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Kelman and Masculinity

Citation for published version:

Jones, C 2010, Kelman and Masculinity. in S Hames (ed.), *Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*. Edinburgh Companions to Scottish Literature, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 111-120.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Jones, C. (2010). Kelman and Masculinity. In S. Hames (Ed.), *Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman*. (pp. 111-120). (Edinburgh Companions to Scottish Literature). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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Shimmying on the Border: Kelman's Leaky Masculinity

'He had fucking reached it now man the fucking dregs man the pits, the fucking black fucking limboland, purgatory; that's what it was like, purgatory, where all ye can do is think.'¹

James Kelman's fiction has one enduring subject, the state of men and masculinity in the contemporary period. At the centre of his narratives are solitary male figures for whom existence is a perplexing challenge to physical, spiritual and psychic well-being. However, despite the unheroic complexities of his male characters Kelman is often grouped with other Scottish male authors, such as William McIlvanney, Irvine Welsh and Ian Rankin, who write from an overarching male point of view and whose works are often dominated by the hyper-masculinised 'hard man'. Neil McMillan asserts that along with these others Kelman produces texts which 'fail to question their own residual masculinism'.² In this they take part in what Christopher Whyte describes as a 'representational pact' in contemporary Scottish fiction in which the prevalence of the hard man signals that 'the task of embodying and transmitting Scottishness is, as it were, devolved to the unemployed, the socially underprivileged',³ due to the greater authenticity of their Scottishness in speech and social practice. Certainly Kelman's own pronouncements characterising writing as a type of guerrilla class warfare fuel the premises of such a pact and its foregrounding of an assertive and aggressive masculinity. In an article for the *Guardian* newspaper in 2007 he reiterated his argument that a writer needs to find ways 'to hijack third-person narrative from the voice of imperial authority'; writing is a 'weapon', a response to a situation he characterises as 'somebody punching the fuck out ye ... but ye went away and attended the cuts, had a shower, and came back with Daddy's axe'.⁴ Such emotive statements casting the novel as a militarised and colonised war-zone only bolster Kelman's own reputation as a hard man writer.

However, in contrast to the media image of him and his writing, Kelman's male characters are immeasurably more complex, uncertain and vulnerable than this hard man image allows. They are disempowered but react to this by retreating into themselves; these narratives are explorations of individual anxiety and self-doubt, stasis and crisis told with a spare but persistent humour and liberal employment of 'bad' language. However, where his use of working-class protagonists and the Glasgow vernacular allow antagonistic critics to dismiss his fiction as coarse 'literary vandalism',⁵ his anxious portraits of men in crisis also risk presenting them as victims. Somewhere in the midst of these contradictory apprehensions of Kelman's fictional world, the issue of male identity becomes a crucial site of conflict which succeeds in problematizing, resisting and ultimately de-essentializing masculinity.

The model of male identity Kelman most foregrounds in his fiction is, I contend, cogently summarised by Sammy Samuels in *How Late It Was, How Late* as 'purgatory, where all ye can do is think'.⁶ That particularly masculinised model of selfhood, the thinking subject, is purgatory. The implications of such a paradigm are complex. The secular appropriation of this Catholic concept suggests that identity itself is more a matter of faith than fact, not stubbornly autonomous but haunted by cultural constructions of enormous power. In the face of such uncertainty some commentators perceive a hysterical appropriation of victimhood in Kelman's delineation of disoriented masculinity, and purgatory certainly suggests a state of suffering and expiation. It evokes a scenario in which contemporary man is atoning for the sins of a previous life before achieving entry to a promised land of gender equality. Certainly if for Kelman the thinking subject is purgatory, such a conception is a significant critique of prevailing notions of masculinity for which the *cogito*, the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am', has been the privileged model. Masculinity in a

patriarchal and masculinist society establishes its hegemony, argues R. W. Connell, partly by its 'claim to embody the power of reason',⁷ an aspiration which traditionally spurns the body, and its corollaries of emotion and feeling, and seeks transcendence over and control of material reality. For Kelman, however, the male condition is not power over the world but existential suffering in it, a realisation of powerlessness, uncertainty and the radical instability of selfhood. In this chapter I maintain that such a portrayal of masculinity challenges and deeply problematizes dominant conceptions of male identity to the point of conjuring its disappearance.

Purgatory, after all, is a liminal space between death and redemption. It suggests a borderland, and Kelman's textual strategies evoke just such a marginal location. This writing signals the limits of literary form; the texts situate themselves at the borders of meaning, language and representation, being full of gaps, silences, contradictions, repetition and reversal. They foreground the inexpressible and unrepresentable, broaching communication breakdown, scaling the limits of the intelligibility of language and individual identity, strained by a barely-contained anxiety:

Aw christ he was tired. How the hell could he no just drop off! just fucking drop off. It was his back, it was sore, he couldnay lie on his front cause of the bracelets and he couldnay get comfy he just couldnay get fucking comfy, know what I'm talking about fucking comfy, comfy fucking comfy he was fucking fuckt man he was fuckt, that's what he was, fuckt, fucking bastarn good night, good fucking night, if he could sleep, if he could just sleep; but how the fuck can ye sleep if ye cannay get comfy? It's a straight question.⁸

Sammy's lament while languishing in a police cell epitomises the textual strategies which situate Kelman's fictions stuttering and disconsolately shimmying on the

border of a perplexed no-man's land. For amid these margins, in its limited focus on male characters, this writing also occupies the borders of masculinity, questioning what it is to be a man, and drawing attention to the instability and weakly secured boundaries of male identity.

Kelman's preoccupation with margins relates to his concern to write from the position of the 'other' and give voice to those not represented in dominant discourse. He consistently frames his work as a liberatory discourse, as writing 'that nobody else is going to be oppressed by',⁹ and his strategies aim to be a means of escaping the oppressive 'imperial' bias of dominant representation, 'part of a much wider process, or movement, toward decolonization and self-determination'.¹⁰ However, the other here is insistently male and therefore Kelman risks not only presenting his men as victims but accusations that he appropriates this status as a tactic of re-securing and re-establishing male authority.¹¹ For example, Ben Knights has pointed out how for some readers Kelman's male characters present themselves as victims in stories of helplessness and dependency, and such 'appeals to sympathy [are] usurping a conventionally feminine position' which 'amounts to a perverse kind of claim to centrality'.¹² McMillan also perceives Kelman's strategy as 'locating his characters in ideologically feminine spaces of interiority, passivity and pathos'.¹³ These interpretations perceive a reasserting or re-centring of male dominance and even of a phallic masculinity in Kelman's writing, his 'hard style' as McMillan terms it.

However, Kelman's texts can also be seen as presenting male weakness and disempowerment as a resistance to a conception of a hegemonic masculine identity where strength, control, autonomy, agency and stability are the privileged signifiers of naturalised male dominance.¹⁴ In Kelman's fiction we see a movement away from the hegemonic model as his work progresses over time. The status of the central male

characters traces a trajectory from a relative nearness to the discursive centre of male power towards its margins. In *The Busconductor Hines* Rab is a family man, married with a young son endeavouring to hold on to his busconductor job. As a heterosexual working man, a father, he is closer to the central ideals of hegemonic masculinity than other protagonists of the novels, even if he is about to become unemployed. In *A Disaffection*, Patrick Doyle is single and trying to hold on to his job as a teacher. In *How Late It Was, How Late* Sammy is very much an outsider, an out of work construction worker who has lost his girlfriend and his eyesight. *Translated Accounts* and *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* both situate themselves away from Scotland, the former in an unnamed war zone organised around the voices of the displaced and persecuted, and in the latter Jeremiah Brown is an ‘unassimilated alien’¹⁵ in the United States, a father but also a low grade immigrant, a wanderer and cheaply recruited airport ‘security operative’ on what he terms a ‘teenager’s wages’. Finally Kelman’s 2008 novel *Kieron Smith, Boy* follows the life of a young Glaswegian from the age of about seven to twelve years, only able to glimpse the faraway fascinating shore of masculinity through his grandfather and father and other grown-ups around him.

This sequence of novels appears as a calculated journey away from hegemonic masculinity and towards its margins, countering traditional expectations of male success with failure and crisis. Through this journey Kelman explores the production of masculinity, how male identity is socially constructed, enacted and policed, by highlighting its weaknesses, not strengths. In the stress points of crisis, breakdown and loss of control Kelman emphasises the instability and vulnerability of male identity and disrupts the discursive boundaries of masculinity imposed by the hegemonic model. The ambiguous victim status of his male characters, the

interruption of the body and the deliberately textual production of male identity in Kelman's writing are strategies which radically undermine the transcendent autonomy of the traditionally conceived masculine subject.

Failure and crisis are certainly markers of Kelman's men. *A Disaffection* opens with the lines: 'Patrick Doyle was a teacher. Gradually he had become sickened by it'.¹⁶ At the beginning of *How Late* Sammy is waking from a stupor on the street:

Ye wake in a corner and stay there hoping yer body will disappear, the thoughts smothering ye; these thoughts; but ye want to remember and face up to things, just something keeps ye from doing it, why can ye no do it; the words filling your head: then the other words; there's something wrong; there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man.¹⁷

Early in *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* Jeremiah portrays himself in these terms:

I was an ex Security operative, how Uhmerkin can ye get! Okay, failed Security operative. No really a failure, I just didnay make a career out it. But add to that failed husband and failed parent, failed father, general no fucking hoper. And now I was gaun hame, gaun hame! I was a failed fucking immigrant!¹⁸

And so it goes on, crisis and breakdown spiralling in a critique of male subjectivity itself in 'the fucking black fucking limboland, purgatory' of the thinking subject (Kelman 1998: 172).¹⁹ These men verge on hysteria, that particularly feminised loss of control of rational power over self and environment; they are unstable and lack a sense of their own autonomy and agency. Scott Hames describes Kelman's narrative subjects as 'leaky' and as such they 'exercise less control over their own boundaries'²⁰ than is traditionally expected of men. In fact, in Kelman's writing there is a constant testing of the integrity of male *bodily* boundaries.

The issue of the representation of the male body is an important point here. It is axiomatic to feminist analysis that repression of the male body has traditionally been necessary to achieving male selfhood. As Jane Gallop writes in *Thinking Through the Body*, ‘men have their masculine identity to gain by being estranged from their bodies and dominating the bodies of others’.²¹ For Margrit Shildrick, this estrangement relies on securing the boundaries of the body in contrast to the traditionally conceived situation of women:

Women, unlike the self-contained and self-containing men, leaked; or, as [Elisabeth] Grosz claims: ‘women’s corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage’. The issue throughout Western cultural history has been one of female lack of closure ... The indeterminacy of body boundaries challenges that most fundamental dichotomy between self and other, unsettling ontological certainty and threatening to undermine the basis on which the knowing self establishes control.²²

We can read Kelman’s primary textual strategies in light of such threats to autonomy and stability.

A prominent characteristic of Kelman’s writing, that he represents his men in narratives of striking if problematised interiority, is certainly suggestive of an estrangement from the body. Peter Middleton in his study of masculinity and subjectivity in modern culture terms this an ‘inward gaze’ and asks whether such literary interiority is a form of ‘masculine self-aggrandizement’.²³ Certainly, as Hames points out, ‘if [Kelman’s protagonists] are enslaved by objective circumstances, they are unchallenged masters of the interior reality to which they escape’,²⁴ a mode of representation coded to promote a ‘practice of self-mastery ... which affirms the self-presence of the ego and raises its transparency to the status of

“objective” self-control’.²⁵ He immediately dismisses this possibility, however, asserting that Kelman’s men ‘are never permitted these consolations of self-mastery’, tormented as they are ‘by the disorder of their inner worlds, and their *lack* of rational self-discipline’.²⁶ Such an argument continues to promote the idea of a masculine estrangement from the body. However, it is not simply the inner disorder that undermines men here. The constant interruption of the body in these texts is a significant strategy which questions the viability of that estrangement, counters any occasion for self-aggrandizement, and actualises the threat to autonomy, stability and ‘ontological certainty’ identified by Shildrick.

If we revisit Sammy’s ‘comfy’ lament quoted above, we can see that here he is verging on a spiralling hysteria, unable to escape this anxious moment, trapped in a hysterical repeated incantation of his predicament, incapable of controlling his actions, even when his only desire is to sleep, to lose consciousness and give up control. The body is his barrier to oblivion, frustrating his unheroic desire, but also demonstrating his inability to escape or transcend the material realm. It disturbs, disrupts and disconcerts in many ways. Bodily appetites, needs and addictions repeatedly call attention to the material status of these men, particularly smoking. Nearly all Kelman’s protagonists smoke their way through their narratives, including ten year old Kieron Smith. The exception is Jeremiah Brown who, in *Land of the Free*, has given up smoking for six months but cannot desist from thinking and talking about it, mourning his forsaken habit.

The interruption of the body is, at crucial times, graphically physical. For instance, Sammy’s ‘comfy’ lament, and indeed that section of the text, concludes with the sentence, ‘Fucking pong as well, the phantom fucking farter man he was at it again’,²⁷ in reference to the man sharing Sammy’s police cell. The appearance here of

uncontrolled bodily emissions emphasises the leakiness of the male bodies in Kelman's writing, and the transgressing of bodily boundaries that puts into question the self-asserted, self-contained coherence and integrity of the masculine subject. This signals abjection, the anxious ambivalence Julia Kristeva famously, in *Powers of Horror*, relates to polluting substances that cross the body's boundaries: blood, saliva, milk, urine, semen, faeces, tears. The abject signifies, according to Kristeva, 'the place where meaning collapses',²⁸ that is, it not only threatens the integrity of the symbolically constituted borders of the subject which separate the self from that which threatens the self, but also our fundamental ability to make sense of reality. Sammy's situation approaches such a predicament as this particular occasion of border breach occurs immediately after the demonstration of his own diminishing composure and control over his body.

Although in this moment it is someone else's leaky body that Sammy expresses his revulsion of, there are many instances of this crossing of bodily boundaries associated with Kelman's protagonists and the problematic effect it has on them. For example, crying signifies difficult physical moments where the breaching of both bodily and emotional defences imply a process of denial and resistance to the materialising of personal upset. In the moment Hines returns to his flat to find his wife has left him, 'he sat down on the armchair and started to greet. It was a strange thing. His face didn't alter and nor did his eyes redden, and he stopped it right away'.²⁹ And Sammy, emotionally roused by a song, belatedly realises 'There was tears coming out, he fucking felt them'.³⁰ The action or event of crying is brought to our attention here, not the emotional nature of the feelings being experienced; there is a certain difficulty in recognising exactly what is happening, a disconnection, an alienated gap between mind and body.

The more necessary and naturalised breaching of bodily boundaries – calls of nature – are less awkward to contemplate but can also create an acute sense of anxiety. The opening of *A Disaffection* has Patrick ‘round the back of the premises for a pish’,³¹ though why he feels the need to do this in isolation outside the ‘local arts centre’ is not explained. Jeremiah in *Land of the Free* needs to urinate for most of the novel. He spends the second half of the text at bursting point and the close of the narrative finds him in a dark, snowy suburban landscape still not having relieved himself. We leave him in that state of urinary distress which was signalled over 200 pages before when, sitting by himself in a bar, he resists having to get up and go to the toilet in case he loses his seat: ‘Aw dear, nay option, safeguard the bladder. Naw! Fuck the “aw dear, nay option, safeguard the bladder” shite, I wasnay gauny be dictated to by any body, no even my ayn. I would exercise mind ower matter’.³² This is an example of a stubborn resistance to the interruption of the body and the breaching of its boundaries and it prompts the question of whether Kelman’s men refuse to acknowledge the abject ‘polluting object’, or whether they cling to it and therefore indulge in their abjection.

Kristeva in her psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity relates fluids and products that cross the body’s boundaries to the pre-oedipal realm of the abject in which the masculine subject confronts his fear of an archaic maternal authority. In *Powers of Horror* she links abjection with ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules’,³³ and further, she associates the abject with ‘what is jettisoned from the “symbolic system” ... what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based’.³⁴ In light of this, can we interpret Kelman’s willingness if not to embrace the abject but certainly associate it with his male characters as contributing towards his articulation of resistance to dominant

conceptualisations of identity, particularly hegemonic masculinity, and as demonstrating a desire to disturb identity, system and order? Though his men are often tormented by abjection, they are also attracted by its promise of oblivion, as with Hines at another moment of crisis:

He bit a large mouthful of the bread, and cheese, as though by blocking his mouth and respiratory system his digestive system would be forced into taking action; he sipped the tea to aid its progress. O christ he felt like chucking it. A good greet could solve everything. She [his mother] would settle his head against her breasts, pat his back rhythmically, crooning an auld scotch sang till he toppled off the edge to go crashing on the jaggy boulders below. A mother's love is that which is required. Thrust me back in out the road for fuck sake mammy I need to hide away, away.³⁵

This suggestion of welcome for engulfment by the mother is the opposite of the exact fear which is signalled by the anxiety of abjection, the loss of individual being. The attraction of non-being, referred to elsewhere in Kelman's writing more assertively in relation to suicide, here articulates a desire to forsake independent action and autonomy, the privileged cornerstones of male identity.

This desire for disappearance expressed in relation to the feminine signals some difficult issues relating to Kelman's representation of women, for which he has been criticised by some commentators. We never have privileged access to a female consciousness and it is a fact that when women do appear, from the point of view of the men they are strong, dominant, in control and sometimes in positions of power. In his novels they are often seen as more conservative, in a tradition of working-class fiction where women bring a reactionary influence to bear on their men. McMillan

traces a trajectory through Kelman's work springing from Scottish novels of the 1930s such as George Blake's *The Shipbuilders*:

In the specific ideological ensemble which makes up Kelman's work, the 'other' space which women occupy is also consistently identified as bourgeois. Alison and Sandra, like most of the women in the earlier Glasgow novels, are middle class, or at least upwardly mobile ... Kelman persistently identifies womanliness with negative bourgeois aspirations.³⁶

Certainly women like Hines's wife Sandra demonstrate such aspirations, expressed in the desire to move to a better area, acquire a better job, and live a more comfortable, affluent life.

Women's desire for greater propriety in their families and partners also focuses on more abstract realms in efforts to seal the boundaries of psychic as well as physical subjective existence; Kelman's texts are threaded with female attempts to stop the incontinence of men, whether of a linguistic, philosophical or biological nature. For example, towards the end of *A Disaffection* Patrick's tipsy need to engage his sister-in-law Nicola in conversation is thwarted by her resistance to his slightly gushing sentimentality. In reply to his lyrically damp-eyed view of his four year old niece that she has 'a real sense of peace' compared to her brother, Nicola insists that 'Women have to listen more than men, that's why they've got a sense of peace as you call it.' She goes on, 'I'm not criticising you Pat but I think you've got a glamourised view of women which is wrong, it really is wrong.'³⁷ And with regard to Patrick's conjuring up of the beautiful view from the top of the Red Road flats, she counters:

The Red Road flats is an awful place to live. When I was at school in Balornock I had a friend and she had a cousin living there and her mother killed herself.

Pat was about to say something but he stopped.³⁸

Sentimentalism is not the only concern; language generally is a preoccupation of these women as they disapprove of men swearing, and, as with Kieron Smith's mother, encourage their children to speak 'properly'. They are markedly more silent than the men whose linguistic incontinence often causes them trouble. For instance, in *How Late* Sammy describes his partner Helen as 'good at silence',³⁹ a characteristic also typical of Yasmin in *Land of the Free*: 'What did Yasmin say? Fuck All. She listened' (Kelman 2004: 73).⁴⁰ There is a sense here of stronger, stiffer, more stable personal boundaries in women, of greater autonomy and self-control. Kövesi goes so far as to ask whether Kelman himself displays 'a glamourised view of women'.⁴¹ In this context glamourised, if referring to what these texts position as attractive and admirable in women, focuses on those qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. Can we go further than Kövesi, then, and ask whether Kelman's cautious and slightly awed reverence towards some women in his texts amounts to a strategy of re-routing hegemonic masculinity through women?

Women are not strangers to power in Kelman's fiction; 'Ye meet them everywhere too in these official capacities'⁴² says Sammy in reference to the woman who interviews him at the benefit office. She emanates a 'sensation of total and absolute fucking cleanliness man ... class or something'.⁴³ Though he is blind he can imagine her: 'Sammy knew this kind of woman. Totally beautiful in a weird way, didnay matter what like she was, her build, nothing. Dead sexual as well. Sometimes they wear these smart-cut suits, their blouses are low-cut and they're beautiful and ye're at a total disadvantage'.⁴⁴ Sammy's sexualizing of the woman's domination may be an attempt to diminish her status as an agent of the state in relating her power to the manipulation of a traditional mystical and threatening femininity. But his

translating of the class war into a battle of the sexes fails to achieve any self-vindicating conceptual power for him and he is left 'fuckt', his disempowerment confirmed. Her ruthless interrogation, knowledge and control of the situation along with her invisible, ubiquitous presence – 'he hadnay heard her approach'⁴⁵ – signals her legitimised appropriation of masculinised authority.

Women in Kelman's fiction often serve to highlight the alienated distance of his men from the dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity, their dwindling status and visibility in a world of masculinised power. Many of his protagonists, like Hines, express a desire to disappear which signals a resistance both to embodiment and assertive male identity. So of his newly experienced blindness, Sammy conjectures with guarded optimism, 'if this was permanent he wouldnay be able to see himself ever again. Christ that was wild. And he wouldnay see cunts looking at him. Wild right enough'.⁴⁶ And ending with the words 'that was him, out of sight',⁴⁷ *How Late* enacts this disappearance. Rather than a restatement of the traditional repression of the male body in representation, I contend that this resistance to visibility exists in tension with the foregrounded anxious embodiment of Kelman's men to signal a desire for new masculinities and a rejection of traditional models of male identity and their essentialist tendencies. It suggests a resistance to representation in these texts which is captured in a deliberate move away from material reality in the conclusions particularly of Kelman's later novels which succeeds in promoting a more discursive approach to male subjectivity, and a conception of identity as textual and fundamentally fictional.

Apart from Sammy going 'out of sight', the note of unreality can be seen at the end of *A Disaffection* where everything becomes uncertain and menacing, and Patrick, running away from police who may or may not be chasing him and shouting at him,

considers the temptation of suicide with reference to a biblical precedent: ‘What is that story in the bible about a guy who commits suicide. Who is that guy who commits suicide, as a thing to be committed.’⁴⁸ Jeremiah’s last words refer to Billy the Kid, the beloved mythologized folk hero outlaw. Male desire and aspiration appear to need a translation through narrative, a reference outside of the self, in order to be realised. At the end of *Kieron Smith, Boy*, Kieron, who has a passion for dangerous climbing, fantasises about being saved from falling by his deceased grandfather’s spirit:

Maybe a bad spirit would make me do it ... if it was a ronepipe and ye were getting to the very top and the spirit just blew the wind and knocked ye off. So yer granda would be there, his spirit would come to yer rescue, maybe a breath of wind or a hard blowing wind, to stop ye hitting the ground heid first, ye would land one foot at a time, nice and soft, or else in a big pile of sacks and just get up and walk away, Oh that was lucky, and it would be, except if it was him, yer granda.⁴⁹

These final words of the novel conjure a complex fantasy. Kieron mourns his dead grandfather, desires his transcendence of death, and in effect expresses a yearning, a nostalgia for that traditional masculine triumph of mind or spirit over body which is the enduring legacy of the ideal masculinity his grandfather embodies in this novel. This fantasy of disembodiment characterises the impossible desires of Kelman’s protagonists, signalling the impossibility of masculinity itself. It can be read as a recognition of the unreal nature of all those heroic and hegemonic ideals, their ghostly presence which continues to haunt our cultural reality. Identity here is a fiction, achieved through the medium of fictions, which signal the limits of our world. If Kelman’s leaky narratives allow his men to slip from our grasp through the gaps –

silences, contradictions and inarticulacies – of his texts, they open up possibilities for such fantasies of identity rather than closing them down in prescriptive ideals.

Kelman's fictions admit the pain and strangeness of embodiment for men and articulate a yearning for a derealization, a dematerialization of the male subject. Like these texts, his men are suspended between material reality and transcendence, in an 'other' space which is for some a feminised realm. However, the fragile stability of his embodied subjects prevents them from fully occupying any single position. Ultimately, we have to say that Kelman's texts are on the border of masculinity, sometimes looking out from the inside of that border, sometimes on the outside looking in. His shimmying, oscillating representations produce yet resist abjection, produce yet resist identity, produce yet resist the material existence of the male body. Perhaps Jeremiah and his urinary crisis is an exemplar of Kelman man here; he is left in a state of tension in the context of the imminent failure of his body's boundaries. He fails to find an appropriate receptacle, in Calvin Thomas's terms,⁵⁰ for this bodily product, a situation in which he threatens to upset the proprieties of acceptable behaviour. Just as Kelman's men generally upset and exceed and challenge the norms, the model, the 'receptacle' of hegemonic masculinity, especially through their embodiment. This is not a comfortable state; as Sammy says, it is purgatory. Yet Kelman's breaching of the borders of fiction and the boundaries of masculinity dramatises a protest against our biological, linguistic and philosophical certainties, and promotes, if not a viable alternative vision, a process of questioning which aims I think to save us from the brittle edges of hegemonic masculinity. Kelman's writing of male anxiety marks him as an author certainly resistant to preserving the boundaries of gendered identity and ego coherence, someone on the side of Judith Butler when she writes that her intention is 'not to solve ... the crisis of identity politics, but to

proliferate and intensify this crisis ... to affirm identity categories as a site of inevitable rifting'.⁵¹ Kelman is doing nothing if not rifting identity and indeed rifting on the unstable boundaries of masculinity.

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Notes

1. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 172.
2. McMillan, 'Wilting, or the "Poor Wee Boy Syndrome"', p. 41.
3. Whyte, 'Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', p. 275.
4. Kelman, 'Make Yer Point', p. 5.
5. Jenkins, 'An Expletive of a Winner', p. 4.

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6. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 172.
 7. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 164.
 8. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 175.
 9. McNeil, 'Interview', p. 4.
 10. Kelman, 'Elitist Slurs', p. 2.
 11. Sally Robinson's makes this argument in her analysis of representations of men in North American texts since the 1960s. She perceives a noticeable trend in the number of portrayals of white men as visibly wounded victims and argues that these representations take part in a process of recentralising white men through victimhood, "perform[ing] the cultural work of *recentering* white masculinity by *decentering* it" (*Marked Men*, p. 12).
 12. Knights, *Writing Masculinities*, p. 192.
 13. McMillan, 'Wilting, or the "Poor Wee Boy Syndrome"', p. 41.
 14. Hegemonic masculinity is defined by Connell in his influential study *Masculinities* as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (*Masculinities*, p. 77). Such a configuration defines the normative in any particular period, and can encompass, for example, the privileging of heterosexuality, fatherhood, success in work and play, and, in Western terms, whiteness, the middle class and the middle-aged.
 15. Kelman, *Land of the Free*, p. 37.
 16. Kelman, *Disaffection*, p. 1.
 17. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 1.
 18. Kelman, *Land of the Free*, p. 20.
 19. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 172.
 20. Hames, 'Dogged Masculinities', p. 85.
 21. Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, p. 7.
 22. Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies* pp. 34–5.
 23. Middleton, *The Inward Gaze*, p. 9.
 24. Hames, 'Dogged Masculinities', p. 68.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
 26. *Ibid.*

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27. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 175.
 28. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.
 29. Kelman, *Disaffection*, p. 163.
 30. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 262.
 31. Kelman, *Disaffection*, p. 1.
 32. Kelman, *Land of the Free*, p. 211.
 33. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
 35. Kelman, ***Busconductor Hines*, p. 131.**
 36. McMillan, 'Wilting, or the "Poor Wee Boy Syndrome"', pp. 48, 49.
 37. Kelman, *Disaffection*, pp. 314–5.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
 39. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 139.
 40. Kelman, *Land of the Free*, p. 73.
 41. Kövesi, *James Kelman*, p. 97.
 42. Kelman, *How Late*, p. 111.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
 45. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 46. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 47. *Ibid.*, p. 374.
 48. Kelman, *Disaffection*, p. 337.
 49. Kelman, *Kieron Smith*, p. 422.
 50. Thomas, *Male Matters*, p. 30.
 51. Butler, 'Force of Fantasy', p. 124.