance at Coachella Music Festival in the US that year, during which the group staged a widely publicised pro-Palestine protest during its final live performance. This sparked widespread attention in the media on both sides of the Atlantic (BBC News NI 2025.04.23, Doyle and Hughes). 26 September 2025, meanwhile, marked the end of legal proceedings against KNEECAP band member Mo Chara, who was charged with a terrorism offence the previous May after reportedly displaying a flag representing Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah on stage during a performance in late 2024 (BBC News NI 2025.09.26, Bonner and O'Connor).

I will analyse eighteen articles in total: ten published by the BBC and eight published by RTÉ. My criteria for selecting the material were based on the relevance of the articles to the research puzzle, which seeks to analyse discursive constructions of KNEECAP'S masculinised and racialised identity by state media as well as determine the extent to which these constructions suggest a perceived threat to the ideological status quo in the postcolonial North. I measured the relevance of the articles using a twofold approach. First, I determined whether or not KNEECAP is the primary subject of the article. Second, I determined whether or not the article refers to

KNEECAP's protests against the genocide in Gaza or to its pro-Palestine advocacy in general. These references could either be direct (via discussions of the group's protests during live performances at Coachella and other festivals) or indirect (via discussions of terrorism charges against Mo Chara, festival bans, and wider calls for censorship). In sum, all articles I have selected for empirical analysis both focus on KNEECAP as their primary subject and either directly or indirectly refer to KNEECAP's political advocacy in relation to Palestine. It is important to clarify that this thesis focuses on broader framings of the protests of KNEECAP by state media rather than the personal interpretations and interests of private individuals or groups. As such, private, AI-generated, or otherwise unofficial digital media articles and online posts have not been included for analysis.

Coding and analysing the texts

To conduct a thorough analysis of the empirical material, I will code the selected texts according to the conceptual criteria set forth by Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory. Once I have identified the key elements, nodal points, and floating signifiers of the texts, I will analyse the relationships, tensions, and antagonisms between them by way of addressing the questions posed by my overall research problem. To reiterate, my research questions are as follows:

1. *To what extent and how do British and Irish state media discursively construct KNEECAP's identity through race and gender in relation to the group's pro-Palestine protests?*
2. *In what ways do these constructions suggest a perceived challenge to hegemonic state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland?*

Following a brief overview of the texts' structural and linguistic qualities, I will use the methodological tools outlined above as a means of systematically addressing the following questions in the texts:

- What meanings are established or forefronted by the specific combination of elements and floating signifiers used in these texts, if any?
- What meanings are excluded from the text as a result of this?
- What discourses, hegemonic or otherwise, are reproduced within the text? Is there any evidence of existing discourses being challenged in the text?

To address the first of my research questions, I will focus on elements, nodal points, and floating signifiers that relate either explicitly or implicitly to the categories of race and gender. Regarding race, I will seek to find and analyse references to ethnicity, nationality, tradition, culture, social identity, and place of origin in relation to KNEECAP. Exploring discursive constructions of the group in terms of gender will warrant analysis of textual and visual references to identity, masculinity, nationalism, emotion, gender stereotypes, and prescriptive language. Specifically, I will examine the ways in which these different elements and signifiers relate to each other and form chains of equivalence within and around discourses, insofar as these discourses are evident in the empirical material. For the second research question, I will build upon the findings of my primary analysis to discuss the implications of these discursive constructions of KNEECAP from a Postcolonial perspective and in relation to challenging hegemonic state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland.

Towards a Feminist, poststructuralist methodology: positionality and reflexivity

This thesis wishes to further observe Feminist poststructuralist praxis as part of its research methodology by centering both positionality and reflexivity throughout. Positionality refers to the relationship between a researcher's identity, as located within their social reality, and their own research. It has a significant bearing on how a researcher produces knowledge in relation to their research subjects as it allows them to acknowledge the partial and ever-shifting nature of social contexts and categories (Haraway 1997). How a researcher positions or situates themselves in this manner has a profound effect on their methodological choices, as well as their interpretation of empirical material. Moreover, positionality can have a bearing on the power dynamics at play between the researcher and the researched. Reflexivity, meanwhile, is a researcher's ability to recognise biases and assumptions originating in their own work. Practicing reflexivity has become a staple in the epistemic toolboxes of Feminist and poststructuralist research, requiring the researcher to address the social reality of both themselves and the subjects of their analysis as well as the extent to which their research is motivated by specific theoretical or political agendas (Adkins, Ahmed, et al. 2002). It is necessary to remain especially vigilant in this regard when a clear "personal dimension" is at play, whereby the researcher embodies aspects of the issue at hand (Said 1978, p. 25).

It is imperative that I address my own positionality in relation to this thesis for a number of reasons. As someone from the Republic of Ireland with no personal or historical connections to Belfast or Northern Ireland, the fact that I do not share any part of KNEECAP's identity beyond a common (Catholic) Nationalist background and also being a *Gaeilgeoir* means that I can analyse and interpret media representations of this identity without the risk of sentimental attachment. However, my support for KNEECAP's pro-Palestine advocacy and ongoing protests of the genocide in Gaza is an underlying bias that I must continually keep in check in order

to present my findings in a manner that is both rigorous and just. I will therefore endeavour to lean on processes of abductive reasoning during my analysis so as not to let any pre-existing biases interfere with the research itself, nor to pre-empt my own conclusions.

Furthermore, I am required to be reflexive throughout the research process in order to remain aware of my own partiality when constructing my theoretical and analytical frameworks. I seek to achieve this on a practical level in a number of ways. First, mine is not the only identity that can valuably contribute to the construction of meanings throughout the research process (Cutcher 2020, p. 311). As such, I will carefully consider different positionalities vis-à-vis all ideas and concepts discussed throughout the thesis and provide alternative readings of these to the best of my ability. Second, I will endeavour to not allow my own feelings and emotionality affect my sampling and coding of empirical material during the research process. Although I agree with Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar (1989) in recognising that feelings and emotions are a natural, inevitable, and even constructive aspect of the research process, it is important to also recognise that these may subjectively influence my analysis findings and discussion in ways that do not reflect or support the initial aims of the research. I will therefore be stringent in my method of sample selection and coding of empirical data.

Ethical considerations

This thesis encompasses a research process that seeks to align with principles of academic integrity, research transparency, accountability, and respect. As mentioned previously, all empirical material used in the analysis is publicly accessible and available online. None of the material pertains to private online activity, meaning that the analysis is not at risk of violating the rights, freedoms, or privacy of any

individuals or groups. By continually recognising my own positionality and employing reflexivity as a Feminist research tool, I will do the utmost to remain impartial insofar as it is in the best interests of my research outcomes. In line with my Feminist and poststructuralist research design and my application of abductive reasoning therein, I understand that the intelligibility of any tentative conclusions I draw from the empirical analysis depends largely on my contextualisation of the subjects and social reality in question.

My use of language in this thesis also merits acknowledgement in relation to research ethics. There is nothing neutral nor natural about the language used by a researcher, regardless of their academic field. However, objectivity of language is not my goal as I write this thesis. Instead, I strive for the translatability and democratisation of knowledge through my use of language. To echo Donna Haraway (1988, p. 580), Feminist researchers need to champion the ability to “translate knowledges among very different – and power-different – communities”. By situating myself critically within my research, I aim to interact linguistically with the empirical research material in such a way that acknowledges and embodies the partiality, vulnerability, and heterogeneity of knowledges produced in the process (Haraway 1988, p. 590). I will echo KNEECAP’s own ethos by being mindful about my use of language, what it means within the context of this research, and its accessibility to the reader. The members of KNEECAP, who rap *as Gaeilge* (in Irish) and in English, regard their own use of the Irish language as an anti-colonial act within the Northern Irish context (Commins 2025). Writing this thesis in English, I recognise the colonial connotations of its linguistic base, namely the enduring superior status of English vis-à-vis my native *Gaeilge* within academic discourses in Ireland and the UK. In light of this, my inclusion of lyrics from various KNEECAP songs at the beginning of each chapter serves to symbolically challenge not only the solemn and elitist conventions of academic language in Western institutions, but the postcolonial

supremacy of Anglophone knowledge production at the expense of indigenous languages and cultures more widely.

IV: Analysis

(Is) cinnte go bhfuil muid sa bhealach
Ag roinnt an fhirinne sa bhruach thiar agus Gaza
Sampla déanta duit anois so ciúnas Mo Chara
Ní tharlóidh sin a riamh ná bí buartha tá mé a rá leat

*We're definitely in the way
Telling the absolute truth about Gaza
You've been made an example of so quiet Mo Chara
That won't ever happen don't worry I'm telling you*

- KNEECAP, Sub Focus
'No Comment' (2025)

Using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) poststructuralist discourse analysis as method, this chapter delves into the empirical material proper. By identifying key elements and signifiers in the text at hand, I analyse the extent to which and how British and Irish state media use race and gender to discursively construct KNEECAP's identity in news reporting on the group between 18 April and 26 September 2025. Beginning with KNEECAP's place of origin, I highlight the signifiers, chains of equivalence, and other gendered and racialised cues in various discourses that culminate in a narrative that appears to frame KNEECAP as a so-called 'security threat'. I then proceed with a more focused analysis of the specific linguistic and visual elements used by the BBC and RTÉ to reinforce their respective constructions of KNEECAP's political positioning vis-à-vis Palestine. Overall, I argue that my findings indicate a higher tendency to hyper-visibilise KNEECAP's identity through racialising discourses in British state media than in Irish state media.

Furthermore, I suggest that the visibility of KNEECAP's gender identity is largely contingent on the degree to which these discourses are racialised in state media generally, thereby highlighting an intrinsic link between protest masculinity and Irish Nationalist identity in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland.

Place, race, and gender: 'West Belfast' as signifier

From the articles analysed, a signifier that stands out initially is 'West Belfast'. West Belfast is KNEECAP's place of origin, where two of its members grew up and where the group itself was established in 2017 (Manning 2025). It is also a site of historical and cultural significance within the Northern Irish capital and its wider postcolonial context. A traditionally industrial and working-class area, West Belfast was an epicentre of conflict during the Troubles. Discriminatory state housing policies, pervasive British military presence, and sectarian violence further entrenched divisions between the Protestant and Catholic communities living in the area and led to myriad civil rights demonstrations and protests for socio-economic reform in the late 1960s (Mitchell 2011, p. 52). Amid rising sectarianism, Nationalist and Republican paramilitary groups became concentrated in segregated West Belfast from the 1970s onwards and the area gained a reputation as a site of violent clashes between Nationalist Republicans, British state armed forces, and Unionist paramilitaries (Hughes et al. 2008). As a result, West Belfast continues to symbolise antagonistic relations between (Catholic) Nationalists and (Protestant) Unionists, with the latter hegemonised in contemporary political and economic terms within Northern Irish power relations today. Viewed through a Postcolonial lens, these power relations extend beyond politics and economics to position the (Catholic) Nationalist community of West Belfast as an ideological Other on account of its non-hegemonic identity vis-à-vis British rule in Northern Ireland.

Regarding the use of ‘West Belfast’ in the articles analysed, four of the ten BBC articles introduce KNEECAP as either a ‘West Belfast rap group’ or ‘West Belfast act’ (BBC News NI 2025.04.23, Quinn; Doyle and Hughes; BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn; 2025.07.24, no byline). By specifically identifying the group as being from *West* Belfast as opposed to just Belfast, the BBC potentially imbues the geographical signifier with greater meaning. It is possible that for many, ‘West Belfast’ might not signify any meaning beyond the group’s geographical place of origin. However, some British and Northern Irish audiences might recognise West Belfast’s historical association with (Catholic) Nationalism and dissident Republicanism, thereby reading a racialised understanding of KNEECAP as (Catholic) Nationalists and/or dissident Republicans. Moreover in this respect, ‘West Belfast’ as a signifier is likely to invoke memories of the violence, fear, and terrorism during the Troubles in Northern Ireland for some readers. This signification possibly creates a chain of equivalence between those who read KNEECAP’s identity based on a geopolitically oriented and ultimately racialised constitution of its meaning. These could be Northern Irish Unionists, Protestants, Loyalists, state representatives, citizens from other constituent states in the UK, and anyone else who might identify KNEECAP as Other according to this and other signifiers.

In the discourses around KNEECAP as both performers and pro-Palestine advocates, ‘West Belfast’ implies a gendered meaning as well as a racialised one. The predominantly (Catholic) Nationalist make-up of West Belfast’s segregated demographic was observed to be mainly “working class... young, (and) male” (Ruane and Todd 2009, p. 74). “Working-class”, “young”, and “male” are all identifiably core aspects of KNEECAP’s masculinised identity, self-constructed largely through satirical references to dissident Republicanism, hedonism, and drug culture (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 480). This self-identification as being Belfast-based, working-class, and Nationalist has already been well-documented by the media as a defining (and masculinising) feature of KNEECAP’s music and art (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021;

Manning 2025, pp. 2–3). One BBC article even highlights the Catholic aspect of the group’s identity, quoting Mo Chara as he asks fans to get their “grannies to light a wee candle for me”, referring to a common Catholic practice (BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn). As such, KNEECAP’s gender identity is intrinsically tied to its place of origin in the sense that it is a protest masculinity derived from the socio-economic and historical context of the group’s upbringing. To quote Postcolonial geographer Richard Phillips (1995, p. 592), “historical geographies of masculinity must be contextualized and interpreted in relation to construction of race, class, nationalism, and sexuality”. Regarding the construction of masculinities in segregated West Belfast, it is contendable that protest masculinities formed among working-class, (Catholic) Nationalist men in the face of the hegemonic masculinities of their (Protestant) Unionist counterparts. To identify as young, male (Catholic) Nationalists from West Belfast, as two members of KNEECAP do, is to therefore signify a protest masculinity that fundamentally challenges hegemonic masculinities within Northern Ireland’s postcolonial power structures (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 847).

While nearly half of the BBC news articles analysed employ ‘West Belfast’ as a descriptive means of identifying KNEECAP, the term is not used in any of the RTÉ articles analysed. RTÉ instead describes the group as ‘Northern Irish’, ‘Irish’, or as originating from Belfast (RTÉ News 2025.04.25, no byline; 2025.05.22, Reuters; 2025.07.08, Press Association). Although the BBC does not explicitly draw links between ‘West Belfast’ and the possible historical connotations outlined here necessarily, its use of the signifier nonetheless implies a difference in both perspective and purpose regarding the respective aims of British and Irish state media apparatuses. While RTÉ acknowledges KNEECAP’s place of origin in most of its coverage, the state broadcaster manages to avoid constituting a narrative that constructs KNEECAP’s Northern Irish identity in terms that might connote dissident Republicanism or historical legacies of violence, implicitly or otherwise. Meanwhile, the BBC’s construction of the group’s identity can potentially be read in more

antagonistic terms. By continuously framing KNEECAP as originating from West Belfast, the BBC potentially reproduces a gendered and racialised discourse around the group that marginalises them as an Irish (Catholic) Nationalist Other amid the perceived hegemony of (Protestant) Unionist ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland.

KNEECAP: a 'security threat'?

State media discourses in Ireland and the UK have been known to frame KNEECAP as a controversial act since the group first started gaining publicity in 2017 (Ó hÍr and Strange 2021, p. 466). However, newfound perceptions of the group as a alleged 'security threat' appear to corrolate with the group becoming more outspoken on Palestine and the Gaza genocide, frequently combining its live performances with acts of protest. Among the foremost signifiers of these perceptions of KNEECAP are the terms 'terror', 'terrorism', and 'terrorist'. On 22 May 2025, it was announced in both Irish and British media that the London Metropolitan Police had brought charges against KNEECAP member Mo Chara for allegedly displaying the flag of proscribed Lebanese organisation Hezbollah on stage at a gig (RTÉ News 2025.05.22, no byline; BBC News NI 2025.05.22, Fox). It is clear from the linguistic choices made by RTÉ and the BBC from this date onward that different discursive tensions around this news story were established early on in state media coverage.

Comparing initial reports on the matter, RTÉ's main headline states that KNEECAP member Mo Chara was charged with a "terrorism offence" (RTÉ News 2025.05.22, no byline). Meanwhile, the BBC's headline states that he was charged with a "terror offence" (BBC News NI 2025.05.22, Fox). The BBC's use of the word 'terror' rather than 'terrorism' in this context highlights the term's unfixity when applied to overlapping legal, political, and cultural discourses. 'Terror' not only

invokes an understanding of terrorism as a coercive and violent tool for achieving political or ideological aims, but also serves to convey the emotional meaning of terror - fear. Whether advertent or not, this linguistic choice exposes BBC news audiences to a more evocative and sensationalised narrative that serves to reinforce prevailing Unionist notions which liken Irish Nationalists to dissident Republican terrorists, or at least insinuate their propensity for inciting fear and terror through violence (Ruane and Todd 2009). This narrative is further reinforced by the fact that ‘terror’ is used repeatedly in the headlines of four further BBC articles pertaining to the matter in the following months (BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn; BBC News NI 2025.05.20, O’Neill; BBC News 2025.09.19, Yousif; BBC News NI 2025.09.26, Bonner and O’Connor). The meanings imbued in these textual elements become racialised on account of this negative, ethno-religious association with Irish (Catholic) Nationalism, thereby antagonistically constituting KNEECAP as an ideological Other in the eyes of the British establishment.

Of course, discursive framings of KNEECAP as a security threat are not confined to British media discourses alone. In an RTÉ article from July 2025 regarding a KNEECAP gig in Glasgow, a dominant narrative conveying KNEECAP as a security threat emerges once again (RTÉ News 2025.07.08, Press Association). According to the article, Police Scotland reportedly had a “proportionate and considered policing plan” in place as it anticipated “safety concerns” at the gig (RTÉ News 2025.07.08, Press Association). Image 1, included in the main body of the article, depicts two police officers standing outside the venue, the façade of which reads: ‘TUESDAY 8TH JULY: KNEECAP – SOLD OUT’ (RTÉ News 2025.07.08, Press Association). Although the gig in question went ahead as planned, its publicity was largely due to state media discourses highlighting the security concerns of the regional police force, as well as the cancellation of KNEECAP’s performances at Glasgow’s TRNSMT Festival. A BBC Scotland News article was among the first to report these developments, quoting Police Scotland as supposedly requiring a

“significant policing operation” (BBC Scotland News 2025.05.28, McLaren). Indeed, it was Scottish First Minister John Swinney who had initially called for KNEECAP’s ban from TRNSMT Festival, establishing a chain of equivalence between political representatives and state security forces based on a shared objective to neutralise any alleged threat posed by the group. The BBC’s more consistent coverage of the need for state intervention with respect to KNEECAP’s gigs arguably signifies an apprehension towards



Image 1

the group’s pro-Palestine advocacy, conflating this with a propensity for violence and criminal behaviour that is supported by the group members’ Irish Nationalist background. The violent connotations of language such as “axed”, as used in the BBC Scotland News headline, both reinforce the plausibility of this signification and masculinise its meaning (BBC Scotland News 2025.05.28, McLaren). In this light, British state media are no longer constructing KNEECAP’s identity as a music group, but rather as a legitimate threat to state security apparatuses through racialised and (implicitly) gendered discourses. Given that this particular identity construction aligns closely with the colonial view of the Irish (Catholic) Nationalist as having a propensity for violence, it is also possible to suggest that a threat to the ideological status quo of the postcolonial North is also signified.

Regarding both the significance and signification of gender in this respect, many descriptive elements featured in discursive constructions of KNEECAP function as a means of masculinising the group’s image and possibly enhancing perceptions of an alleged security threat therein. Specifically, the language used in

some articles often denotes aggression and violence in either a semantic or an onomatopoeic sense. The British media in particular make frequent use of this type of language, which arguably lends to an antagonistic portrayal of KNEECAP as harbouring a violent or dangerous masculinity. As mentioned previously, the headline of the article about the group's removal from TRNSMT Festival states that they were "axed" from the festival (BBC Scotland News 2025.05.28, McLaren). A similar headline from the BBC's coverage of Glastonbury Festival in June 2025 reads "Kneecap hit back at Starmer in highly-charged Glastonbury set" (BBC News 2025.06.29, Savage). In another BBC article, even KNEECAP's fans are framed in a way that is more akin to a militant group via use of the descriptive element "force":

'Kneecap fans turned out in force on Friday to support the Irish-language hip-hop trio at their biggest ever festival headline gig, which came just days after a band member was charged with a terror offence.'

(BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn)

Given the widely acknowledged links between power, masculinity, and aggressive or violent behaviour, these linguistic choices constitute certain masculinised meanings with respect to KNEECAP's gender identity, especially as self-identifying Irish (Catholic) Nationalists (Scarpaci and Frazier 1993, p. 14). In any case, racialised and gendered constructions of discourses around the threat and danger of KNEECAP can be better understood in the broader context of hegemonic postcolonial ideology in Northern Ireland. The so-called 'security threat' represented by KNEECAP is supplemented by an Orientalist logic that deems them, like the Palestinians they support, to be a dangerous Other vis-à-vis the British establishment and its ideological foundation. As the examples given here illustrate, the British state media in particular appear to discursively construct KNEECAP in these antagonistic terms, framing the group as a state security threat that might challenge hegemonic

ideals and values by virtue of the racialised and masculinised dangers it is purported to represent. This is mainly achieved through the use of ‘terror’, ‘terrorist’, and other connotative linguistic elements which implicitly signify a racialised and gendered association with the historical violences of Irish Republicanism in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Through these discursive constructions of KNEECAP as Other via state media, the British establishment inadvertently highlights its use of both repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses to contain the group amid its pro-Palestine protests, which in turn suggests an insecurity on the part of the state with respect to the integrity and legitimacy of its own ideological foundation. This is not surprising, given that the postcolonial hegemony of British state ideology can never be fully constituted so long as social entities such as KNEECAP continue to actively antagonise social relations across different fields of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p, 125).

KNEECAP, Gaeilge, and constructing the Other

The process of Othering in relation to KNEECAP also manifests itself in the BBC’s signification of the group’s use of *Gaeilge* in its music. Articles published by the BBC on its various regional platforms between May and September 2025 consistently describe KNEECAP as an ‘Irish language hip-hop group’, ‘Irish-language hip-hop trio’, ‘Irish language group’, and ‘Irish-language band’ respectively (BBC News NI 2025.05.22, Fox; BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn; BBC News 2025.06.29, Savage, BBC News 2025.09.19, Yousif). On one occasion, ‘Irish language’ features as an element in the headline of the article itself (BBC News 2025.09.19, Yousif). The fact that the members of KNEECAP rap *as Gaeilge* is undoubtedly a type of novelty to which news media reporting is drawn generally (Bednarek and Caple 2012). Yet the recurrent use of ‘Irish language’ as a descriptive element by the BBC in this case seems to indicate more than just a novel aspect of the

news story. It also serves to signify KNEECAP's representation of, and adherence to, the historical traditions of Nationalist working-class Belfast, where *Gaeilge* was spoken as a means of circumventing the Anglophone practices which upheld the economic and political hegemony of (Protestant) Unionism (Ruane and Todd 2009, p. 192). British state media may therefore regard KNEECAP's use of *Gaeilge* as symbolically undermining hegemony within postcolonial Northern Irish politics and culture and potentially disrupting the ideological status quo in the process (Ruane and Todd 2009, pp. 11–12).

The BBC's frequent referrals to KNEECAP's use of *Gaeilge* in discourses around the group's political controversies is worth highlighting for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, they can be discerned as a signifier that helps constitute KNEECAP's identity as Other in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland, where the historical marginalisation of *Gaeilge* under colonialism has resulted in an established Anglophonic hegemony in the contemporary context. Furthermore, by referring to the group's use of *Gaeilge* amid discourses concerning its pro-Palestine protests and allegations of terrorism, the meaning of *Gaeilge* becomes intrinsically associated not only with KNEECAP's (Catholic) Nationalist identity, but with an understanding of (Catholic) Nationalism as a protest identity vis-à-vis (Protestant) Unionist hegemony under British rule. Interestingly, the BBC's coverage of this particular aspect of KNEECAP draws critical attention to the ways in which the group's use of *Gaeilge* actually challenges the hegemony of Anglophone practices and, ultimately, (Protestant) Unionist state ideology in the Northern Irish context. This understanding of *Gaeilge* as a counter-hegemonic force is not unwarranted. Indeed, it was not until the legislative approval and passing of the Identity and Language Act in 2022, in which *Gaeilge* was finally granted official status as a language in Northern Ireland alongside English (An Dream Dearg 2022). There were no legislative provisions for due recognition of *Gaeilge* by public authorities before this act was passed, thereby demonstrating Anglophone hegemony within Northern Irish state

apparatuses (Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022). Furthermore, its use in court had been illegal since the colonial-era Administration of Justice (Language) Act of 1737 (Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022).

Further to this particular reading of *Gaeilge* as a dual signifier in political and legal discourses around KNEECAP, one important aspect to note is the anglicisation and reformulation of group member Mo Chara's name during legal proceedings in relation to his alleged terrorism charges. Mo Chara, whose real name is Liam Óg Ó hAinmídh, was formally charged under the name Liam O'Hanna by the London Metropolitan Police, an action which both RTÉ and the BBC explicitly acknowledged in their respective news coverage of the case (RTÉ News 2025.05.22, no byline; BBC News NI 2025.05.22, Fox). The anglicisation of Ó hAinmídh's name is first mentioned in an RTÉ article published on 22 May 2025, which states the following:

“Liam Óg Ó hAinmídh, who performs under the stage name Mo Chara, was charged under the name Liam O'Hanna over the displaying of a flag in support of Hezbollah at a gig at the O2 Forum in Kentish Town, north London, on 21 November last year.”

(RTÉ News 2025.05.22, no byline)

I have underlined a section of the above statement where RTÉ had also embedded a link to another related article, drawing the reader's attention even more closely to this particular element. This quite literally adds emphasis to the notability of the action taken by the London Metropolitan Police. Similarly, a BBC article published on the same day has the following headline:

“Belfast man Mr Ó hAinmídh has been charged under the name Liam O'Hanna.”

(BBC News NI 2025.05.22, Fox)

Whatever the intent may have been, the decision made by the London Metropolitan Police to anglicise Ó hAinmídh's name as part of formal juridical proceedings speaks to a longstanding history of British colonial practices both in Ireland and further afield. The anglicisation of Irish placenames became state-sanctioned policy under British colonial rule across the island of Ireland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Nash 1999, p. 461). The replacement of Irish placenames with British colonial names nationwide not only erased indigenous geographical and cultural identities, but also inscribed new systems of power designed to marginalise *Gaeilge* and *Gaeilgeoirí* as part of the British colonial project (Nash 1999, p. 460). The consequences of this practice remain some of the most enduring and visible legacies of colonialism in Ireland today. In recent decades, critical Postcolonial and Nationalist perspectives on the matter have driven various social movements for Irish language conservation and de-anglicisation policies both North and South (Nash 1999, p. 458). By choosing to anglicise Ó hAinmídh's Irish name, the legal and security apparatuses of the British state appear to reproduce the colonial administrative practices that helped to establish the hegemony of (Protestant) Unionism as an Anglophone ideology in the postcolonial North today (McVeigh and Rolston 2009, pp. 16–18).

Regarding the discursive construction of Ó hAinmídh's own personal identity in terms of both race and gender, the anglicisation of his name and state media reporting of this action achieve a number of things. Regarding race, this act strips Ó hAinmídh of a core aspect of his Irish identity. As a *Gaeilgeoir*, Ó hAinmídh's name bears cultural and socio-political weight in the sense that it signifies not only his Irishness, but also his (Catholic) Nationalist identity by virtue of *Gaeilge* being his first language. The significance of this is reinforced in the aforementioned BBC article, where Ó hAinmídh is introduced as a “Belfast man” (BBC News NI

2025.05.22, Fox). This further connotes the sensitivity of this particular identity within a postcolonial context, as well as in more masculinised terms. The London Metropolitan Police's decision to anglicise Ó hAinmídh's Irish name possibly signifies a lack of respect for *Gaeilge* and its cultural significance as the indigenous language of Ireland at the state level. In any case, the act diminishes the language's legitimacy by forgoing its implementation in a legal context.

On the issue of gender, it is worth highlighting the omission of the suffix 'Óg' in Ó hAinmídh's name following its anglicisation. *Óg* means 'young' in Irish, meaning that Liam Óg translates to 'Young Liam' or 'Liam Junior'. Found in many cultures globally, the linguistic convention of patrilineal forenaming serves to imbue and validate a masculine meaning in the name itself (Pilcher 2017, p. 818). In Ireland traditionally, to be named for being the younger male member of the family is to be endowed with a masculinity that is intrinsically linked to patriarchal 'breadwinner' notions and the vocational succession of men within family structures (Nash 1996). 'Óg' therefore signifies a masculinity that is socially and culturally constructed through the interwoven facets of youth, manhood, and Irish nationhood. The omission of 'Óg' during the anglicising process of Ó hAinmídh's name may therefore be viewed as having an emasculating effect on his identity as a young Irish man and, subsequently, as a member of KNEECAP.

Signifying race and gender beyond words: visual elements

Visual elements can also form and inform part of the systems of signs at the heart of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 9). Given the often polysemic nature of visual elements in the "articulatory practice" of discourses, their role as floating signifiers in discursive formations of identity warrants critical attention (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 105). The argument

that they cannot be overlooked when analysing discursive constructions of KNEECAP's identity in wider state media coverage of the group's controversies is supported by the fact that at least one visual element accompanies the text of every article analysed as part of this research.

The first visual element of note is the tricolour balaclava worn by JJ Ó Dochartaigh, who goes by the stage name 'DJ Próvaí'. Images of DJ Próvaí in the distinctive headwear appear in nine of the ten BBC articles and in five of the eight RTÉ articles analysed. Its presence in much of the state news coverage of KNEECAP is not surprising, given that the balaclava has become the official logo of the group's brand (Manning 2025, p. 1). An enduring symbol of Irish Republicanism for some and a harrowing reminder of paramilitary violence for others, the balaclava is an unequivocal floating signifier that traverses many discursive fields in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland. KNEECAP's symbolic use of the balaclava is intended as an ironic nod to Northern Ireland's history of sectarian conflict and the modes of Nationalist Republican resistance that operated during the Troubles (Manning 2025; Ó hÍr and Strange 2021). In the vein of Discourse Theory and discursive struggles for meaning however, this analysis finds that the visual inclusion of the balaclava in British and Irish state media coverage of KNEECAP could also potentially signify a glorification of violence, terrorism, and hatred that goes beyond KNEECAP's self-representation. This signification is particularly reinforced by prevailing British state media discourses alleging the group's support of terrorism in the context of its pro-Palestine protests (BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn).

The respective representations of the tricolour balaclava as a visual element in both RTÉ and BBC news coverage adequately demonstrates its role as a floating signifier in discursive constructions of KNEECAP's identity. Calling DJ Próvaí a "balaclava-wearing beatmaker" in one article, the BBC alliteratively draws attention to its significance before a visual element is even presented, directly invoking its

symbolic representation of Irish Nationalist and Republican identities as part of KNEECAP's protest masculinity (BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn). Given that the BBC article in question centres on KNEECAP's controversy regarding the terrorism charge against Mo Chara, certain meanings of criminality, violence, and revolutionary masculinities in KNEECAP's music and politics may become imbued in this specific articulation of the group's identity (Taylor 2019). In this respect, the inclusion of images of DJ Próvaí wearing the tricolour balaclava may enhance racialised and gendered antagonisms within the aforementioned discursive constructions of KNEECAP as a security threat in some state media coverage.

Alternatively, the tricolour balaclava may also be capable of signifying Irish (Catholic) Nationalist unity, strength, and resistance, demonstrating a subtle yet



Image 2

recognisable difference between Irish and British state media discourses. Included in an RTÉ News report on Glastonbury Festival 2024, Image 2 depicts DJ Próvaí wearing his balaclava on stage with one hand holding a microphone to his mouth and the other raised upwards (RTÉ News 2025.05.03, Quinn). His figure is silhouetted against a green background, invoking the (Catholic) Nationalist aspect of the Irish tricolour flag and thereby potentially signifying the harbouring of resistance by the oppressed Other in a postcolonial context. Meanwhile, Image 3 similarly depicts DJ Próvaí in his balaclava (BBC News NI 2025.04.23, Doyle and Hughes:

and the other raised upwards (RTÉ News



Image 3

Getty Images). Included in a BBC article on the backlash against KNEECAP following its protests at Coachella, it could be argued that the red-orange colour

scheme of this image more readily insinuates an element of danger or threat rather than resistance (BBC News NI 2025.04.23, Doyle and Hughes: Getty Images). These images of the tricolour balaclava signify opposing readings of the protest masculinity embodied and espoused by KNEECAP, with the BBC's framing of the visual element arguably appearing to be more antagonistic than that by RTÉ (Connell 2005).

Another visual element that functions as a floating signifier in terms of racialised identity is the *keffiyeh*. Worn by Mo Chara during many live performances worldwide, as well as during his court appearances in the UK, the *keffiyeh* is a traditional Palestinian headscarf that has become a symbol of solidarity among pro-Palestine movements globally. In many contexts, it is understood to represent history, tradition, and resistance in the face of oppressive colonial powers (Zulaihah 2023, p. 141). From a Postcolonial perspective, the *keffiyeh* has become an identifiable nodal point around which other elements and signs related to anti-colonial discourses of solidarity and resistance have become oriented (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 5). This is evident in its use by Northern Irish (Catholic) Nationalists, who wear *keffiyehs* to express solidarity with Palestine and draw a parallel between their own anti-colonial struggles and those of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

As well as constituting an important nodal point, the *keffiyeh* can also be understood as a floating signifier on account of ongoing struggles to constitute its meaning (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 7). For instance, prevailing Orientalist logic dictates that the *keffiyeh* may alternatively be viewed with apprehension or suspicion in certain Western discourses due to its representation of the Orientalised Muslim or Arab Other (Renfro 2018). The political and cultural discourses around KNEECAP, particularly those mediated by the BBC, appear to subliminally present this Orientalist perspective via their use of images depicting Mo Chara wearing a *keffiyeh* whilst simultaneously recounting the allegations of terrorist offences made against him. Given its strong red colour scheme and Mo Chara's assertive stance, Image 4

could be interpreted as an example of this particular reading of the *keffiyeh* as signifier. In fact, Image 4 and Image 5 both carry possible connotations of violence and aggression due to the active, open-mouthed facial expressions of their *keffiyeh*-wearing subjects (BBC News NI 2025.04.23, Doyle and Hughes: Getty Images; BBC News 2025.06.29, Savage: Getty Images). From this angle, the *keffiyeh* no longer symbolises Palestinian



Image 4



Image 5

identity or resistance alone, but also becomes a vessel through which British postcolonial state ideology interpellates KNEECAP as Other. In this light, the BBC seems to establish yet another visual association between KNEECAP's racialised protest masculinity and violence, hatred, and terrorism in hegemonic state media discourses.

Aside from his wearing of the *keffiyeh*, it is clear from the articles analysed that Mo Chara himself features prominently as a visual element in the British and Irish media discourses around his terrorism charges. Two BBC articles from 22 and 28 May respectively include Image 6 alongside their bodies of text, depicting Mo Chara close-up, staring straight ahead, and lacking emotional expression (BBC News NI 2025.05.22, Fox: PA Media; BBC Scotland News 2025.05.28, McLaren: PA Media). The image arguably resembles the type of photographic portrait taken by police authorities of a criminal suspect. Although the image was clearly not taken in such a context, its framing in this manner by the BBC may invoke similar connotations. Regardless of whether or not this was the intended impression, Irish

state media articles appear not to implicate Mo Chara to the same degree visually. This suggests that the British media more readily employs visual elements that allow audiences to read Mo Chara as a criminalised subject rather than as a performer and political activist, leading to a more antagonistic construction of KNEECAP overall in state media discourses. This is especially the case if we are to read KNEECAP's identity as a protest masculinity that converges with its identity as a racialised Other in the eyes of the British establishment.



Image 6

In a news article on KNEECAP's ban from Hungary, the BBC makes use of visual images in a way that brings the discursive struggle of the group's identity amid competing masculinities to the fore (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline). The article



Image 7

reports an announcement made by Hungary's Secretary of State for international communication, Zoltán Kovács, to formally ban KNEECAP from the country for three years, stating that the group "posed a national security threat" (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline). Three images are included in the article, two of which I include here (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline: Getty Images). These visual elements appear to be juxtaposed in some respects. Image 7 depicts the members of KNEECAP smiling and posing casually at a film awards show (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline: Getty Images). They are dressed in the same urban streetwear attire that they are known for wearing during performances, including DJ Próvaí in his tricolour balaclava. A key

visual aspect associated with working-class youth and hip-hop culture, the BBC's highlighting of KNEECAP's apparel reinforces discursive constructions of the group's protest masculinity, regardless of the state media broadcaster's advertence in this case (Commins 2025, p. 81).

Meanwhile, Image 8 depicts Zoltán Kovács in formal business attire with a serious expression of concern on his face (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline: Getty Images). The colours in Image 8 are cooler and more subdued, further adding to the sense of solemnity conveyed in the



Image 8

image. The article thus visually presents two contrasting versions of masculinity, one being the non-hegemonic protest masculinity represented by KNEECAP and the other being an arguably hegemonic masculinity represented by Kovács. This also possibly establishes a chain of equivalence between the masculinities represented and upheld by state representatives in different countries, all of whom stand in shared opposition to what KNEECAP is purported to represent. This reading of the visual elements suggests an antagonistic struggle in the discourse around KNEECAP's identity, signifying a hierarchisation of masculinities that speaks to the hegemonic power structures and ideological tenets upheld in part by the British state media apparatus.

Parallels with Palestine I: KNEECAP and discourses on antisemitism

The historical and cultural parallels between Northern Ireland and Palestine appear to influence how different elements of the discourses around KNEECAP and its pro-Palestine stance signify different meanings. For instance, use of the terms 'antisemitic' and 'antisemitism' by the BBC when citing British politicians and other political representatives in relation to KNEECAP's pro-Palestine advocacy signifies a

conventional, binary narrative that reflects a continued association between antisemitism and support for the Palestinian cause. This mainstream media narrative is derived from misleading confluences of antisemitism, defined as anti-Jewish prejudice, with anti-Israel or anti-Zionist sentiment (Jaffee 2024). Following closer analysis, it is apparent that calls by British state representatives and media personalities to censor KNEECAP and ban the group from performing at UK festivals are often justified using this conflated discourse. The following quote from a BBC article published on 24 May 2025 provides a clear example:

'Some politicians, including Tory leader Kemi Badenoch, have called for them to be banned. And they were called antisemitic and "terrorist sympathisers" after they described Israel's military action in Gaza as a US-funded genocide at the Coachella music festival in California last month.'

(BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn)

The BBC also relays the views of aforementioned Hungarian state representative Kovács, quoted as stating that KNEECAP “repeatedly engage in anti-Semitic hate speech supporting terrorism and terrorist groups” and that “Hungary has zero tolerance for antisemitism in any form” in relation to the group’s ban from the country (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline). The establishment of ‘anti-Semitic’ and ‘antisemitism’ as signifiers in this discourse serves to shape the audience’s understanding of KNEECAP as harbouring anti-Jewish prejudice rather than as advocating for Palestinians and an end to genocide in Gaza. Indeed, the majority of the article focuses on recounting the allegations of terrorism made against Mo Chara, as well as detailing various other festival bans faced by the group, while making no attempt to clarify or define what is meant by the use of elements such as ‘hate speech’, ‘terrorism’, or ‘antisemitism’ (BBC News 2025.07.24, no byline). An alternative reading of this discourse might argue that the BBC attempts to offer a

non-partisan overview of the KNEECAP controversy by airing the opinions of fans and festival-goers who believe in the group's political cause (BBC News 2025.05.24, Glynn). However, it is important to observe that the meanings of pro-Palestine advocacy and protests against genocide have themselves become distorted and overshadowed by the privileged signification of antisemitism as a nodal point in hegemonic media discourses around KNEECAP and the Israel-Palestine conflict generally. This leads audiences to conflate these meanings and consequently omit contextual nuance from the narrative as a whole. The use of 'antisemitism' and 'anti-Semitic' as either direct or indirect signifiers of pro-Palestine advocacy thus helps to construct KNEECAP as being racially prejudiced against Jewish people. This potentially has implications for the group's own struggles with being racialised as Irish (Catholic) Nationalists in British state media discourses. Visibilising or invisibilising different marginalised groups based on the degree of their oppression, such as with Jewish people or with Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland, creates a competitive, racial hierarchy within the category of Other that ultimately excludes them from hegemonic power structures under the auspices of the postcolonial state (Gunew 1997, p. 26).

Comparatively speaking, Irish state media do not appear to frame KNEECAP in antisemitic terms as readily as British state media. In the articles analysed, RTÉ mentions 'antisemitism' only when citing the espoused views of state authorities elsewhere. In one news article, RTÉ relays the following statement made by the French state authorities concerning Rock En Seine Festival in Paris:

'Ahead of the show, the French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau said the authorities would be vigilant for "any comments of an antisemitic nature, apology for terrorism, or incitement to hatred" at the event.'

(RTÉ News 2025.08.25, no byline)

The article then proceeds to contextualise the minister's statement by detailing the "high levels of antisemitism in France in the wake of Palestinian militant group Hamas's... attack on Israel that triggered the war on Gaza" (RTÉ News 2025.08.25, no byline). There appears to be no instance in which use of this or other, related elements originates from any politicians or other state representatives from Ireland. Articles published by RTÉ tend to separate antisemitism discourses from the legal and political discourses around KNEECAP, demonstrating that any meanings which conflate the two within related fields of discursivity are neither essential nor fixed (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). It can therefore be argued that, inadvertently or otherwise, RTÉ challenges existing hegemonic narratives around KNEECAP's stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict on account of this separation of meanings within the discourses at hand. Irish state media differs from its British counterpart in this respect, wherein their discursive constructions of KNEECAP do not rely upon a conflating narrative that might signify the group's identity misleadingly and, in turn, subject the group to a racialised and Othered hierarchy within postcolonial power structures.

Parallels with Palestine II: challenging hegemony

There is some evidence of existing hegemonic discourses around KNEECAP and Palestine being challenged in the texts analysed. In a news article from 8 July 2025, RTÉ interviewed a number of KNEECAP fans outside a Glasgow venue and found the overwhelming majority of them to support KNEECAP and its political views:

"Pro-Palestinian protester Naomi said: "We're of the opinion the establishment is so under threat, they're having to look to ridiculous means to try and silence outspoken voices."

(RTÉ News 2025.07.08, no byline)

By ‘establishment’, it can be assumed that the protester is referring to the British State, formal interventions by which were what led to KNEECAP being banned from performing at some UK festivals, as well as to Mo Chara being charged with terrorism offences under British law (RTÉ News 2025.07.08, no byline). Yet despite these discourses, the chains of equivalence linking KNEECAP fans and pro-Palestinian activists and protesters appear to hold strong on account of certain key elements. Among these is the term ‘truth’, which recurs as a nodal point as part of counter-hegemonic discourses in the texts. In the same RTÉ article, another KNEECAP fan seeks to vindicate the group’s pro-Palestine advocacy by saying that “people don’t like hearing the truth” (RTÉ News 2025.07.08, no byline). An earlier BBC article published after KNEECAP’s performance at Coachella also acknowledges the subject of ‘truth’, quoting the group’s manager Daniel Lambert speaking to Irish state media:

Speaking to Irish broadcaster RTÉ, Kneecap's manager said: "If somebody is hurt by the truth, that's something for them to be hurt by, but it's really important to speak truth."

Daniel Lambert added: "Thankfully the lads are not afraid to do that."

(BBC News NI 2025.04.23, Quinn)

Crucially, the BBC’s decision to include this statement presents an internal variation among BBC news reporting, demonstrating that hegemonic discourses can also be challenged from within what might be considered an otherwise monolithic state entity serving to uphold an ideological status quo in a postcolonial context.

This analysis has primarily addressed the first research question of this thesis regarding discursive constructions of KNEECAP and its pro-Palestine stance in terms of race and gender across Irish and British state media. It has demonstrated that many linguistic and visual elements used by the BBC and RTÉ in their news reporting serve convincingly as nodal points and floating signifiers in the construction of KNEECAP's Irish (Catholic) Nationalist identity. However, the difficulty with pinpointing signifiers and chains of equivalence that bring the group's gender identity singularly to the fore speaks to the contingency of the group's protest masculinity on racialising discourses. The final chapter will discuss this phenomenon in more depth and in relation to my second research question, which addresses the relationship between discursive constructions of KNEECAP and challenges to hegemonic state ideology in the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland.

V: Discussion and conclusion

Underneath all the thundering there's magic
And if there's a better way to live, I've gotta have it

- KNEECAP, Grian Chatten
'Better Way to Live' (2023)

Orientalist logic and (post)colonial legacies: KNEECAP and the BBC

The research findings outlined in the previous chapter raise a number of issues for discussion. First is the observation that the racialising nature of state media discourses around KNEECAP's pro-Palestine advocacy is clearer in articles published by the BBC than in those published by RTÉ. From a Postcolonial perspective, this possibly reflects an Orientalist tendency in British state media to Other those who represent non-hegemonic identities within British postcolonial contexts. KNEECAP's identity embodies a protest masculinity defined by the socio-economic and cultural tenets of Irish (Catholic) Nationalism (Ruane and Todd 2009). Given the institutional and structural hegemony of (Protestant) Unionism in Northern Ireland's postcolonial climate, KNEECAP represents a more antagonistic position with which the BBC may struggle more to reconcile than RTÉ. The BBC thus seems to represent an Ideological State Apparatus that serves to reconstitute colonial practices, such as Orientalist Othering and anglicisation, using elements and nodal points that signify multiple and often inimical, racialised meanings when contextualising KNEECAP's pro-Palestine advocacy. Whether inadvertent or not, this frames KNEECAP in terms which amplify its antagonistic identity vis-à-vis the hegemonic ideology of (Protestant) Unionism in Northern Ireland.

Among the foremost implications of this phenomenon is what Critical Race Theorists call *hypervisibility*. The politics of visibility point to conceptualising race in the context of colonialism and scrutinising the role of colonial oppression in the self-expression, construction, and signification of identities among colonised groups (Fanon 2008). Hypervisibility results from focused scrutiny of an individual or group identified as Other due to their perceived deviation from the norm within hierarchised power structures (Settles, Buchanan, et al. 2019). In this case, hypervisibility of KNEECAP's identity as working-class (Catholic) Nationalists from Northern Ireland is achieved via various racialising signifiers used by the BBC. This also subsequently leads to a hypervisibility of the group's protest masculinity, which defies hegemonic norms by virtue of its cultivation in marginalised socio-economic conditions (Connell 2005, p. 118). Regardless of its intention with using these particular elements, the BBC's consequent framing of KNEECAP in state media discourses speaks to a possible concern regarding greater, discursive struggles in Northern Ireland between the anti-establishment sentiment of some groups, such as young working-class (Catholic) Nationalists and pro-Palestine activists, and the hegemonic ideology of their (Protestant) Unionist and pro-Israel counterparts.

Challenging hegemonic state ideology I: the (in)visibility of protest masculinity

Another point worth discussing is the implications of gender as an implicit part of the racialising state media discourses I have extrapolated from my analysis findings. From an Irish-speaking, terrorism-supporting criminal suspect to a “free man”, the highlighting of Mo Chara's identity serves the dual purpose of visibilising his non-hegemonic status within the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland in masculinised as well as racialised terms (BBC News NI 2025.09.26, Bonner and O'Connor). KNEECAP's protest masculinity is more strongly visibilised through the

very discursive constructions through which the group is racialised in British state media discourses, embedding this as part of the group's identity as Other. As a result, KNEECAP is framed in opposition to any hegemonic masculinities which may take ideological precedence within the context of the British establishment and its postcolonial outposts. Yet according to Connell (2005, pp. 85–90), hegemonic masculinity comes under threat in the face of what she calls “crisis tendencies”, or the disruption of power relations within the current social and gender order. Amid periods of crisis in this sense, the collapse of hegemonic masculinities leads to the formation of new masculinities, such as KNEECAP's protest masculinity in the post-conflict, urban settings of West Belfast and Derry in Northern Ireland (Connell 2005, p. 85). The group's protests against the ongoing Gaza genocide form part of a wider contemporary crisis, whereby a global movement advocating for a free Palestine is also serving to disrupt the current international political order (McCandless 2025). KNEECAP's members have positioned themselves within this movement, justifying their protests against the genocide on the basis of what Connell (2005, p. 118) calls a “working-class masculine ethic of solidarity”, in light of the allegedly parallel oppression experienced by Irish (Catholic) Nationalists historically. Thus, KNEECAP's protest masculinity may be regarded as undermining the hegemonic masculinities underpinning (Protestant) Unionist ideology in Northern Ireland, political representatives of which continue to publicly express support for Israel amid the ongoing conflict (Arar 2017, p. 857).

Challenging hegemonic state ideology II: language as power

A final point of discussion is the role of language and the power constituted therein across various fields of discursivity. Based on this analysis, *Gaeilge* is among the foremost elements to signify a challenge to postcolonial state ideology in discursive constructions of KNEECAP. The Good Friday Agreement, a peace deal

agreed upon by the Irish and British governments to end the Troubles in Northern Ireland, included stipulations regarding linguistic diversity and respect for the Irish language in the post-conflict state going forward. Yet, despite these stipulations, *Gaeilge* remains marginalised across political, legal, and economic spheres (MacGiolla Chríost 2000, p. 45). In light of this reality, the explicit visibilisation of *Gaeilge* as a core aspect of KNEECAP's Irish Nationalist identity in state news reporting helps to position the group outside of the political, economic, and Anglophone hegemony of Unionism in Northern Ireland under British rule. Through a gender lens, it may also serve to implicitly signify the group's identity of protest masculinity on account of its association with certain non-hegemonic, working-class *Gaeilgeoir* communities not only in Northern Ireland but across Ireland (Ruane and Todd 2009).

In addition, I also suggest that the privileged signification of KNEECAP's use of *Gaeilge* in state media has implications that go beyond understanding the language as merely a novel part of the group's brand. It also constitutes a specific antagonism which fundamentally defies hegemonic state ideology in Northern Ireland, upheld in part through postcolonial Anglophone practices within its various state institutions, by virtue of its deeply politicised association with "Irish claims to nationhood" (Ó Cathail 2016, p. 112). Althusser (1971, p. 104) notes that dominant state ideologies are often rooted in (Western classical) notions of "nationalism, moralism, and economism". In the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland, dominant ideological positionings within politics and culture represent a multiplicity of tensions between the values and ideals of British-aligned, economically privileged (Protestant) Unionist communities and those of their (Catholic) Nationalist counterparts (Ruane and Todd 2009). The continued legacy of British ideological predispositions to Western Imperialism is therefore disrupted and challenged by the active revival and reconstitution of marginalised linguistic practices, which KNEECAP does to great effect by using *Gaeilge*. In this vein, it is not surprising that Ideological State

Apparatuses such as the media may be understood as a means of stabilising any challenges to the ideological status quo, such as those represented by KNEECAP through action and advocacy alike (Althusser 1971).

Advocating a 'better way to live': avenues for future research

This thesis contributes to the ever-growing body of scholarship on race and gender in relation to Postcolonial Theory, Postcolonial Feminist Theory, Discourse Theory, and masculinity studies. My poststructuralist treatment of race and masculinity as intersecting categories serves to broaden the scope for analysing the significance of discursive identity construction for studies of postcolonial contexts. Specifically, this research seeks to draw particular attention to the construction of non-hegemonic masculinities within racialised discourses around marginalised, Northern Irish identities such as that of KNEECAP. This has not been an entirely straightforward process, given the implicit ubiquity of both whiteness and masculinity, among other privileged categories that can consequently be subsumed and at times overlooked in gender research (Bridges 2019, pp. 24–25). As such, the hypervisibility of KNEECAP's racialised and masculinised identity speaks to a wider debate regarding the construction of racialised, postcolonial masculinities with regard to white European subjects, as is the case with KNEECAP (Newell 2009, p. 246).

Notwithstanding the challenge of articulating modes of identity with respect to both whiteness and masculinities, this thesis has demonstrated a capacity for understanding how hegemony is both discursively upheld and challenged in these terms within postcolonial contexts. At the same time, it has also highlighted a need for further qualitative research on postcolonial masculinities, as well as the racialising discourses that serve to visibilise them, both within and beyond predominantly White European contexts.

Furthermore, this thesis joins a wave of recent scholarship on Israel-Palestine, a pertinent issue that extends far beyond academia. While only treated analytically in parallel with the Northern Irish context, this entire research project pivots on the fulcrum of the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the Israel-Palestine conflict at large. While state media apparatuses from Ireland, the UK, and other Western state actors serve to highlight and question the actions of groups like KNEECAP under their own ideological remits, the lives of Palestinians continue to be impacted by the consequences of the hegemony of Israeli Zionism in Palestine (Gerber 2003). The need to be vigilant in pinpointing and critically investigating these issues is imperative, whether by conducting academic research on race, gender, and ideology (as I have sought to do) or by using art and music as platforms for public protest (as KNEECAP continues to do). To quote Mo Chara's statement to the press outside Woolwich Crown Court following the handing down of his court ruling in September 2025:

"This entire process was never about me. It was never about any threat to the public, it was never about terrorism – a word used by your government to discredit people you oppress. It was always about Gaza, about what happens if you dare to speak up."

(BBC News NI 2025.09.26, Bonner and O'Connor)

Far removed from discursive media constructions of KNEECAP as threatening and dangerous is the group's self-proclaimed message of "love, inclusion, and hope" (RTÉ News 2025.04.29, no byline). This message is both appropriate and imperative for the burgeoning fields of Postcolonial, Postcolonial Feminist, and gender research, through which discriminatory systems of power and oppression can be identified in theory and combatted in praxis. It is through hearing and heeding the

messages of marginalised voices that hegemony can be challenged, leading to meaningful change and a better way to live for all.

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Image 1:

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Image 3:

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Image 4:

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For accessibility purposes, the QR code below provides access to a Spotify playlist of all KNEECAP songs referenced in this thesis:

