Music in Times of Conflict: Resilience, Belonging and the Making of Alternative Identities

Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies (WELS)

Call for doctoral projects starting in October 2027

The Open University

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Project description

Project Type

This is a PhD project

Please note that a research proposal aligned with this research project will be required from applicants in addition to an application form.

School

Languages and Applied Linguistics

Unit

Institute of Educational Technology

Members

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Aim

The overall research project aims to explore how music and its material culture enabled young people in Northern Ireland to create resilience, alternative

identities and cultural agency during the Troubles in order to understand the role of youth cultural practices in shaping everyday life and community memory under conditions of conflict.

Its objectives are:

(O1) Illuminate the diverse experiences and cultural agency of young people during the Troubles through their engagement with music and its material culture

(O2) Explore how objects of music material culture functioned as sources of resilience, emotional refuge and alternative identity for young people

(O3) Enrich public understanding of music's cultural heritage and significance in supporting youth and community resilience in conflict-affected contexts, using Northern Ireland as a case study

(O4) Establish a sustainable community of practice that facilitates ongoing public engagement, education and cultural memory initiatives.

The proposed doctoral project instead would seek to explore the role of music and its material culture in shaping resilience, belonging and alternative identities among communities living through conflict. Moving beyond Northern Ireland as a single case study, the project will investigate how music-related practices, objects and memories provide forms of cultural agency, emotional refuge and community connection across different geographical and historical contexts of conflict.

Its objectives include:

(O1) Examine how individuals and communities use music and its material culture to negotiate identity, belonging and resilience during periods of conflict and social upheaval.

(O2) Investigate how music-related objects, collections and everyday practices become embedded with personal and collective meanings, functioning as sources of memory, refuge and cultural agency.

(O3) Compare how different conflict-affected contexts use music as a means of sustaining communities, expressing resistance and creating alternative narratives beyond dominant conflict identities.

(O4) Contribute to wider understandings of music as cultural heritage by exploring its role in preserving memory, supporting reconciliation and informing peacebuilding processes.

Methodology

My research project uses multimodal ethnographic and ethnohistorical approaches that combine the qualitative study of youth culture with social semiotic analysis and archival research (cf. Dicks et al. 2006; Ledin and Machin, 2020; O'Hagan, 2022). Specifically, multimodal ethnography examines how meaning is made across diverse semiotic resources—such as texts, images, objects and technologies—to understand how people create, communicate and experience culture in context (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Central to this approach is the recognition that semiotic choices are shaped by social, cultural and material conditions. Ethnohistory complements this by situating these practices in their historical context, using archival materials, newspapers, oral

histories and other documentary sources to trace how cultural practices and material artefacts evolve over time and respond to changing sociocultural and sociopolitical conditions (O'Hagan, 2022). In order to foreground the affective and creative agency of youth, this is combined with the theoretical lenses of De Certeau's (1984) 'tactics', defined as the subtle, everyday practices through which individuals creatively navigate, resist or adapt to dominant power structures, and Williams' (1977) 'structures of feeling', which describes the lived, affective experiences that emerge in particular historical moments before being fully articulated in dominant cultural forms. This approach aligns with existing music-in-Troubles scholarship (Curtis, 2009; Heron, 2015).

Being based in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, it is envisaged that the proposed doctoral project would also adopt a sociolinguistic perspective on music and conflict. A material culture focus is particularly encouraged, enabling the candidate to explore the relationships between musical objects, practices and meaning-making in contexts of conflict. However, there is considerable flexibility in the specific methodological approach, allowing the project to be shaped by the candidate's expertise and chosen geographical context. Approaches may include, for example, multimodal ethnography, discourse analysis, linguistic ethnography, oral history, archival research or other qualitative methods appropriate to the research questions. Interdisciplinary perspectives are particularly encouraged, drawing on fields such as history, sociology, youth studies and conflict studies.

Contribution

The overall research project seeks to challenge the binary view of youth in conflict contexts as ‘victims’ or ‘perpetrators’, reframing them as active cultural agents who used music and material culture to unsettle, resist and reimagine systems of control. It advances understanding of cultural memory, peacebuilding and the arts in divided societies, while fostering partnerships to preserve Northern Ireland’s cultural heritage and support ongoing healing processes.


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