



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

“Acting the part of an illiterate savage”: James Kelman and the question of postcolonial masculinity

Citation for published version:

Jones, C 2009, "Acting the part of an illiterate savage": James Kelman and the question of postcolonial masculinity', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 275-284.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449850903064724>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/17449850903064724](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449850903064724)

Link:

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

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Postcolonial Writing

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**“acting the part of an illiterate savage”–James Kelman and the Question of
Postcolonial Masculinity**

CAROLE JONES

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

cjones6@staffmail.ed.ac.uk

Abstract: The ubiquitous hard man of twentieth-century Scottish culture is often constructed as a product of English colonialism, a reaction to the feminisation and inferiorisation of Scottish culture. This article investigates the appropriateness and implications of this approach to Scottishness in the context of James Kelman’s framing of his writing through a postcolonial vision of cultural resistance and his Booker Prize winning novel *How Late It Was, How Late*.

“[T]o put this more starkly, to the extent that English literature was, as [Robert] Crawford persuasively suggests, a Scottish invention, then so was British colonialism.” (Michael Gardiner, “A Light to the World”)

The construction of Scotland as an English colony continues to be a common Scottish preoccupation, if at times humorously on the street, then more seriously in nationalist political discourse and the academy. In the late twentieth-century period postcolonial ideas punctuated these debates. For example, Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, in their book *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (1989) refer to Franz Fanon’s concept of the colonial inferiorisation of native culture in relation to the Scottish context. More recently, Ellen-Raisa Jackson and Willy Maley in their article “Celtic Connections: Colonialism and Culture in Irish-Scottish Modernism” argue that these two cultures are “intimately estranged by precisely what ties them together--colonialism” (77). This paper explores some appropriations of colonial and postcolonial discourses with regard to the Scottish writing scene and the appropriateness of their mobilisation in this context. Here I focus on the specific case of the awarding of the Booker Prize for fiction to James Kelman for

his novel *How Late It Was, How Late* in 1994, and in light of the controversy which surrounded this event, I question whether this text justifies Kelman's own employing of an emancipatory postcolonial language to define his own writing at this time.

Kelman's male-centred fictions often attract criticism for what is perceived as his masculinist mode of representation. Indeed, in the media the stereotypical "hard man" characteristics of Kelman's men, such as their swear-word laden discourse and Glasgow accents, tend to be dwelled upon. This places his writing in the eye of the storm of the discussion of Scotland's colonial status. The construction of Scotland as an English colony is often accompanied by an anti-colonial "MacChismo" (see Noble for early use of this term), a projection of Scottish national identity as an exaggeratedly assertive manliness. This is often presented as a reaction to the feminized inferiorism of the Scottish position as subject to English dominance within the Union, most memorably characterized by Renton in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993):

Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It's nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don't hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots. (78)

As well as signalling the presence of more echoes of Fanon and his book *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), this tirade brings together the discourses of colonisation and gender in a relationship feminizing the Scottish oppressed as the most effete, the most passive and the most abject. As a refutation of this position a proliferation of hard men stalk the pages of Scottish writing, characters such as *Trainspotting*'s infamous Frank "Franco" Begbie and the tough policemen of William McIlvanney's *Laidlaw* and Ian Rankin's *Rebus* novels. However, a compensatory MacChismo is not just a recent phenomenon. Such representations were abroad in the 1930s when urban, particularly Glasgow, novels enjoyed an initial period of popularity, with sensational titles such as Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long's *No Mean City* (1935) about the "razor gangs" of the Gorbals. And for Carol Anderson and Glenda Norquay writers such as the poet Hugh MacDiarmid exemplify a similar MacChismo in their cultivation of an aggressive intellectual image during the heyday of Scottish nationalism and the Scottish literary renaissance of the 1920s: "[They] saw two directions in which they could go. The eighteenth-century polymath offered one attractive role model, the urban hardman the other, although they are not mutually exclusive" (8).

The connection of a colonially-produced inferiorism with a highly masculinised national image and identity drives what Christopher Whyte calls a "representational pact" in Scottish writing where working-class men, hard men even, come to represent the nation in literary texts:

One may posit a demand on the part of the Scottish middle class for fictional representations from which it is itself excluded; a demand, in other words, for textual

invisibility. This would connect with the widespread perception of the Scottish middle classes as “denationalised”, as less Scottish in terms of speech and social practice than the lower classes. The task of embodying and transmitting Scottishness is, as it were, devolved to the unemployed, the socially underprivileged, in both actual and representational contexts. (275)

Lower-class men, then, are privileged in literary representations for their stronger, more masculine Scottishness, signalled by their more authentically Scottish, or more convincingly anti-English language. Does Whyte’s representational pact mean we can understand this hard man masculinity as a kind of anti-colonial machismo, as a resistance to colonial status? Can such an aggressively masculine stance ever be helpful as an occasion of a putatively postcolonial self-assertion which would enable an imagining of alternatives to essentialised notions of Scottish identity produced in relations of dominance and submission?

In the Scottish cultural context we can certainly delineate postcolonial qualities, particularly concerning the linguistic diversity of the nation--English, Scots, and Gaelic--and the focus on identity, issues of nationalism, self-determination and inferiorism.

However, there is another level of complexity to this question in that Scotland itself is not a unified entity, and as Berthold Schoene-Harwood points out, “in the writings of many authors from the Scottish Highlands and Islands, mainland (or rather Lowland) Scotland has repeatedly been likened to an imperial power, with anglicised chiefs and lairds, often resident in Edinburgh or London, as the main perpetrators of economic and cultural erosion” (58).

In this context, it is interesting to note that Kelman more often than not describes himself as being from Glasgow--“James Kelman will live and probably die in Glasgow” is the biographical note in several of his books--and positively resists associating himself with a cultural nationalism. If anything, he expresses a class sensibility, aligning himself with the working class, if not explicitly with any organised working-class politics. But within the paradigm of Whyte’s representational pact, Kelman’s exclusively male and lower-class protagonists are often taken up as examples of the masculinised nature of Scottish national identity.

The opening paragraph of *How Late it Was, How Late* illustrates several Kelman characteristics as to why this should be so:

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 yer 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. Edging back into awareness, of where ye are: here, slumped in this corner, with these thoughts filling ye. And oh christ his back was sore; stiff, and the head pounding. He shivered and hunched up his shoulders, shut his eyes, rubbed into the corners with his fingertips; seeing all kinds of spots and lights. Where in the name of fuck... (1)

This extract illustrates the principal features of Kelman’s writing: his representation of the vernacular, the Glasgow accent, and the swearing (the epitome of MacChismo); his

style, regularly labelled as “stream-of-consciousness” (interpreted as MacChismo incoherence); the slippery status of the text’s narrator, which throughout his fiction often runs between first, second and third person pronouns (again often interpreted as part of a general inarticulacy); and the ubiquitous presence in his narratives of a central lower-class, male protagonist.

How Late won the Booker Prize in 1994 amid a flurry of outrage, for the most part targeted at Kelman’s language, particularly his “bad” language. Over ten years later Susheila Nasta refers to this event in an Open University text book in the following manner:

Written in an incomprehensible Glaswegian street dialect and containing at least 4000 instances of the “f” word, *How Late it Was, How Late* was condemned by Julia Neuberger, one of the judging panel, as a travesty of the prize and a “disgrace” to the state of the novel in Britain and the English language. (333)

The exaggerated focus on comprehensibility and the exact number of swear words contained in the novel dominated much of the outraged but often frivolous coverage of the award in the media, reiterated here by Nasta with an uncritical seriousness. Journalist Simon Jenkins’s reaction was a highlight of this discourse, in a satiric, vitriolic attack on Kelman and his writing in *The Times* which, among its extended condemnation, made the following colourful assertion:

I can only assume that the judges were aspiring to some apogee of political correctness. They greeted Mr Kelman as an inversion of the norms, a Jilly Cooper of the gutter, a Barbara Cartland of the Gorbals. They wanted to give awfulness a break. Here was a white European male, acceptable only because he was acting the part of an illiterate savage. (20)

Here we can clearly observe the process of “inferiorising” in action, even if the purpose is satirical. The invoking of these female romance writers as the epitome of awfulness seeks to instate a comparison with which to feminise and therefore trivialise Kelman, a common characteristic of colonial discourse itself. In contrast, elsewhere in the piece it is Kelman’s supposed machismo that so offends Jenkins; in fact he covers all available grounds--popular culture, masculinism, sexism, classism, and moral outrage--for the dismissal of the work.

In light of Kelman’s class affiliations, Jenkins’s evoking of the writer as “acting like an illiterate savage” connects with a particular discourse, imperial and Victorian in nature, which related class and race where the working class were often imagined in all their otherness as another race. In *Imperial Leather* Anne McClintock describes this racializing of class difference as a symptom of “a major contradiction in the Victorian economy: the transition from an industrialism based on imperial slavery to industrial imperialism based on waged labor” (113). For example, “in newspapers, government reports, personal accounts and journals, the pit miners were everywhere represented as a ‘race’ apart” (115), and “journalists, social workers and novelists figured the East End slums in the language of empire and degeneration” (120). However, to put Jenkins’s

outburst properly into context, his comments are a reaction to Kelman's own acceptance speech when he himself engaged the discourses of colonial oppression and postcolonial liberation in response to the media consternation that surrounded his nomination in the run up to the ceremony. Kelman asserted that:

There is a literary tradition to which I hope my own work belongs, I see it as part of a much wider process, or movement, toward decolonization and self-determination: it is a tradition that assumes two things: the validity of indigenous culture; and the right to defend in the face of attack. It is a tradition premised on a rejection of the cultural values of imperial or colonial authority, offering a defence against cultural assimilation, in particular imposed assimilation.

Unfortunately, when people assert their right to cultural or linguistic freedom they are accused of being ungracious, parochial, insular, xenophobic, racist, etc.

As I see it, it's an argument based solely on behalf of validity, that my culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that right, they may have the power to dismiss that right, but the authority lies in the power and I demand the right to resist it. ("Elitist Slurs" 2)

Kelman's characterization of his writing as a weapon of anti-colonial cultural resistance instates the discourse which Jenkins enthusiastically takes up in his defence of cultural standards and values. Matching Kelman's politicised indignation, Jenkins's Arnoldian grasp on colonial discourse suits his performance of aggressive outrage which ranges

from characterising the awarding of the prize to *How Late* as “literary vandalism” to explicitly questioning Kelman’s human status in the evoking of his “savagery”.

Significantly, though, Jenkins is accusing Kelman not of *being* an illiterate savage, but of *acting like* one, as if he is making a bad choice, or striking a pose in his refusal of Standard English and standard representation. Indeed the accusation suggests that Kelman is appropriating a status of “other” to which he is not entitled. Jenkins’s production of this savage other creates a binarised framework which places civilised over savage, masculine over feminine, literate over illiterate, white European over black other within an encompassing assertion of being over acting. Such an analysis seeks to persuade us of the stability, the beingness, of these privileged categories, a state which Kelman is undermining with the aid of the Booker judges. And Jenkins’s conception is one in which there are no victims, no oppressed, only savages. Kelman is, then, letting his side down, abandoning the responsibilities of whiteness as well as its privileges. For Jenkins refuses here to consider the diversity of the white community, of white experience; those like Kelman who insist on their marginalization from hegemonic identities are only acting a part, or *acting out* to use an infantilising notion which surfaces earlier in the article. (Comparing Kelman’s novel to a Glaswegian drunk he supposedly met once on a train, he opines, “My reeking companion demanded attention like a two-year-old” (20).)

The references to whiteness are of particular interest here: Jenkins refers to Kelman as “a white European male”; Kelman begins his speech by identifying himself as a “white parent from an ordinary Glasgow environment” (2). The universal rubs against the local in these appropriations as Kelman insistently imposes diversity on the category

producing whiteness as a site of the oppressed as well as the oppressor. However, the question does remain of how this move inflects upon his deploying of colonial and postcolonial discourses to define his position and his writing. Is he appropriating a discourse of oppression to which he has no claim, as Jenkins argues? Is this an acting out, a cynical and decadent move on Kelman's part? This was an accusation made against Irvine Welsh regarding his novel *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1996). There the narrator's paralleling of the position of Scotland's urban poor with the plight of black South Africans under apartheid has incensed critics who see Welsh's text as an appropriation and a colonisation of the oppression and suffering of others, specifically black others, for the purpose of inflating self-worth and "subaltern credentials", as Aaron Kelly describes it (116. See also Jackson and Maley 2000; Jones 2006).

This argument reiterates a critique of one particular trend found in Western representation since the 1960s. This thesis argues that a noticeable number of portrayals of white men and masculinity have taken part in a process of recentralising white men through victimhood. For instance, in her book *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (2000) Sally Robinson has commented on the significant amount of representations of wounded white men that she finds in North American culture since the 1960s. She argues that in this "post-liberationist era" there is a perception that white men have become increasingly *decentered* as the political successes of identity politics, civil rights movements, liberation movements, and also, importantly, economic shifts have increased the representation--in both senses of the word--and access to power of marginal groups. In this context there has arisen a struggle over the power to define the normative in a culture, according to Robinson, "so taken with the dynamics of victimization" (12), that

is, the victimization of the oppressed, the victims of the dominant white male establishment. White masculinity, traditionally the invisible universal, has become in this paradigm specifically and negatively marked as oppressive. However, Robinson argues that:

In order for white masculinity to negotiate its position within the field of identity politics, white men must claim a symbolic disenfranchisement, must compete with various others for cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded. (12)

Through readings of various cultural texts from the period Robinson argues that when dominant masculinity becomes visible, it does so as wounded, as victimized, as “in crisis”. These men, then, according to Robinson, are installed as victims of patriarchy and late capitalism, and their wounds are a physical materialization of that status. The foregrounding of such a process she says “performs the cultural work of *recentering* white masculinity by *decentering* it”.

Though Robinson refers to the work of authors such as John Updike in his “Rabbit” novels, and texts such as Stephen King’s *Misery* (1987), such representations are not entirely new. In a previous age when the rise of feminism and the decline of imperialism led to male insecurity, H.G. Wells provides an exemplary image of the painful unveiling of an oppressive whiteness at the end of his novel *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance* (1897):

And so, slowly, beginning at his hands and feet and creeping along his limbs to the vital centres of his body, that strange change continued. It was like the slow spreading of a poison. First came little white nerves, a hazy grey sketch of a limb, then the glassy bones and intricate arteries, then the flesh and skin, first a faint fogginess, and then growing rapidly dense and opaque. Presently they could see his crushed chest and his shoulders, and the dim outline of his drawn and battered features.

When at last the crowd made way for Kemp to stand erect, there lay, naked and pitiful on the ground, the bruised and broken body of a young man about thirty. His hair and beard were white,--not grey with age, but white with the whiteness of albinisms, and his eyes were like garnets. His hands were clenched, his eyes wide open, and his expression was one of anger and dismay.

“Cover his face!” said a man. “For Gawd’s sake, cover that face!” (156)

The exposed figure of the white man here elicits a mixture of horror and pity, and has resonances of the victim of Robinson’s thesis.

My principal question here is whether Kelman’s novel is part of this process of recentering white men through a spectacle of victimhood. His deliberate invoking of postcolonial rhetoric leaves him open to accusations of the kind made by Jenkins, that he is cynically appropriating a discourse of oppression that is not his own, and gaining authority at the expense of the genuinely oppressed. In investigating how Kelman’s novel engages with this argument, I will focus on the issue of visibility in *How Late*, and the implications for Kelman’s conception of identity.

Certainly Kelman's men have been characterised as victims, even as feminised by this victimhood, and this has been interpreted as an effective way of them drawing attention to themselves. Ben Knights, in parallel with Robinson's thesis, has pointed this out: "It is as though in telling his story of helplessness and dependency [Hines of *Busconductor Hines*] has usurped a conventionally feminine position ... an appeal to sympathy, and even a perverse kind of claim to centrality" (192). Neil McMillan also perceives Kelman's strategy as "locating his characters in ideologically feminine spaces of interiority, passivity and pathos", accusing his texts of "failing to question their own residual masculinism" (41). Allegations endure of the recentering or the reasserting of male dominance and even a phallic masculinity in Kelman's writing, his "hard style" as McMillan calls it.

Robinson's thesis rests on the importance of visibility, for identity politics generally and for her male victims. Certainly male victimhood and wounding is a significant facet of *How Late*, where protagonist Sammy Samuels is blinded after a brutal beating by the police, foregrounding issues of vision and the visible. However, I contend that *How Late* is a text that resists visibility. This resistance is present in the opening sentence of the first paragraph of the novel when Sammy is wishing "yer body will disappear". He expresses such a desire more than once: "Sammy wanted to vanish. Jesus christ he wanted to vanish, he really did" (255). From the outset the text remarks upon the tyranny of the relations of vision, the burden of being visible--"these eyes looking" (2). The novel opens as Sammy comes to on the street after a "lost" seemingly drunken weekend:

How come they were all looking at him? This yin with his big beery face and these cunning wee eyes, then his auld belted raincoat, shabby as fuck; he was watching; no watching but fucking staring, staring right into Sammy christ maybe it was him stole the leathers. Fuck ye! Sammy gave him a look back then checked his pockets; he needed dough, a smoke, anything, anything at all man he needed some fucking thing instead of this, this staggering about, like some fucking down-and-out winey bastard. (3)

Giving each other looks, Sammy and the other man are fixing each other, ostensibly as “down-and-out winey bastards”. A little further on Sammy describes in detail this process of fixing:

What did it matter but what did it matter; cunts looking at ye. Who gives a fuck. Just sometimes they bore in, some of them do anyway; they seem able to give ye a look that's more than a look: it's like when ye're a wean at school and there's this auld woman teacher who takes it serious even when you and the wee mockers are having a laugh and cracking jokes behind her back and suddenly she looks straight at ye and ye can tell she knows the score, she knows it's happening. Exactly. And it's only you. The rest don't notice. You see her and she sees you. Naybody else. Probably it's their turn next week. The now it's you she's copped. You. The jokes dont sound funny any longer. The auld bastard, she's fucked ye man. With one look. That's how easy you are. And ye see the truth then about yerself. Ye see how ye're fixed forever. Stupid wee fucking arsehole.

(12)

Here Kelman demonstrates the power of the subject, the holder of the gaze, to “fix” the other as object, effectively dramatizing a process of selfhood and the shame which, according to Sartre, accompanies becoming an object for another consciousness. Significantly for the topic of this essay, Kelman’s scene is a reverberation of Frantz Fanon’s assertion in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that such a visual relation is fundamental to a process of racial othering. For Fanon it is the “racial epidermal schema” (112), the visibility and “fact of blackness” which enables this process: “I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*” (116). In resisting his own fixing, Sammy realises that blindness may be a release from the burden of visibility, and the oppressive relations it produces. Through a “whole crash of thoughts” he thinks there was “one weird wee image to finish it all off: 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” (12). This signals a new relationship with the self because, in fact, “he felt good, really, it was fucking good, this kind of control over yer body when it was sore, how ye survive, how ye survive” (11).

Considering the sense of liberation Sammy feels on escaping the realm of vision, it is interesting to note that his blindness can be read as the consequence of his own actions. On page five of the novel Sammy hits a policeman, the result of which is a severe beating by the furious police, his arrest and eventually his waking up blind in the cells. In the circumstances, how can we think of Sammy’s punch, the action which precedes, even precipitates his blindness? The text is deliberately ambivalent here as Sammy’s violence is framed as unprovoked in the immediate moment. The scenario begins when he encounters a group of undercover, that is, supposedly invisible,

policemen; “Sammy knew them, ye can aye tell, their eyes” (3). He begins begging for change, but as he says, “these sodjers man if ye’re no a fucking millionaire or else talk with the right voice, they dont give a fuck” (4). He eventually makes his presence felt, finally elicits their annoyance and lets loose the blow, “a beautiful left cross” (5). Can we think of Sammy’s punch, then, as a protest against the fixing that visibility brings, the surveillance that polices that fixing, and, further, as demonstrating the extent of the punishment of such protest?

Geoff Gilbert contends that Sammy’s punch is like “the actions of a ‘low type’ that make ‘nothing’ happen, but which produce an unstable but predictable intensification of affect around the unveiling of power” (226); it demonstrates “the absolute negligibility of certain agents in the face of the reproduction of social structures” (225). However, the circumstances of the assault conspire to make Sammy an ambivalent victim; one could even argue that he makes a decision to get himself beaten up (“But he decided. Right there and then. It was here he made the decision” (3)). Consequently, he is difficult to recuperate as a victim.

Similarly, uncertainty surrounds Sammy’s “wounding”. He becomes blind, but it is somewhat questionable whether this really is the result of the beating. From the opening of the novel his eyesight is troubling him; when he comes round he is “seeing all kinds of spots and lights” (1) and he has to shield his eyes from the “terrible brightness” (2). Moreover, the invisibility of this impairment is insisted upon throughout the novel as he is questioned again and again as to whether he really is blind. How can it be satisfactorily proved to the observer that he is not simply pretending? “Anyone find an eyesight! There’s a guy here looking for an eyesight!” mock the police (13). And the

doctor refers to the “alleged dysfunction” (225). This wounding does not present the reader with a spectacle. Moreover, since the novel is focalised through Sammy, his blindness blinds the reader--there are no physical descriptions of Sammy or anyone else, and this is particularly significant in relation to the other effects of the assault; we never really get to *see* his bruises, though we learn by the end of the novel that they are considerable enough to warrant photographing several days after the assault. This is in direct contrast to the wallowing in male wounding that Robinson finds in texts like Stephen King’s *Misery*, for instance. This lack of visual data compromises the impact of Sammy’s victim status.

How Late is a text, then, that is ambivalent in its presentation of male victimhood, and one in which the central character ultimately resists visibility. Such a resistance resonates with the call by performance critic Peggy Phelan for a radical negativity in representation, an engagement with absence, which may involve what she describes as “an *active* vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility” (19). Sammy could be said to enact such a vanishing as he leaves the scene of *How Late* with the final words of the novel: “that was him, out of sight”. In refusing to take the payoff of visibility here, I contend that Kelman is resisting the repositioning of the white male back at the privileged centre of culture. In this text he is, in effect, resisting any stabilising of identity, which includes its reification in the various discourses of identity politics. Inherent in this textual strategy is a radical anti-essentialism enacted in an attempt to rethink and represent identity outside of the oppressive relations of dominance and submission so cogently illustrated by a context of colonisation. Kelman’s postcolonial framing of his approach to writing is a way of highlighting and rejecting the

binary relation that Jenkins so easily invokes in his polemical article, that of the white European man versus the illiterate savage. But, further, Kelman's choice to resist the spectacle of the visible in *How Late* and directly engage with the complicated nature of his protagonist's oppressed status distance his novel from the significant trends in late twentieth-century representation I earlier identified where cultural productions claim a victim status for white men through portrayals of spectacular male wounding and the appropriation of discourses of oppression. In this, Kelman's novel is a text, I would argue, which promotes solidarity rather than the appropriation of the victimhood of the other.

This conclusion prompts a reassessment of *How Late*'s position in relation to those texts which produce such a spectacle, that rather than compare Sammy Samuels to H.G. Wells's infamous character, it is more appropriate to relate him to another invisible man, the African American protagonist of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel of that name. Where Wells imposes the binary opposition of visibility versus invisibility as his protagonist is either one or the other, Ellison's invisible man is more contradictory and ambiguous. He opens his narrative with this declaration:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (7)

People also refuse to see *Sammy*; the teacher objectifies him, the establishment refuses to see him as a person with a disability, and critics at the time of the publication of the novel refused to see him beyond their characterization of him as a “drunk” (though he hardly drinks throughout the narrative), a “criminal”, or an inarticulate “tramp” (see Gilbert). Everywhere he is dehumanized and disempowered; hence he resorts to punching a policeman, in effect, acting the part delineated for him in dominant discourse, in order to make himself visible. However, in a discerning move by Kelman, this action precipitates Sammy’s blindness and ultimate disappearance, his removal from the scene of surveillance. Consequently, selfhood is elusive for Sammy, as it is in Ellison’s novel where identity is also unfixed, hybrid, and often a disappointment and a let down. Ellison’s invisible man retreats to a cellar, a bunker, and similarly Sammy retreats “out of sight”. Sammy is not coming painfully into visibility, but eluding the fixative of a newly determined male centrality.

For all the stark militancy of Kelman’s public rhetoric, his Booker Prize winning novel can be seen as demonstrating not a self-aggrandizing appropriation of an oppressed identity, but an attempt to disappear from the dominant discourse, to become invisible and refuse identity. As the novel struggles towards invisibility, the state of being “out of sight”, we are reminded that, in Phelan’s words, “There is an important difference between wilfully failing to appear and never being summoned” (11). In staging Sammy’s disappearance *How Late* recognises that there may be “real power in remaining unmarked” (Phelan 4), avoiding the surveillance and entrapment of hegemonic identities. As a consequence *How Late* also protests against the representational pact that has forced working-class men into visibility in contemporary Scottish narratives to assume the

burden of representing the nation, often through the adoption of an assertive MacChismo. In his problematizing of the hard man Kelman resists a reductive anti-colonialism while invoking the liberatory impulses and strategies of a postcolonial rhetorical “process or movement” which resists essentialising conceptions of identity.

There is a case, writes Michael Gardiner, for the “positive move of using postcolonial qualities to develop political articulations, textual strategy” (“Democracy” 39). Kelman does just this in fiction which is deft, articulate and sensitively engaged with the absences, silences and representational gaps that evade the dominant discourses, and enacts a worthy attempt at achieving liberation from them. Underlying this aim is not an appropriation but an articulation of a discourse of oppression, enabling his desire to escape fixed identity and expose those relations of dominance and submission on which it depends. He affirms an anti-essentialist, anti-identitarian conception of the male subject that derives inspiration, strategies and conviction from the liberatory possibilities of a decidedly postcolonial vision.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Carol and Glenda Norquay. “Superiorism”. *Cencrastus*. 15 (1984): 8-10.
- Beveridge, Craig, and Ronald Turnbull. *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. London: Penguin, 1965.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1986.
- Gardiner, Michael. “Democracy and Scottish Postcoloniality.” *Scotlands* 3.2 (1996): 24-

- Gardiner, Michael. "‘A Light to the World’: British Devolution and Colonial Vision." *Interventions*. 6.2 (2004): 264-81.
- Gilbert, Geoff. "Can Fiction Swear? James Kelman and the Booker Prize." *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*. Ed. Rod Mengham. Cambridge: Polity, 1999. 219-34.
- Jackson, Ellen-Raïssa and Willy Maley. "Birds of a Feather?: A Postcolonial Reading of Irvine Welsh’s *Marabou Stork Nightmares*." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*. 41 (2000): 187-96.
- Jackson, Ellen-Raïssa and Willy Maley. "Celtic Connections: Colonialism and Culture in Irish-Scottish Modernism." *Interventions*. 4.1 (2002): 68-78.
- Jenkins, Simon. "An Expletive of a Winner." *The Times*. 15 October 1994. 20.
- Jones, Carole. "White Men on their Backs--From Objection to Abjection: The Representation of the White Male as Victim in William McIlvanney’s *Docherty* and Irvine Welsh’s *Marabou Stork Nightmares*." *International Journal of Scottish Literature*. 1 (2006). < www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk > .
- Kelly, Aaron. *Irvine Welsh*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- Kelman, James. *How Late It Was, How Late*. London: Vintage, 1998 [1994].
- Kelman, James. "Elitist Slurs are Racism By Another Name". *Scotland on Sunday: Spectrum Supplement*. 16 October 1994. 2.
- Knights, Ben. *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York/London: Routledge, 1995.

- McMillan, Neil. "Wilting, or the 'Poor Wee Boy Syndrome': Kelman and Masculinity." *Edinburgh Review* 108 (2001): 41-55.
- Nasta, Susheila. "Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise*". *The Popular and the Canonical*. Ed. David Johnson. Abingdon: Routledge/Milton Keynes: Open University, 2005. 294-343.
- Noble, Andrew. "MacChismo in Retrospect". *Bulletin of Scottish Politics*. 1.2 (1981): 73-81.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Robinson, Sally. *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Schoene-Harwood, Berthold. "'Emerging as the Others of Our Selves'--Scottish Multiculturalism and the Challenge of the Body in Postcolonial Representation." *Scottish Literary Journal*. 25:1 (1998): 54-72.
- Wells, H.G. *The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance*. London: Modern Library, 2002 [1897].
- Welsh, Irvine. *Trainspotting*. London: Minerva, 1997 [1993].
- Whyte, Christopher. "Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. 34.3 (1998): 274-85.