
“Taxpayers’ Money”: Subverting Anti-Welfare Sentiment through Irish Rap Lyrics

Clodagh Heffernan
University College Cork

Copyright (c) 2022 by Clodagh Heffernan. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Abstract. Since the 1990s, working-class Irish hip hop MCs have criticised the Irish social welfare system through their rap lyrics. Like most global hip hop, Irish rap uses oppositional politics to offset the stigmatising ideas of class that are propagated by the dominant classes in society, especially negative stereotypes surrounding social welfare recipients. Although not recognised within literary Irish Studies, these lyricists are producing working-class counter-narratives to classist anti-welfare sentiment in Irish society through their poetic lyrics. This article draws from Irish and international Hip Hop Studies scholarship to argue that Irish rap should be regarded as working-class Irish poetry that contains intrinsic literary and cultural value. Focusing on the work of a Louth-based hip hop group, TPM (Taxpayers’ Money), this article reads Irish rap as poetry. Using close textual analysis, I examine how TPM’s rap-poems use adversarial messages and working-class aesthetics to protest and critique anti-welfare hegemony in Ireland.

Key Words. Working-Class Irish Studies, Hip Hop, Social Welfare, Poetry, Politics

Resumen. Desde la década de los noventa, los MCs de hip-hop de clase obrera en Irlanda han criticado la burocracia dentro de la seguridad social irlandesa a través de sus subversivas letras de rap. Al igual que la mayoría del hip hop mundial, el rap irlandés utiliza la política de oposición para contrarrestar las ideas estigmatizadoras de clase difundidas por las clases dominantes, en particular los estereotipos negativos que rodean a sectores de la sociedad que reciben prestaciones del sistema. Aunque no se reconozca dentro de los estudios literarios irlandeses, estos letristas están produciendo contra-narrativas de clase obrera frente al sentimiento clasista anti-prestación irlandés a través de su lírica. Este artículo parte de estudios a nivel irlandés e internacional sobre el Hip-Hop para defender que el rap irlandés debería considerarse como poesía irlandesa de clase obrera con su propio valor literario y cultural. Tomando como objeto principal de estudio la obra de un grupo de hip-hop de Louth, TPM (Taxpayers’ Money “Dinero del contribuyente”), este artículo analiza el rap irlandés como

poesía. Utilizando un análisis textual detallado, se examina cómo los poemas de rap de TPM utilizan mensajes de lucha y la estética de la clase obrera a modo de protesta y crítica de la hegemonía anti-prestación en Irlanda.

Palabras clave. Clase obrera, Irlanda, hip hop, prestación social, poesía, política

Introduction

Ireland's rich history of oral storytelling is naturally imbricated in the country's music, and working-class Irish life has long found expression through various musical forms. John Moulden asserts that traditional Irish folk music has enabled Ireland's working class to tell their stories throughout history, creating a "sub-literature" that was "highly expressive and at the centre of sociability; the highest form of verbal art easily accessible to the poor":

[V]ernacular creativity was a many-handed affair, democratic and communally owned, and without any sense that it came 'from above'. The expression was fully vernacular, often locally based and within the range of people's own experience – they may have known the song-maker. This was a face-to-face experience, social and shared, unlike solitary reading. (2018: 103-04)

Moulden's discussion focuses on traditional Irish ballads of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but his observations also have relevance to contemporary working-class music culture in Ireland, particularly hip hop/rap. The hip hop/rap genre is not typically associated with Ireland, and its significance to Irish working-class culture has yet to be fully explored. The genre originated in impoverished black communities in New York in the 1970s; correspondingly, hip hop in Ireland is produced almost exclusively by young working-class people. Moreover, the storytelling style of traditional Irish folk musicians is comparable to that of the black MC's of New York City's Bronx in the 1970s. Tricia Rose, the American sociologist widely credited with having pioneered Hip Hop Studies, has dedicated much of her career to analysing rap's "ability to use the powerful tradition of black oration and storytelling to render stylistically compelling music dealing with the pleasures and pains lived by those with the least" (2008: ix-x). Similarly to their historical predecessors – both the Irish folk-music makers of old and the black-American MCs of the twentieth century – young Irish rap lyricists express the realities of working-class life by prioritising the representation of the local and the communal, as well as through using a vernacular that is grounded in Irish working-class experience.

As noted by Jeffrey O.G Ogbar, hip hop scholarship has found its place in several academic disciplines, including literary criticism: "Since the early 1990s, sociologists, literary critics, and scholars of American studies, African American studies, and cultural studies have added to the expanding corpus of hip hop studies" (2007: 3). Unsurprisingly, the literary evaluation of rap lyrics has thus far been led by American scholars and has dealt primarily (although not exclusively) with American hip hop. Comparatively, no Irish Studies scholar has produced a thorough and sustained literary critique of Irish hip hop to date. Inspired by the work of American hip hop scholar Alexis Pate, this article holds that Irish rap lyrics can be fruitfully "read" as poetry. Pate asserts that "many rappers use complex techniques of poetic structure in their work", and he regrets that "these poets are not often given credit in the world of poetry and art for what they do" (2010: xv). Of course, poetry forms an integral part of Irish literary history and the country's reputation as a home to many poets has been widely discussed. Yet, the scholarly community does not currently recognise Ireland's rap MCs as a noteworthy cohort

of working-class writers operating within the wider sphere of Irish poetry. This is an unfortunate elision within Irish Studies, especially considering the fine poetic quality of this work and the insights into working-class youth culture that Irish hip hop provides. If the bygone folk-music lyrics of Ireland's working-class can reasonably be said to constitute as "sub-literature", as Moulden has suggested, then contemporary Irish rap should be afforded a similar status. With its working-class roots, oral-poetic dispositions, and adversarial messages, Irish rap forms a crucial part of the tradition of subversive Irish working-class poetry.

Cultural Context(s) of Irish Hip Hop and the Social Welfare Theme

Considering the lack of scholarship concerning Irish rap, it is useful to start by briefly outlining the genre's cultural context in Ireland. Hip hop became popular in Ireland during the 1980s, a result of Irish diasporic links with US cities, as well as the circulation of rap mixtapes and influential hip hop films. By the 1990s, "thriving underground scenes had formed across the island" and Irish hip hop production has grown exponentially ever since (Rollefson 2021: 226). J. Griffith Rollefson, an American musicologist working in Ireland, is currently carrying out research that will hopefully give rise to scholarly conversations around Irish rap. Rollefson is the Principal Investigator of the ongoing "Hip Hop Interpellation" project, which is engaging with communities on six continents to uncover the nature of hip hop "knowledge flows", to include an examination of Irish hip hop culture. Rollefson argues "that hip hop spreads, not as a copy of the African American original, but through its performance of knowledge, emerges as an always already constituent part of local knowledge and practice" (2021: 225). He performs close textual analyses of rap lyrics to demonstrate "how Irish artists have dug down deep and found hip hop where they're at, how hip hop has left and is leaving its imprint in the local cultural firmament, how au/oral traditions the world over are finding hip hop at the core of their local praxis" (Rollefson 2021: 234-35). As a case study in how Irish hip hop engages with working-class experience, this article will consider how Irish rap addresses negative stereotypes relating to welfare recipients.

Social welfare has emerged as a pressing concern within Irish hip hop, constituting one of the major ways in which rap MCs articulate working-class perspectives on socio-political issues in contemporary Ireland. Irish rap corresponds to Christopher Deis' observation that "hip hop music can be understood to be a type of social soundtrack or informal barometer for a society or community's mood and sentiments", particularly when one considers the articulation of life on the dole in Irish hip hop (2010: 199). The most accomplished work in the genre produces openly defiant and insightful critiques of the centre-right political establishment and classist anti-welfare sentiment. Perhaps the earliest example of the welfare theme can be attributed to ScaryÉire, a revolutionary hip hop crew which formed in Dublin in 1990. In their 1994 track "Dole Q", they express the feeling of discrimination suffered by the welfare class and complain about the difficulty of simply obtaining one's welfare payment: "good Jaysus, bless us and save us, / it'd sicken your hole. / The things you have to go through to get your fuckin' dole". Themes of welfare injustice have persisted in Irish rap, evident in the lyrics of many contemporary Dublin MCs, including Ballyfermot's Coleman and Finglas native Temper-Mental MissElayneous, Ireland's best-known woman rapper. Social welfare is also evoked in Northern Irish rap, with comedic Belfast rapper Wee Goose describing a father's efforts at welfare fraud, a topic that I will discuss later. Arguably the most politically charged treatment of the social welfare theme in Irish hip hop occurs in the music of County Louth's TPM, and for this reason, the rest of this article will focus on the work of this specific rap group.

TPM (Taxpayers' Money)

TPM is effectively the hip hop offshoot of The Mary Wallopers, an anti-capitalist folk band from County Louth. The Mary Wallopers is made up of Charles and Andrew Hendy, two brothers from Dunleer, and their friend Sean McKenna. Since releasing their folk EP, *A Mouthful of the Mary Wallopers* (2019), the band has become perhaps the best-known contemporary folk outfit in Ireland. The Mary Wallopers have been the subject of several articles in national newspapers, performed on prime-time late-night Irish television programmes, and have accumulated a sizable fanbase through their popular internet livestream performances. The band members regularly discuss the working-class politics from which Irish folk music originated, emphasising the subversive power of the folk genre and rejecting contemporary commercial folk music's tendency to remain "very twee and very safe" (cited in *The Irish Times* 2021). TPM is a political/comedic rap duo comprised of Charles and Andrew Hendy. The Hendy brothers' outlook on the subversive potential of folk music largely corresponds with their understanding of the rap genre. In a 2021 interview with *The Irish Times*, Charles explains that "any music we enjoy is very honest": "Grandmaster Flash and The Message, it's about his life and what's around him. And that's where hip-hop really blossoms and it's the same with punk and it's the same with folk. Anything that's kind of DIY" (cited in *The Irish Times* 2021). In the same interview, Charles describes how the "the biggest influence" on the lyrical content of both The Mary Wallopers and TPM has "always been reactionary stuff to poverty", with Andrew elaborating that they are "more inclined to write about stuff that annoys [them] than write songs about clouds or whatever" (cited in *The Irish Times* 2021). Accordingly, the musical content of both The Mary Wallopers and TPM suitably encapsulates the potential for both genres to operate as spaces for anti-capitalist and working-class expression in contemporary Ireland. As Charles explains, "TPM is more in-your-face, but to us there isn't much difference in the actual politics" (cited in *The Irish Times* 2021).

One of the major ways in which the Hendy brothers challenge the perception of poverty in Irish society is by using their TPM lyrics to articulate their experience of life on the dole in County Louth. The majority of TPM's raps make explicit reference to the experience of the social welfare system, and "dole life" is the very social condition from which TPM arose. The band attained national recognition with their viral hit "All the Boys on the Dole" in 2015. Their online *Bandcamp* page reveals the inspiration behind the track:

All the Boys on the Dole was written in a slump of depression, sitting in a broken car with no money, nowhere to go and no end in sight. It is a response to the idea that if you are in our situation you are worthless. You are NOT worthless. [capitalisation in original] (TPM *Bandcamp*: n.d)

Furthermore, the band's name is an acronym for "Taxpayers' Money". Any working-class person can easily discern what TPM's name is referencing: the enraged comments of those members of the middle class who gripe about their tax money being used to fund the welfare state and the "feckless" lifestyles of people on the dole. The phrase "taxpayers' money" is therefore redolent of anti-welfare sentiment, and we will later consider how this has manifested in Ireland's popular culture through hostile "welfare fraud" initiatives by Ireland's political elites. TPM's choice of name is thus emblematic of a mischievous and defiant response to the higher social classes that would most certainly abhor the controversial messaging of their dole tracks. Ergo, the group deliberately mock anti-welfare sentiment through shamelessly reappropriating "taxpayers' money" as a badge of honour. The subversive function of TPM's name is consistent with the content of their rap-poems, demonstrating how "words spoken [in hip hop] can oppose existing ideas and supplant them with new ones" (Pate 2010: 27). TPM's

radical lyrics succeed in creating counter-narratives to anti-welfare discourse that denigrates the welfare class as “worthless”. This is manifested in their two most politically confronting tracks: “All the Boys on the Dole” and “TPM Don’t Have Your Money”.

All the Boys on the Dole (2015)

As previously mentioned, “All the Boys on the Dole” was TPM’s breakout song, and the attention that it garnered through online media platforms ultimately led the Hendy brothers to establish themselves as a hip hop group. Speaking to a reporter for *Totallydublin.ie*, Andrew recollected the experience:

We made our first song and we weren’t a band or anything and two days later I was busking [with The Mary Wallopers] and then me and Charles played All the Boys on the Dole. Some young lad recorded it on his mobile phone and suddenly it went viral. Then we had all these newspapers asking after our name. (cited in McDermott 2019)

This reflects the significance of technology and mass-media culture to the effective dissemination of underground hip hop. Robert Shusterman emphasises how mass media benefits rappers by preserving the essential oral and performative quality of rap: “lyrics cannot be adequately conveyed in mere written form, divorced from their expressive rhythm, intonation, and surging stress and flow” (2000: 209). The viral appeal of the “All the Boys on the Dole” can be attributed to the Hendy brothers’ comically impudent rhymes and intonation, all of which are enhanced by their guttural Dunleer accents. This in turn attracted mainstream media attention which allowed their oppositional message to be heard by all social classes in Ireland. This recalls Shusterman’s observation that

Only through the mass media could hip hop become a very audible voice in our popular culture, one which middle America would like to suppress since it often stridently expresses the frustrating oppression of ghetto life and the proud and pressing desire for social change. (2000: 209)

In the context of TPM and Ireland, mass-media culture enabled the Hendys to bring the taboo lives of young working-class men into the spotlight, critiquing social-welfare stigma in the process.

“All the Boys on the Dole” can be “read” as a working-class party anthem, an Irish example of hip hop’s ability to “establish a space for pleasure and release in a system of political economy that [marginalises] poor and working-class youth” (Deis 2015: 196). While the lyrics describe how dole life is “always a struggle”, the prevailing attitude is the sense of camaraderie that comes when young men unite to reject welfare stigma, instead opting to celebrate the forbidden freedom that comes with unemployment. There is a sense of conflict in the first verse as Andrew articulates the anxiety of “waiting for dole day” and the anger provoked by the classist attitude of the administrator at the dole office:

Everyday I’m on the same page,
waiting for dole day,
thinkin’ bout tick that I have to pay.
The woman in the window, harassin me!
“Why can’t you get a job and be like me?!”
[lyrics reproduced as they appear on *Bandcamp*]

TPM's rap-poem evokes the "everyday" financial hardship suffered by those reliant on the welfare system, and the disdainful attitudes of welfare officials. One of the most interesting aspects of the first verse is TPM's evocation of the idiom "to buy something on tick", which means to purchase something on credit; the "tick" is short for the "ticket" that records a person's debt. Tick culture remains a crucial strategy of resistance throughout impoverished areas in Ireland, enabling working-class communities to operate loan systems between neighbours and community vendors such as the coal man, the milk man, and the bin man. However, I posit that the mention of "tick" in this context carries connotations of drug culture, rendering it uniquely provocative.¹ The importance of repaying one's tick to the drug dealer is repeatedly emphasised throughout Irish hip hop music in general, and the track under discussion contains increasingly explicit references to cannabis as the lyrics progress. Therefore, I maintain that the line in question confirms that the speaker uses illegal drugs, cannot pay his dealer up front, and thus must wait for his dole to come in before he can pay his tick. The allusion to drugs, combined with the speaker's admission that he uses his dole – his "taxpayers' money" – to purchase the offending substances is exceedingly controversial.² Although drug use exists among *all* social classes in Ireland, it is welfare recipients who are targeted by a conservative culture that blows the issue out of proportion and associates drug use with working-class delinquency. "All the Boys on the Dole" suggests that welfare claimants should be accepted as "worthy" members of society, irrespective of whether they partake in narcotics or not. In making this song, TPM radically insist on the humanity of Ireland's marginalised welfare class.

The second verse begins with Charles expressing his awareness of the negative stereotypes pertaining to working-class youths in Dundalk town, where the Hendy brothers now reside. The lyrics reflect the sense of defeat induced by the classist remarks aimed at young people engaged in education-to-employment schemes:

Oh I'm at a loss, dealin with FÁS,
 put me on a cross, cause I don't have a boss.
 Everyday's the same, people lookin' at me:
 "He never did nuthin since he left O'Fiaich!!" [lyrics reproduced as they appear on
Bandcamp]

It is significant that the hackneyed phrase "at a loss" occurs alongside the mention of FÁS. FÁS (now SOLAS) is a state-run education and training agency which is responsible for assisting those seeking employment in Ireland.³ According to the dictionary definition, to be "at a loss" can mean to be "puzzled or uncertain what to think, say or do" or it can refer to "making less money than is spent buying, operating, or producing something". The metaphorical crucifixion forced upon the speaker causes him to feel disillusioned with the named agency of the state, despite FÁS' official aim of assisting people on the dole to escape the hardship of unemployment. The function of FÁS is to encourage people to undergo vocational training and subsequently secure a job, an apparently gainful experience. However, TPM assert that this is

¹ I accept that this might seem like a classist assumption on my part; to avoid appearing to repeat the class bias that imparts negative stereotypes about drugs onto Ireland's poor, I should justify my conjecture. My own experience of working-class youth culture causes me to associate the term "tick" with the purchasing of illegal narcotics. Based on my own lived experience of Irish working-class life, I am confident that most young working-class people would understand what is meant by this early line in the song.

² One might argue that because it is so, TPM are counterintuitively reproducing dominant ideas of class that frame the welfare class as shameless scroungers, exploiting the state and the taxpayer in order to maintain their degenerate lifestyles. However, the task of defending the working class is not advanced by denying the fact that welfare claimants (like every other group in society) take drugs sometimes.

³ FÁS was superseded by SOLAS in 2014, but the training programmes offered by SOLAS are still colloquially referred to as "FÁS courses" throughout Ireland.

not the case; rather, dealing with FÁS will result in one being “at a loss”. While they may not be any worse off financially, their dignity will be “lost”, which TPM imply is worse than being “at a loss” for money as a result of not having a job. Shusterman notes how rap has been “condemned as superficial because of its simplistic semantic structures”, including the genre’s characteristic use of hackneyed phrases, clichés, and proverbs (2000: 223). He argues that the use of these phrases in rap music is subversive and artistically admirable, recognising how they “acquire new meanings which not only depart from but challenge the clichés of cultural thought” (Shusterman 2000: 224). In this way, TPM have successfully appropriated a hackneyed phrase to reflect a working-class viewpoint which is at odds with the opinion of FÁS held by the organisation’s government funders. TPM decisively reject the notion that FÁS operates as a positive force for improving the lives of the unemployed and the state of Irish society overall. Rather, FÁS is presented as an oppressive force, and the social stigma associated with being one of its users causes the speaker to become the target of hostile stares and judgemental gossip: “Everyday’s the same, people lookin’ at me: / ‘He never did nuthin since he left Ó’Fiaich!’”. In this instance, TPM use the device of quotation to emphasise the extent to which better-off people fail to understand the experience of unemployment. The quote indicates the speaker’s awareness of how “taxpaying” members of society perceive welfare claimants as lazy and unambitious. This second verse of the track also recalls Rollefson’s assertion that “Irish artists have reterritorialized, indigenized, and ultimately found themselves in and through hip hop”, emphasising that Irish rap’s “power [is] found through introspection and centred in/on local traditions and concerns, not taken on an appropriative or assimilative act” (2017: 232-33). For example, the reference to Ó’Fiaich College, an institute of further education in Dundalk, reflects how hip hop artists prioritise the inclusion and representation of the local in their lyrics, thereby enabling them to produce music that can resonate with the community which the lyrics describe.

In the lines that follow, the speaker expresses his realisation that the view of him as “never [doing] nuthin” is vapid and classist. When he decides that he is “not gonna listen to [their] shite”, he gains the confidence and agency to assert the humanity of himself and his working-class peers:

I don’t have a job, but I have a soul!
 Its for the boys on the FÁS course,
 the boys on the dole!

These lines epitomise the characteristic spirit of collectivism that so often occurs in working-class poetry. Through banding together with the other unemployed young men in the town, the speaker is empowered to reject the snobbery of both his middle-class neighbours and the welfare agency staff, described by Andrew in the third verse: “Always callin’ my phone in your snotty tone / givin me lip atop your glass throne.” The camaraderie of the working-class youths who have been marginalised by the system ignites an indestructible attitude of defiance in the speaker, compelling him to dedicate his very soul to the other boys on the dole. Following this, the lyrics become increasingly audacious, with more unambiguous references to the communal practice of smoking cannabis:

I’m not bendin’ for you,
 rather blaze at home,
 with the boys on the FÁS course,
 the boys on the dole!

The dialogic use of the word “you” here functions to address both the bigoted members of the middle class and the forces of welfare officialdom who create and uphold unfavourable ideas about welfare claimants. The track appeals to working-class audiences through TPM’s unapologetic and humorous elevation of working-class life above middle-class propriety. TPM’s address to those who pine for their “taxpayers’ money” is seditiously comical, with the boys’ habit of “blazing” and refusal to “bend” showing their defiance of the prejudice of others. The ending of the song pushes this celebratory defiance even further as TPM encourage others to join in on their illicit fun and exhibit their working-class identity with shameless pride:

Come and join our little scene,
bring a hefty bag of green,
and raise a flag, up a pole
for the boys on the FÁS course,
the boys on the dole!

Ultimately, the track casts off the classism of anti-welfare sentiment, creating a counter-narrative that insists that welfare recipients are “NOT worthless” regardless of their employment statuses or lifestyle choices.

TPM Don’t Have Your Money (2020)

When asked for a comment ahead of the 2020 political General Election in Ireland, TPM told the media that they were encouraging the public to “use [their] vote to fuck Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil out of the place” (cited in *Hotpress* 2020). “TPM Don’t Have Your Money” was released two weeks before the vote. The self-described “anti-landlord anthem supporting welfare cheats” offers a salient rationale for why the aforementioned establishment parties “shouldn’t be elected”, but metaphorically (I think) “should be shot” (“TPM Don’t Have Your Money”, *Bandcamp*). The track recalls Justin A. Williams’ view that “hip hop is a dialogue, a conversation, both with itself and outside forces” that can act as an “inspiring and empowering force” which exerts its influence on grassroots movements, political campaigns, and protests (2015: 1-3). TPM attempted to hamper Fine Gael’s chances of re-election to government by reminding the electorate of the party’s infamous anti welfare fraud campaign of 2017, which encouraged the public to report suspected “welfare cheats” to the authorities. This is directly mentioned in the first verse:

The rent goes up, the wages stay steady
You’re watching Fine Gael ads on the telly
They’re telling you all about welfare cheats
Be careful now child, what you choose to believe.

The 2017 campaign, entitled “Welfare Cheats, *Cheat Us All*” (original emphasis), was instigated by Fine Gael’s Leo Varadkar in his capacity as Minister for Social Protection. By the time the song was released, Varadkar was the party leader of Fine Gael and the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland.

During the “Welfare Cheats” campaign, Varadkar caused widespread consternation by stating that he sought to stand up for “the people who get up early in the morning” (cited in Devereux and Power 2019: 348). In their accomplished Gramscian analysis of the political/social ramifications of the “Welfare Cheats” initiative, Eoin Devereux and Martin J. Power astutely unpack the classist dimension of Varadkar’s remark:

His use of this carefully chosen phrase – with its intimations of ‘deservedness’/ ‘undeservedness’ – in his leadership campaign was revealing in that it was not only a coded message to his supporters within the Fine Gael party; it was also a way of identifying (and othering) those members of Irish society that he, and thus by extension Fine Gael, do *not* represent (original italics). (2019: 348)

The first lines of “TPM Don’t Have Your Money” evoke Varadkar’s comment through a sly indirect reference. TPM sarcastically poke fun at the notion that welfare claimants are lazy drains on society, while also pointing out to the electorate that much more sinister corruption is carried out by Ireland’s elites:

I’m waken up around 10 o’clock
 Scratch my hole and then I flick my snots
 I take €100 out of the tax pool
 But that’s all the harm I’m going to do to you
 The other prick gets up at 6am
 Drives his beamer to Dublin
 To the KBC bank, he walks in
 Starts committing crimes with a ballpoint pen. [Lyrics reproduced as they appear on *Genius.com*]

The message is that the man who rises early to drive his luxury car to his high-flying career is an unscrupulous “prick” who abuses his power in order to benefit the higher social class to which he belongs, while more vulnerable members of society are left in the dirt: “Kicks some pensioner out of their house / The tax form, it never got filled out”. Through parodying the stereotype of the welfare recipient who sleeps in in the mornings and alluding to the unprincipled activities of the early-riser, TPM argue that collecting the dole is a far lesser crime than exploiting a privileged position. In doing so, TPM divert public scrutiny onto the capitalist class and away from the unemployed population. Given the widespread outrage that Varadkar’s remark caused in disadvantaged communities, it is perhaps unsurprising that TPM are not the only working-class MCs to have used it as subversive lyrical material. For example, Dublin rapper Nugget explains how “Leo says ‘get up early, start making it work’ / That’s the voice of talk to put the blame on the poor” (“Stand Up”). Shusterman emphasises how rap’s oppositional politics are expressed through intertextual samples of music and lyrics found in other songs, as well as through “[appropriating] non-musical content, such as media news reports and fragments of speeches” (2000: 205). Both TPM and Nugget take a public statement by a widely disliked political figure (certainly in working-class Ireland) and use it to take aim at the forces which, as TPM explain in their track, encourage “class war” by “[pitting] the poor against the poor”.

“TPM Don’t Have Your Money” is characteristically cheeky in tone and subject matter, with both MCs irreverently proclaiming to be “real welfare cheats” who “[get their] money on a Monday / And then it’s cash in the claw every other day”. As Andrew says, they “don’t get enough” to live on from their dole money; therefore, they unabashedly admit to partaking in off-the-books work, a practice evidently considered scandalous by Varadkar and his ilk. The practice of claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance (thereby declaring yourself to be “fit for and seeking work”) while simultaneously working illegally is a topic which frequently sparks outrage in the right-wing press. This particular mode of “deception” is too often applied to welfare-reliant communities as a whole, representing one of the major stereotypes surrounding welfare claimants in Ireland. In “TPM Don’t Have Your Money”, the speakers’ intrepid admission to being “real welfare cheats” reflects Rollefson’s observation that hip hop music

and culture involves “high-stakes inversional practices wherein stereotypes must be inhabited and animated before they can even be addressed as stereotypes” (2017: 228). The prideful tone as the boys address the establishment parties and their middle-class voters is abhorrent by the standards of bourgeois decorum, with the swear word reflecting stereotypical working-class speech patterns that those in higher social strata might consider to be uncouth: “Well you can cry all you want, I don’t give a Fine/Fianna fuck / It’s not my fault that in debt you’re stuck”. The manner in which TPM deliver the news that they “don’t give a fuck” about the adversities facing Ireland’s capitalist class represents an inverse form of classic hip hop braggadocio. Fernando Orejuela suitably describes this defining characteristic of rap lyrics and hip hop style:

The boast is another African American narrative form that celebrates oneself, usually by bragging about one’s prowess and riches (real or exaggerated). The boast amplifies reality, sometimes testing the boundaries of believability. The impact is one of surprise; the boaster’s exaggerations exude freshness, humor, and shock. (2015: 48)

In this instance, TPM’s are using a shocking rhyming strategy to boast about their utter indifference to the opinions held by the Irish political establishment regarding people on the dole. The fricative alliteration (“Fine/Fianna fuck”) produces an effect that is at once catchy, comedic, and controversial. Clearly, this can be attributed to the combination of a swear word (which is inherently taboo in “polite” society) with clever wordplay that instantly evokes both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, Ireland’s two main centre-right political parties. Unlike in the majority of hip hop boasts, the Hendy brothers are not boasting about their wealth or status in “TPM Don’t Have Your Money”. Rather, the boast is rooted in a certain gritty pride that comes with having nothing and carrying on anyway, or rather, having nothing but working-class solidarity, which emboldens TPM to defiantly let the upper classes know exactly what they think of them.

TPM’s use of “you” here is an example of how rap commonly uses personal pronouns as one of its “polemical strategies”, as Shusterman suggests, with the song being “structured on the opposition between ‘you’ and ‘us’” (2000: 227). In a society where many accept it as “common sense” that welfare recipients are feckless cheats, it is shocking for those on the dole to come out and say it about themselves directly. TPM’s self-deprecating humour subversively calls attention to the way that anti-welfare discourse functions to bring shame onto the welfare class, effectively repurposing this rhetoric to challenge and deconstruct the classist ideology at its core. Ultimately, “TPM Don’t Have Your Money” creates a counter-narrative that insists that it is “not the dole that has the country bust”, but rather that the blame for Ireland’s economic problems rests squarely on the shoulders of the capitalist class. This is best articulated by Charles in the last verse:

If you’ve got a problem, open your eyes
 We’re not the people that you need to despise
 Let’s think for a minute, go after the facts
 Go after Apple cause they never pay tax (*wankers, Apple are cunts*)
 And the government don’t think that this is a crime
 And they can’t afford to pay the nurses for their time
 Cheated your mummies, cheated your daddies
 The rich are cunts, the poor aren’t the baddies.

This aligns with TPM’s media statement that the government “make people look any way except up”:

It causes hate against immigrants and people on the dole, which is exactly what the government want. It's so painfully obvious that the people screwing you out of a better quality of life are not the other poor people, but the people with everything. (cited in *Hotpress* 2020)

In no uncertain terms, the final verse hammers home the idea that the real “cheaters” are the people in the top echelons of society who are “too greedy to know when to stop”, not people on the dole who supplement their meagre state allowances through doing odd jobs on the sly, jobs which would hardly be phenomenally well paid anyway. As another Irish MC (Kojaque) puts it, it is those who “give tax breaks to smarmy fuckers in the grey suits” who are at fault (“White Noise”). The lyrics of “TPM Don’t Have Your Money” succinctly echo the grievances that are routinely aired by the working-class in their conversations, and TPM’s defiant clap-back to anti-welfare discourse represents a verbal victory for Irish welfare recipients.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have demonstrated how Irish hip hop forms an important part of the Irish working-class poetics of defiance. Much like many working-class Irish poets who write in the lyric mode, working-class hip hop MCs are producing rap-poems that scathingly oppose both the way that the social welfare system operates and the demeaning ideas about the welfare class that pervade throughout Irish society. Louth’s TPM exemplify the political quality of Irish hip hop, and the two tracks that I have analysed here are poetically composed to protest the ideology of anti-welfare hegemony. Their lyrics indicate a resolute commitment to the values of community, verbally attacking the idea that welfare claimants are “worthless” through delivering defiant counter-narratives with nuance and skill. Through a considerable use of humour, swearing, arguing, and generally breaking the rules of polite society, TPM knowingly inflame those who loudly despise welfare claimants who (in their view) abuse middle Ireland’s precious “taxpayers’ money”. More importantly though, TPM’s raps stand up for marginalised young people in Ireland, fostering a space where “all the boys on the dole” can feel empowered to enjoy life, protest the system, and refuse to “give a Fine/Fianna fuck”.

Works Cited

- “At A Loss.” *Oxford Languages*, Oxford University Press, 2021, https://www.lexico.com/definition/at_a_loss. Accessed 1 Aug. 2021.
- Coleman Music Official. “Crisis – Coleman.” *YouTube*, rap by Coleman, 22 Feb. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9RxnYRr8Hs>.
- Deis, Christopher (2015). “Hip-hop and Politics.” *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 192-205.
- Devereux, Eoin and Martin J. Power (2019). “Fake news? A Critical Analysis of the ‘Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All’ Campaign in Ireland.” *Critical Discourse Studies* 16: 347-62. <https://doi-org.ucc.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/17405904.2019.1568898>.
- Freyne, Patrick (2021). “The Mary Wallopers: ‘Folk was never supposed to be safe’.” (January 5). <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/the-mary-wallopers-folk-was-never-supposed-to-be-safe-1.4525357#:~:text=The%20Mary%20Wallopers%20have%20played,how%20subversi>

[ve%20folk%20actually%20is.&text=%E2%80%9CFolk%20was%20never%20supposed%20to%20be%20safe%20music.](#)

- Kojaque (2018). “White Noise.” *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Kojaque-white-noise-lyrics>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- McDermott, Michael (2019). “Nice and Hendy: Charles and Andrew Hendy – TPM.” *Totally Dublin* (July 17). [Nice and Hendy: Charles and Andrew Hendy - TPM \(totallydublin.ie\)](#).
- Moulden, John (2018). “Sub-Literatures?: Folk Song, Memory and Ireland’s Working Poor.” *A History of Working-Class Writing*, edited by Michael Pierse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 102-21.
- “Musicians on the General Election: TPM – ‘It’s time for change, and neither Fianna Fáil nor Fine Gael will make it.’” *Hotpress*, 24 Jan. 2020, <https://www.hotpress.com/music/irish-musicians-general-election-tpm-say-time-change-neither-fianna-fail-fine-gael-will-make-22801562>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- Nugget. “Stand Up – Nugget.” *YouTube*, rap by Nugget and uploaded by Focus Ireland, 1 April. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfmFayQzuBI>.
- Ogbar, Jeffrey O.G. (2007). *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Orejuela, Fernando (2015). *Rap and Hip Hop Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rollefson, Griffith J. (2017). *Flip the Script: European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rollefson, Griffith J. (2021). “Hip Hop Interpellation: Rethinking Autochthony and Appropriation in Irish Rap.” *Made in Ireland: Studies in Popular Music*, edited by Áine Mangaoang, John O’Flynn, Lonán Ó Briain. New York: Routledge. 224-35.
- Rose, Tricia (2008). *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pate, Alexs (2010). *In the Heart of the Beat: The Poetry of Rap*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- ScaryÉire n.d. “Scary Éire – The Dole Q.” *YouTube*, rap by ScaryÉire and uploaded by YouTuber user gsmithEIDW. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiSDF1bT59A>.
- Shusterman, Richard (2000). *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- TPM. “All the Boys on the Dole.” 2015. *Bandcamp*, <https://tpmlaws.bandcamp.com/album/all-the-boys-on-the-dole>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- TPM. “TPM Don’t Have Your Money.” 2020. *Bandcamp*, <https://tpmlaws.bandcamp.com/track/tpm-dont-have-your-money>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- TPM. “TPM Don’t Have Your Money.” 2020. *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Tpm-ie-tpm-dont-have-your-money-lyrics>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- Wee Goose. “Another Day in Belfast.” 2019. *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Wee-goose-another-day-in-belfast-lyrics>. Accessed 17 July 2021.
- Williams, Justin A. (2015). “Introduction: The Interdisciplinary World of Hip-Hop Studies.” *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1-8.

Received: 1 November 2021

Final version accepted: 2 February 2022

Clodagh Heffernan is a working-class scholar and a first-generation academic from Ireland. She completed a bachelor's degree in English and History at Maynooth University in 2018, and she achieved a First-Class Honours master's degree in Irish Writing and Film from University College Cork in 2021. Clodagh recently began her PhD project at UCC under the title *Protest Writing and Dissent Culture in Contemporary Working-Class Ireland: Poetics of Defiance*, supervised by Dr Heather Laird and Dr Adam Hanna. Her PhD combines Gramscian Marxism with working-class autoethnographic reflections to illuminate the subversive aesthetic and conceptual qualities of the work of Irish writers who self-identify as working class. Clodagh's work focuses on working-class Irish poetry, hip hop, crime fiction, and unpublished community writing from the neoliberal period in Ireland (1980 – present), examining the representation of working-class interactions with state forces such as the systems of social welfare, policing, education, and public arts funding bodies. Her research interests include working-class studies, the intersections between literary form and content, Irish social policy, genre fiction, traditional and alternative poetic forms, hip hop studies, Marxism, and cultural theories.

120227397@umail.ucc.ie

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5111-1825>