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**Citation for published version:**

Jones, C 2015, 'James Kelman's melancholic politics', *Scottish Literary Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 89-112.  
<<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/582221>>

**Link:**

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

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Scottish Literary Review

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Jones, C. (2015). James Kelman's Melancholic Politics. *Scottish Literary Review*, 7(1), 89-112.

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CAROLE JONES

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## James Kelman's Melancholic Politics

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‘Also I am a man, a human man. Frailty is inherent in me. But what do we mean by “frailty” in a context that is utterly and only human?’

I do confess that I hold many weaknesses of a personal nature.’

James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004).

‘The violence of social regulation is not to be found in its unilateral action, but in the circuitous route by which the psyche accuses itself of its own worthlessness.’

Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997).

### Abstract

This essay explores the novels of James Kelman in relation to the theorisation of melancholia and subjectivity in the work of Judith Butler. It relates a masculinised melancholia characterising Kelman's protagonists to an unacknowledged loss which I identify in general terms as the contemporary undermining of the autonomous masculine self. An originary loss for Butler institutes a process of melancholic subjectification which is characterised by anxiety, self-beratement and immobility. Acknowledgment of the precariousness of life and its necessary interrelationality serves to break fixed attachments to this loss and to the past and move the subject through a process of mourning which opens the possibility of new and constructive engagement with life. Focusing on Kelman's novels as enacting an inauguration of mourning, this essay argues for the political significance of Kelman's literary strategies in terms of what Butler characterises as the ‘social battleground’ of the psyche. It culminates in a reading of Kelman's latest novel, *Mo said she was quirky*, as concluding a trajectory of masculine loss in Kelman's novels.

This essay seeks to place James Kelman's novels in relation to contemporary discourses of precariousness which challenge dominant neoliberal models of the self and their privileging of the autonomous individual. I contend that Kelman's fictions are propelled by a gendered melancholia which opens out to a radical critique of autonomy and unitary subjectivity. The political significance of this representation can be clarified when his texts are read in the light of Judith Butler's conceptualisation of the relation between the psyche and the social in her theorising of the melancholically constituted self. This approach is in contrast to a perceived 'negativity' in this writing in some quarters, that it presents a catatonic entrapment of individuals in a self-destructive cycle of anxiety, self-beratement and immobility from which there is no escape, and that Kelman's characters suffer, for instance, a worrying 'awful fixity' and 'seem to be trapped',<sup>1</sup> making these texts politically uninspiring. In the extreme Kelman's inward looking, downbeat protagonists could be appropriated as examples of 'possessive individualism, bourgeois individualism, taken to its extreme',<sup>2</sup> as Willy Maley characterises them, with searing irony. Butler's work famously challenges and refutes such an autonomous model of the self and its relationship with the social context. Interestingly in relation to the perceived 'entrapment' of Kelman's characters, we can think of her as a 'theorist of constraint'<sup>3</sup> concerned with a 'dialectic of constraint and freedom'.<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of Butler's critique, I argue that Kelman's men are not simply 'feminised', as suggested by some critics as a consequence of their take-over of the critical advantages of a feminised position;<sup>5</sup> they can be more usefully engaged as politically radical in their exposure of psychic pressure and processes, amounting to a thorough undermining of a masculinised model of the autonomous subject. I suggest here that Kelman's novels map a trajectory of masculine loss which culminates in the publication of *Mo said she was quirky* (2012) with its female central character. Gender is therefore at the centre of this examination of Kelman's novels, and a focus on melancholia, as explicated in the work of Butler and others, is a useful tool in distinguishing the radical significance of Kelman's oeuvre.

In essence, Butler's critical thought addresses how power acts on the individual, how selves emerge within and in relation to a social context, and how they are comprised and compromised by regulatory norms which coerce compliance, a process she has described as 'an originary complicity with power in the formation of the "I"'.<sup>6</sup> Kelman's fictions appear to inter-

rogate such a politically constrained position, as suggested by his focus on the individual at the expense of the wider social fabric. This compromised, complicit 'I' is Butler's focus as she maps for us the terrain of the psyche as it is produced in relation to the social; her model of the self has at its basis 'a melancholia that reproduces power as the psychic voice of judgment addressed to (turned upon) oneself, thus modelling reflexivity on subjection'.<sup>7</sup> Though also understood by some as pessimistic, Butler presents us with a model of subjectivity that is radical in its relationality and its intimate conception of the individual as shaped by power. Though not providing easy answers to a current social predicament rife with inequality, prejudice and state violence, her compelling vision and its implications provide a constructive tool for reading Kelman's fiction, illuminating his oeuvre as politically prescient and even hopeful.

Kelman's central characters, overwhelmingly male in most of his fictions, are emphatically vulnerable individuals – socially, psychologically, physically and economically. Such a portrayal of men continues to go against the grain of dominant notions of masculinity and indeed hegemonic models which prioritise invulnerability through strength, control, success and rationality. Moreover, Kelman's men often appear to suffer from symptoms of melancholia, a state of sadness akin to mourning famously theorised by Freud in terms of feelings of dejection, grief and loss as well as self-reproach 'and extraordinary diminution of self regard'.<sup>8</sup> Melancholia, 'the suppressed and ambivalent alternative to mourning',<sup>9</sup> signifies a loss which has not been permitted to move through the process of mourning – a disavowed and therefore unfathomable loss. Such a state blocks these protagonists' self-control and agency, and their lives appear structured by the melancholic symptoms of anxiety, unease, failure and crisis, often expressed in the self-beratement which characterises melancholia. Just a glance at the openings of several of Kelman's novels illustrates this: *A Disaffection* begins with the lines: 'Patrick Doyle was a teacher. Gradually he had become sickened by it' (p. 1); commencing *How late it was, how late* Sammy wakes on the street from a stupor, and almost immediately reflects 'there's something far far wrong; ye're no a good man, ye're just no a good man' (p. 1); very early in *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* Jeremiah portrays himself in similarly negative terms:

I was an ex Security operative, how Uhmerkin can ye get! Okay,

failed Security operative. No really a failure, I just didn't make a career out of it. But add to that failed husband and failed parent, failed father, general no fucking hope. And now I was gaun hame, gaun hame! I was a failed fucking immigrant! (p. 20)<sup>10</sup>

Part of my aim here is to investigate Kelman's literary engagement with a melancholic 'failure' as a kind of resistance to normative selfhood in the manner of what Judith Halberstam has delineated as her project in *The Queer Art of Failure*, where 'resistance takes the form of investing in counter-intuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read *failure*, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counter-hegemonic discourse of losing'.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Butler echoes this sensibility when she writes, in reference to Adorno and Foucault, of 'the necessity of conceiving the human in its fallibility. If we are to act ethically [. . .] we must avow error as constitutive of who we are'.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, Kelman would not be the first or only author to associate masculinity with failure and fallibility in the world-view of his writing. Samuel Beckett's work, as Jennifer Jeffers reminds us, infamously engaged 'folly, failure, impotence and ignorance' to make 'an unprecedented assault on patriarchy and the value system of Western masculinity'.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Kelman presents us with 'countertypes of the male normative',<sup>14</sup> but in contrast to Beckett, his representations are not solely calculated to confound and repulse in the manner of those particularly emasculated male figures. Though Kelman's men have been construed as victims, they survive and portray masculine existence in the contemporary period as a perplexing challenge to physical, spiritual and psychic well-being. Though less abstracted from a concrete environment than Beckett's characters, I contend their challenge continues the attack on Western masculine privilege that Jeffers observes in Beckett, an attack that I agree to constitute as one, therefore, on the dominant discourses of Western culture. Foremost among those discourses is the conceptualisation of subjectivity, and what I construe here as Kelman's anti-essentialist stance confronts the coherence of our intimate notions of the nature of our selves.

For most readers, Kelman's men are less repulsive than singularly inadequate to the onslaught of life, a condition which characterises not only male, but human existence, as emphasised by Jeremiah when he declares 'I

didn't know how to do it properly, how to be it properly, be a human being. What the fuck do ye do? What are the appropriate actions?' (pp. 121–22). Such disorientation, not least between 'doing' and 'being', as well as anxiety and self-doubt are symptomatic of Kelman's characters. They illustrate selfhood as a melancholic process which offers an account of the state of humanness as constituted through vulnerability and dependency. That these characters are mostly male only emphasises a contemporary existential identity crisis as propelled by the decentering of masculine hegemony; in places in this writing a dichotomy emerges between the male and the human. Significantly, though, such a disorientated perspective informs Butler's expansive ideas with regard to the human and the notion of a liveable life explored in her work, particularly post-9/11. For Butler, grief and mourning expose what she calls the 'precariousness' of life and the extent to which one's sense of self depends on others; when we undergo the grieving process 'something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that show us that these ties constitute what we are'.<sup>15</sup> Such constitutive dependence breaches the autonomy of the subject and, crucially, she relates this idea to politics:

Many people think that grief is privatising, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticising. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorising fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

Kelman's character of choice, the mostly single lonely male, does not encourage such a reading; how does his solitary, ostensibly inward-looking perspective promote a politics of community and interrelationality?

For one thing, Butler's political aspect emerges in her understanding of loss – the loss which leads to grief – as dispossession, as seen in her assertion that there is a constituting 'mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am'.<sup>17</sup> The concept evokes a fundamental loss, but the word can be understood in two ways. Importantly for Butler, we are dispossessed when we are moved to be 'beside ourselves' by grief or passion; in this we are dispossessed of our autonomy by our inescapable relation with an other

without which we lose something of ourselves. We are reminded in such moments of ‘the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own’. Butler emphasises in particular our initial total dependence on our primary caregivers, a constituting vulnerability which we later disavow in our understanding of ourselves as autonomous beings: ‘it may be that this sphere of dispossession is precisely the one that exposes my unknowingness, the unconscious imprint of my primary sociality.’<sup>18</sup> Dispossession in this sense is therefore ‘a term that marks the limits of self-sufficiency and that establishes us as relational and interdependent’,<sup>19</sup> as well as lacking in total self-knowledge. In addition, there is the word’s more common reference to the loss of land and community, and also the self under conditions of exploitation and oppression. These two understandings are related in Butler’s theorising of a subject that is therefore already outside of itself or ‘ex-centric’ from the start, subject to an inaugural dispossession and vulnerable to being undone because of its dependence on others which unravels its delusional autonomy. Such a model begins to explain Butler’s emphasis on the constitutive relation between the psyche and the social, the personal and the political.

Melancholia as a refusal to grieve, a refusal to acknowledge loss, envelops the individual in negativity, and we see this in all Kelman’s characters, for example here with Jeremiah: ‘I even whined when I was thinking, It wasn’t just me talking man I listened to myself thinking and yeh, that too was a whine, it was fucking terrible’ (p. 52). In the insistent communication of self-beratement, as in Jeremiah’s whine, the melancholic’s narcissistic self-regard constructs a negative judgment of the self which in its extreme can express itself in a self-destructive violence; and thoughts of suicide permeate Kelman’s narratives: ‘All he sought was death’ we are told about Patrick Doyle, ‘Death: purely and simple: simply and pure’ (p. 216). How is this related to the politics of a social context? As Butler notes:

The social world appears to be eclipsed in melancholy, and an internal world structured in ambivalence emerges as the consequence. It is not immediately clear how melancholy might be read, then, in terms of social life, in particular, in terms of the social regulation of psychic life.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler goes on to continue to interrogate this problem of how 'psychic and social domains are produced in relation to one another' that she begins in *Gender Trouble* as a radical critique of the autonomous subject, and to which melancholia emerges as the key. In this process the loss of a loved one or loved thing (which, according to Freud, can be 'one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on'<sup>21</sup>) is not resolved; the loss is denied by substituting the lost object in the ego, an identification which internalises the trace of, and preserves the attachment to, the lost object – it is as if it was never lost. However, Butler argues that it is precisely this 'turn from object to ego that makes the distinction between them possible [. . .] that forms the ego to begin with';<sup>22</sup> that is, the 'interior' psychic life of the subject is made possible by that turn, which initiates an ongoing process of subjectivisation through which the subject is constituted. Melancholia, then, is central to this constitution. Ambivalence towards the lost object – desire alongside anger towards it – 'splits the ego into the critical agency and the ego as object of criticism and judgment' (p. 180), causing the self-beratement for which melancholia is known, as this critical 'conscience' becomes the mechanism by which the self is constantly rebuked for failing to live up to an unattainable ideal. The object of criticism is now the self, a situation which can ultimately threaten death in its potential violence.

For Butler, though, this self-directed violence is connected with the social as it is social power which 'regulates what will and will not be grieved; in the social foreclosure of grief we might find what fuels the internal violence of conscience' (p. 187). The process of an originary loss constitutive of the subject – the incest taboo in Freud; the proscription of homosexual attachments for Butler – is echoed and reiterated in the further losses of objects and ideals which are subject to social proscription. The disavowal of loss and refusal to mourn which instigates melancholia is therefore intimately related to social context and a result of regulatory power: it is this process which Butler describes when she writes, 'The violence of social regulation is not to be found in its unilateral action, but in the circuitous route by which the psyche accuses itself of its own worthlessness' (p. 184). For such an outcome, normative social regulation is implicated in a sense of self that is distanced and cut off from the world in its 'substitution of psychic parts and antagonisms for external relations among social actors' (p. 179). Further, Butler directly relates this melancholic subject to state power:



Figured within the workings of the psyche is the power of the state to preempt an insurrectionary rage. The ‘critical agency’ of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument. This super-egoic conscience is not simply analogous to the state’s military power over its citizenry; the state cultivates melancholia among its citizenry precisely as a way of dissimulating and displacing its own ideal authority. The process of forming the subject is a process of rendering the terrorising power of the state invisible – and effective – as the ideality of conscience. (p. 190)

Similar terms resonate through the Kelmanesque in his equally shattering vision of the relationship of the individual and society. The same internal landscape of the psyche, popularly interpreted as a site of personal failure and crisis in Kelman, is here in Butler a vividly drawn social battleground. This battleground echoes in Kelman’s characterisation of writing as a type of guerrilla class warfare (see, for instance ‘Make Yer Point’<sup>23</sup>). Yet if Butler’s vision leads us back to the social, it is conceived in a very different register: ‘to claim life in such circumstances’ she writes, ‘is to contest the righteous psyche, not by an act of will, but by submission to a sociality’;<sup>24</sup> that is, we could say, not by individual strength but by individual surrender to social connection and interrelationality.

Ultimately, Butler argues, the social circumscription of what constitutes a grievable life defines what is understood as a human life: ‘certain human lives are more grievable than others’<sup>25</sup> she contends, referring specifically to the victims of contemporary global conflicts. And further, she asks under what circumstances does the human become culturally intelligible? How do cultural discourses qualify what is recognised as human? Butler’s concerns are echoed in Kelman’s frequently reiterated apprehension concerning the limitations of the recognition of the human, particularly but not solely in relation to class representation in English literature:

People from communities like mine were rarely to be found on these pages. When they were they were usually categorised as servants, peasants, criminal elements, semi-literate drunken louts, and so on; shadowy presences left unspecified, often grouped under terms like ‘uncouth rabble’, ‘vulgar mob’, ‘the great unwashed’; ‘lumpen proletariat’, even ‘riotous assembly’ (an obscure hint that political activism by these lower-order beings was not unheard of).<sup>26</sup>

The variable perspectives and boundaries of humanness as discerned by Kelman testify to its instability. There is a gap, then, between the experiencing of the human self (Kelman and his community) and its 'capture' in many strains of mainstream representation. There is a loss of the human for the people implicated in these objectifying epithets. For her part, Butler sees such a situation as a political opportunity:

I may feel that without some recognisability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognised make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation.<sup>27</sup>

Kelman's writing is such a juncture; it is a mode of critique of liveability under the present polity.

Kelman's fictions, understood as examples of melancholic subjectivity, create a complex and suggestive evocation of a world structured by an atomising and striating social power, affording a radical critique. The anguish of his characters is central to that project. As Moya Lloyd interprets Butler, 'grief is a pre-requisite for the kind of identification with suffering that Butler argues might foster ethical responsibilities towards the other';<sup>28</sup> it opens us to vulnerability which enables a recognition of dependence and a new way of being with the other. It may be the case that 'in seeing the intersubjective or communal dimension of experience as a condition of vulnerability, Butler reveals a sensibility that is sombre, almost tragic',<sup>29</sup> but such an outlook necessarily challenges violent assertions of invulnerability in contemporary discourses of individualism and nationalism and beyond, such as the 'war on terror'. Vulnerability, produced by our grief or acknowledgment of loss, is crucial to our existence. As Butler writes, 'Survival is a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one's own emergence';<sup>30</sup> that is, our acceptance of the constitutive relation with other(s) which brings us into being is necessary to keep us safely alive. And acknowledging loss and vulnerability is a touchstone of Kelman's writing, as evoked by Jeremiah in connection with the interpersonal: 'How do we say

it about people, the ones that bring a smile to the face. We get a gift from them. It connects to vulnerability and it maybe happens more with women than men because we expect their vulnerability to be less visible' (p. 55).

Before considering how in Kelman's work the acknowledging of loss leads back to the interrelational context of the social, we should first address the manner in which we can discern a constituting melancholia in Kelman's fictions. Is it possible to say through what losses it is induced? The concept of melancholia has been made use of in various different analyses of a range of challenging contexts. In one prescient example, Angela McRobbie has proposed that 'feminism has become, for young women, in rather indiscernible ways, an object of loss and melancholia'.<sup>31</sup> In this argument a 'post-feminist' social context has 'taken feminism into account' (p. 60) so that it is no longer needed, feminism's language, symbolism and equality aims appropriated in the incorporation of young women into a neo-liberal culture of corporate work and consumerism that requires the abandoning of a critique of patriarchy, producing as an outcome the re-traditionalisation of gender roles – 'feminism undone' (p. 60). As McRobbie describes it:

In abandoning or repudiating [...] feminist ideals which would seek to challenge this narrow grid of intelligibility, something is lost and what exactly it is that is lost becomes opaque, and the 'violence of regulatory norms' gives rise to a melancholia. This female melancholia and its attendant patterns of self-beratement can be understood as responses to such a loss. (p. 118)

We can easily perceive the formative influence of Butler here, and also McRobbie admits her debt to Wendy Brown's employing of 'Left melancholia', an attachment to outmoded ideals, analyses, and strategies which stymie reaction to the present moment in Left political movements.<sup>32</sup>

For both McRobbie and Brown, then, the concept of melancholia aids analysis as a tool of radical political perspectives. Aaron Kelly engages the term in a slightly different manner in relation to Kelman's work. He suggests that a novel such as *A Disaffection* 'arrives at what I will term a *melancholy knowledge* or truth' and he describes it as follows:

It is a melancholy knowledge in this novel because it mourns the loss of some pure truth uncontaminated by the instrumental domination of the Enlightenment's own concept and the horrors

committed in the name of the latter. Yet *A Disaffection* also yearns for the persistence of truth, for a critical engagement with the world, even as it acknowledges the fragmentary, fractious and provisional nature of that knowledge. A melancholy knowledge is still a form of knowing though it exists in a negative relation to truth: that is, it forgoes its place in some systemic absolute that has become domination's mythology but reiterates that truths be known if the world is to be understood let alone changed for the better.<sup>33</sup>

Here the loss of 'pure truth' causes a melancholic persistence of truth as an ideal even though its absolute nature has been undermined by Enlightenment modernity. Kelly notes Kelman's acceptance of truth's degraded and contingent state, and yet his continuing acceptance of the need for some kind of truth if we are to escape a postmodern impasse which traps agency. In this perspective, truth becomes a critical process in Kelman's work, unfixed and determined by contextual parameters, but crucial for social and political engagement. This is not necessarily a 'strategic essentialism' but rather parallels Butler's view of universality as a 'temporalised' concept,<sup>34</sup> that what are considered universals are subject to change and there is competition between different versions. As Lloyd describes it in relation to Butler:

Because the universal is particular to a culture, there are competing versions of the universal in existence at any one time. Different political movements, for instance, articulate different conceptions of the universal. They articulate alternative visions of the norms needed to ensure a liveable life, and these rival visions vie for hegemony [. . .] democracy thrives in a context of contestation and agonism. The point is not just to accept the existence of rival ideas of the universal as a relativist might; the task is to endeavour to generate a more encompassing universal out of these competing conceptions.<sup>35</sup>

Such a conception contributes to a notion of radical democracy which calls for openness, openedness and a 'kind of constant mobilisation of the range of radical social movements'<sup>36</sup> in a persistent disruptive process of modification and change. Butler, in effect, 'emphasises contestation and disagreement and rejects the idea that democracy is ultimately attainable'<sup>37</sup> in any stable or final sense.

I contend that Kelman's fiction engages similar terms and perspectives in

its melancholy knowledge. It contests the convergence and resolution of conflict and is open ended in the disputes it stages within itself:

I dont have any doubts. My doubts ceased a long while ago. I am an instrument of all that is fine and far-sighted. I receive almost twice as much of the provender of survival as do my brother and sister-in-law and nephew and niece all rolled up into one neat bundle. And we are all to be at one, yes, at peace, reconciled, fully. Says who? Says me. I say it. I say to my big brother, dont for fuck sake do what you are doing but listen to me as an equal and let us talk to each other, and in that talking we shall be finding the way ahead.

What a pile of fucking shite! What a pile of absolute gibbers! The very idea that such forms of conflict can be so resolved! This is straight bourgeois intellectual wank. These liberal fucking excesses taken to the very limits of fucking hyping hypocritical tollie.<sup>38</sup>

The idea that there can be agreement in unequal economic circumstances is quickly and hyperbolically negated here as Patrick Doyle, the working-class teacher, censures the self-righteous hegemony of liberal class-blindness. In such moments Kelman's subjects profess the lack of a universal viewpoint and demonstrate the vulnerability of their own mastery of the world, their knowledge of it and agency in it, which is lost in the multiple veracities of interpretation and understanding. Where Kelly gleans this as the loss of Enlightenment truth, Kelman's texts present a more ambivalent case as to the grand implications of this claim, particularly in relation to the underpinning of a melancholy selfhood. Loss of truth is something frequently admitted in these fictions, exemplified on an individual level, for example, by Sammy's proclamations regarding his shoes in *How late*: on page one he moans that someone has stolen his 'new pair of leathers' and replaced them with 'an auld pair of trainer shoes' while he is sleeping off a drinking session; on page 247 he admits 'Nay cunt stole his shoes'. The 'good leather' truth becomes the 'auld trainer' truth, well-worn and fragile, the veracity of which is lost in the vagaries of inebriation. This staging of the loss of truth undermines its ultimate existence, as although the truth of the matter seems reinstated, its adjustment challenges our security in its singular nature.

The loss of truth is not an unavowed loss of the kind which promotes a

melancholic subjectivity; we are well-versed in this postmodern condition, and it is often playful, polemical and a fact of these narratives. What *can* be said to be unawowed here is the masculinised nature of this lost truth, founded as it is on an Enlightenment conception of reason exposed by feminist philosophers as characterised as masculine. Reason and rational attaining of truth is foundational to the history of modern Western philosophy from Descartes onwards, so 'the fact that the male-female distinction has been used to symbolise the distinction between reason and its opposites'<sup>39</sup> delineates women's historical symbolic exclusion from rationality and the ability to discern truth; 'what passes as an egalitarian [and universal] ideal is, in fact, a covert privileging of maleness'.<sup>40</sup> Kelman is not averse to illustrating the loss of this putatively universal truth; however, it is its masculinised symbolism that is unacknowledged and the loss of the associated masculine privilege. Further to this, the truth produced by a particular Left, socialist-tending, working-class masculine perspective, based on the kind of collective trade unionism brought about by workers in heavy industries and other male-dominated work places, though ideal in its evocation, makes available a radical political critique of contemporary neo-liberal individualism and its concomitant erosion of collective rights and liberties. As with McRobbie's young women and the loss of feminism, Kelman's men, forced to relinquish this perspective and its critical power in order to become legible in the neoliberal order, are melancholically constituted by their ungrievable loss of radical working-class masculine identity.

Reference to the masculinised nature of Kelman's work is apparent in popular responses which highlight the 'inherently' male characteristics of his protagonists, particularly their drinking, smoking and bad language, their anti-establishment polemic, as if such qualities were solely a male preserve. Certainly the masculine style of Kelman's characters could be read as a melancholic incorporation of a lost masculine object, in the manner of Butler's theorising of subjectivity; there is surely a willingness among a particular cohort of his readers to affirm that masculinity. There are also efforts among critics, mentioned above, to challenge the monolithic nature of such interpretations as in Neil McMillan's assertion regarding Kelman's 'locating his characters in ideologically feminine spaces of interiority, passivity and pathos',<sup>41</sup> or Ben Knights' observation that the Kelman's male characters 'appeals to sympathy [are] usurping a conventionally feminine position'.<sup>42</sup> In Simon Jenkins' case, in his notorious attack on Kelman's work on the

occasion of his winning the Booker Prize for fiction, this challenge to the masculine credentials of Kelman's characters amounts to a polemical emasculation of the writer himself:

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.<sup>43</sup>

The feminisation of literary 'awfulness' and 'savagery' here exposes a searing white male assault on his sexed and raced others which does not omit class:

I once found myself alone in a no-smoking compartment of a corridor train to Glasgow. An ambassador for that city lurched into the compartment and crashed down opposite me. He took out a bottle of cider, rolled himself a cigarette, lent across to me and belched 'Ye git a light, Jimmy?' [. . .] My reeking companion demanded attention like a two-year-old. He told me his so-called life story [. . .] Reading Mr Kelman's book was a similar experience. (p. 20)

If, as in Butler's terms, via Hegel, 'it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings',<sup>44</sup> then in this passage Jenkins' apprehension of the apocryphal Glaswegian, and by extension Kelman's characters, amounts to a withdrawing of recognition of their humanness: that they are 'like two-year-olds' implies their lack of attainment of the necessary qualities of adulthood which nominally define the human; and the positing of a '*so-called* life story' denies the existence of an appropriately identifiable personal history. As Butler argues, 'certain humans are recognised as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life. Certain humans are not recognised as human at all, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life' (p. 2). In these terms humanness is the loss I am reading into Kelman's fictions, his presentation of unliveable lives, as lucidly illustrated by Jenkins. These lives are unliveable because they 'take place outside the liberal consensus of Jenkins' notion of both life and culture';<sup>45</sup> in this class-based analysis they are not recognised as viable. However, it is also obvious here that his attempts to

emasculate Kelman and his work serve to strengthen the notion that the 'human' itself has often been a masculinised concept, further placing a masculine loss as a significant locus in Kelman's writing.

The melancholic, unavowed loss of working-class community and values can be understood in terms of the loss of a certain kind of masculine identity. Across the oeuvre of his novels, Kelman engages this loss increasingly, if incrementally; there is a gradual movement away from the model of hegemonic male identity in which power, strength, control and autonomy are the privileged signifiers of male dominance. That is, the status of the central male character moves from relative nearness to the discursive centre of male power toward its margins. From archetypal working-class family man Rab Hines through single, precariously-employed teacher Patrick Doyle to unemployed Sammy who has lost his girlfriend and his eyesight, the trajectory continues outwards via the displaced and persecuted anonymous narrators of *Translated Accounts*, 'unassimilated alien' (p. 37) immigrant Jeremiah Brown working for 'the wage of an adolescent' (p. 173), and on to Kieron Smith, a boy presented up to the age of twelve who only glimpses masculine freedom and responsibility through his grandfather and father. Most recently, in the novel *Mo said she was quirky* Kelman achieves the greatest possible distance from the centre of hegemonic masculinity with a female central character, Helen, where significant males have no directly apprehensible existence, only as reported by her.<sup>46</sup>

This mapping of a loss of male power across Kelman's novels can be linked to a purportedly nostalgic yearning for a kind of heroic masculinity, often culminating in the closing pages in ambivalent fashion. That these characteristic moments sometimes involve reference to figures in literary or popular fictions and histories or other authoritative texts such as the bible signal an engagement with narrative paradigms as tools with which to construct a coherent model of male identity. These are moments of longing which defer to lost ideals and desirable aspirations of manhood. However, these references are constructed so that the myth of heroism is punctured in the moment of its iteration.<sup>47</sup> For example, in the final scene of *A Disaffection*, as Patrick runs away from police who may or may not be chasing him, and fantasises about revolutionary violence, he considers the temptation of suicide with allusion to a biblical precedent: 'What is that story in the bible about a guy who commits suicide. Is there a story in the bible about a guy who commits suicide. Who is that guy who commits suicide, as a thing to



be committed' (p. 337). No question marks frame these questions, foregoing the pause for answers and their necessity, and constructing an open-ended discourse of uncertain trajectory and hierarchy; answers are not the point, as the reader is left not knowing if Samson or Judas, and the very different implication of their stories, is being referred to. However, the search for precedent signals a yearning for a frame of interpretation, in this case whether the 'temptation of suicide' sets Patrick as betrayer or betrayed. Jeremiah's last words refer to beloved folk hero Billy the Kid: 'But being an outlaw is a serious affair. If anybody with a medical interest ever did a survey of these poor unfortunates it would reveal that the vast majority die of pulmonary diseases brought about by nervous disorders. Take Billy the Kid' (p. 437). This connects with Kieron's grandad's breathing problems in *Kieron Smith, Boy*. At the very end of this long novel, 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. (p. 422)

These final words evoke a complex fantasy; in mourning his dead grandfather, Kieron desires his transcendence of death, and yearns for the triumph of mind or spirit over body which is the enduring legacy of the ideal masculinity his grandfather embodies. However, the scenario does admit that his grandfather is dead, an acknowledgment that signals a possibility of mourning and a beginning of the process of grieving where loss can be declared and the melancholic state, to a certain extent, dealt with.

These three conclusions, then, rather than signalling a sentimental nostalgia for past masculine ideals, enact a breaking of attachment to those lost ideals and inaugurate the conditions for a process of mourning which for Butler enables the subject to 're-enter the world [. . .] as one who understands her dependency on others'.<sup>48</sup> Where the effect of melancholia 'appears

to be the loss of the social world, the substitution of psychic parts and antagonisms for external relations among social actors',<sup>49</sup> mourning enables a way back through a 'redirecting of rage against the lost other' instead of the self, 'defiling the sanctity of the dead for the purposes of life, raging against the dead in order not to join them' (p. 193). Kelman's protagonists' severing of attachments may not appear to us as rage in these instances, yet crucially positioned at the open-ended conclusions of these texts, these moments direct us to look beyond the protagonists and point to a re-engagement with the world, a process Butler projects as survival. In the case of Kieron, this is even enacted in a 'fall', albeit a fantasised one, but suggestive all the same of originary biblical moments of leaving paradise and entering the world.

According to Butler this process of mourning as a re-connection with the world for the constitutively melancholic subject is a cornerstone of a critique of the autonomous subject:

Survival does not take place because an autonomous ego exercises autonomy in confrontation with a countervailing world; on the contrary, no ego can emerge except through animating reference to such a world. Survival is a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one's own emergence. To make of melancholia a simple 'refusal' to grieve its losses conjures a subject who might already be something without its losses, that is, one who voluntarily extends and retracts his or her will. Yet the subject who might grieve is implicated in a loss of autonomy that is mandated by linguistic and social life; it can never produce itself autonomously. From the start, this ego is other than itself; what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all. [. . .] To accept the autonomy of the ego is to forget that trace; and to accept that trace is to embark upon a process of mourning that can never be complete, for no final severance could take place without dissolving the ego.<sup>50</sup>

Butler's theory asserts the relational condition of the subject, that it only emerges through its relations with others. Kelman's fictions demonstrate the same radical anti-essentialist point; I contend that as an oeuvre his novels mark this moment of the inauguration of mourning, and so deliberately refuse the isolated autonomy of a liberal humanist model of subjectivity.

Read as melancholics, Kelman's characters represent the process of the constitution of the subject and its subjugation to power, its relationality and the necessity of acknowledging, not disavowing, its losses.

In such an interpretation Kelman's characters resound with the struggle against a toxic individualism that can, in effect, make you ill. Kelman's stance entertains the possibility of a return to a different sociality which recognises and works with the 'precariousness' of life. The failure and fallibility of Kelman's characters are crucial in developing this alternative perspective on social and political reality, one answer to Butler's quest for a new vision of humanness:

If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another? The attempt to foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense every other human consideration, is surely also to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.<sup>51</sup>

The vulnerability of Kelman's characters, acknowledged in their breaking of their attachment to lost heroic ideals, not only creates political and ethical possibilities, but realises what Homi Bhabha sees as a kernel of rebellion inspiring the melancholic. For Bhabha melancholia is not a form of passivity, but 'a mental constellation of revolt': for him the narrative of the colonised says, 'My revolt is to face the Life of literature and history with the scraps and fragments that constitute its double, which is living as surviving, meaning as melancholia',<sup>52</sup> an apt description of the impulse and realisation of Kelman's fiction in its presentation of 'countertypes of the male normative'. Or as Butler also describes it, 'Melancholia is a rebellion that has been put down, crushed',<sup>53</sup> as the critical agency of the melancholic, in its role as the state's 'psychic instrument' (p. 191), preempts individual insurrection by deflecting anger and aggression against the self. As Butler insists, 'The revolt in melancholia can be distilled by marshalling aggression in the service of mourning, but also, necessarily, of life' (p. 191).

The exposed psyches of Kelman's characters provide a snapshot of a 'crushed rebellion' which still contains a trace or residue of a lost insur-

rection, the resistance of regulatory norms, 'like a long forgotten and only momentarily accessible memory which nevertheless offers an understanding of the tormented landscape of contemporary [identity]'.<sup>54</sup> As Butler argues regarding the 'plaints' of the melancholic, Kelman's narratives can be thought of as 'nascent political text[s]'<sup>55</sup> in their deft representation of the alienating process. At this 'juncture for critique' these fictions present the reader with the uncomfortable limits of liveable life in the balance, raising questions about the limits of the human itself as the boundary between inner and outer life is insistently interrogated and the relation between the psyche and the social exposed in all its complexity. Though apparently inward-looking, Kelman's subject is ex-centric, existing on that boundary where its constitutive relations with the world and its others take place – that is, from where its ongoing subjectivisation occurs – and from where it never escapes.

The loss of a delusional autonomy is painful, and, moreover, I have interpreted this loss as a masculine one, instigated by and making reference in its purview to the losses of absolute truth, an idealised working-class masculine identity attached to a radical political world view, and the privileging of the masculine which characterises the Enlightenment self of modernity. I have suggested that Kelman's novels map a trajectory of this masculine loss which culminates in the publication of *Mo said she was quirky* with its female central character. Does this text, then, symbolise the acceptance of that loss of masculine autonomy, and recognition of the fact of Butler's assertion that 'it is only by absorbing the other as oneself does one become something at all?'<sup>56</sup> Is giving prominence to the protagonist Helen an acknowledgment of the trace of the other within Kelman's literary corpus?

In the title Helen exists as a trace; it refers to Mo, Helen's partner, and his opinion of her and she has no substance, not even being named. However, the novel is directed through Helen's consciousness and it is only through her that we encounter Mo, that we know anything about him. And in fact, this is signalled in the title as its indirect form refers to Helen's indirect discourse, characteristic of the novel. This is not his narrative, then; he is one of its objects, and a fairly minor one. Giving over the title to him would seem to have other significance. Moreover, the melancholic relation here does not concern him but Helen's brother Brian, from whom she has been estranged for many years. The instigation of the narrative is a curious event where Helen thinks she recognises Brian as one of two homeless men

who cross the road in front of her taxi when she is on her way home from her late shift working in a casino. The main part of the narrative concerns her memories of Brian and wondering if she could incorporate him into her already impossibly demanding life and cramped living space. At the end of the novel, on her next journey home she leaves the taxi to look for him and there is an inconclusively presented encounter in which she is violently repelled by the man she believes to be Brian who then disappears:

She grabbed his left arm, grasped it tightly, clinging onto him, not even hearing his voice just like what he was saying, what was he saying? she didnt know and he muttered something and swung round, locked his right hand on her throat for her so to let go, to make her let go his arm, and her trying to gulp, she was choking and clawing scratching at his hand. His grip was locking off her breath and she was forced backwards how he was forcing her backwards, till she staggered and crumpled to the ground, the other one shouting, whatever he was shouting. Then she was lying on her side but seeing to the sky. The tall skinny one was bending over her but it was all just shadows and spots, and she stayed lying there, and when her eyes were open properly the two of them had vanished. (p. 229)

Helen's longing for connection and relation with Brian is set against this refusal. His resistance to interpellation – 'she clapped her hand on his shoulder . . . he tried to shrug her off' – succeeds in that we never find out if it really is Brian. His aggression points to a violent maintaining of his independence and separateness from her. For Helen, though, connection has deep significance; 'If she missed him now she would never find him again [. . .] Her entire life, the strangest strangest feeling like never ever, destined never, how her life never, would *never begin*' (p. 228, emphasis in original). This dramatic and esoteric deduction makes no logical sense, as she herself points out: 'That was so so strange, never to begin and here she was with a six-year-old daughter'. However, in the context of melancholia, her desire to begin her life can be interpreted as a need to escape the melancholic cycle and inaugurate the process of mourning the losses of a despairing, unliveable life by connecting with her brother and acknowledging and stating those losses: 'She would tell him. Everything would be out in the open'. In Brian's refusal of connection, this scene plays out a male autonomy figured

as homeless, outcast and spectral, accompanied by its double rather than its other.

*Mo said she was quirky* presents a dramatic climax to Kelman's critique of the autonomous male subject, putting its survival in doubt and staging its disappearance. There are echoes here of the close of *How Late it Was, How Late* where Sammy leaves Glasgow in a taxi and 'that was him, out of sight' (p. 374). But rather than a demise, this scene can also be interpreted as an inauguration of mourning for Sammy, a moving on in life. In *Mo said* it is actually Helen who reminds us of Sammy when in her prone state at the end she can only see 'shadows and spots' (p. 229), as Sammy in the opening paragraph of *How Late* was 'seeing all kinds of spots and lights' (p. 1). The spectral male disappearance which closes *Mo said* holds no hope for the autonomous male, but, surprisingly for Kelman, the novel does present us with an alternative model of masculinity in Mo, the male agent of the title. Significantly, he is not white, but a gregarious Pakistani man who works as a waiter, and is always talking and laughing, making jokes and playing games with Helen and her daughter Sophie. As strongly connected with the community, he is unable to walk down the street without chatting to friends and strangers alike, and he makes and repairs things from the spare parts he randomly collects. He converts the large cupboard into a bedroom for Sophie in their cramped flat; this is surely a sign of their poverty, but, moreover, also a symbol of his constructive accommodation of the child in his life, of his care and connection. Outward-looking and full-of-life, immersed in the social, Mo is the antithesis of the melancholic, and as such he is prioritised in the title. He symbolises the beginning of Kelman's turn to the future of masculinity, to imagining a liveable life beyond the disappearance of the autonomous masculinised subject.

Melancholia has been a signature of Kelman's writing, inherent in its labelling, for instance, as 'workerist lament'.<sup>57</sup> In a way, this is accurate, though not in the pejorative manner intended. As a 'passionate or demonstrative expression of grief' (*OED*), Kelman's mournful lament can be read as a turn away from melancholia and therefore as a protest against attachment to the past. The melancholic subjectivity he presents connects with the loss of male power and privilege, yet the acknowledgement of that loss that I identify here prompts recognition of vulnerability which potentially opens out to the possibility of a more liveable life, in Butler's words. Her theorising of melancholia as a social issue and the psyche as a battleground enable

constructive new perspectives on the radical nature of Kelman's writing as political critique.

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## Notes

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- 1 Roderick Watson, 'Maps of Desire: Scottish Literature in the Twentieth Century', in T. M. Divine and R. J. Finlay (eds), *Scotland in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1996), p. 303.
- 2 Willy Maley, 'Swearing Blind: Kelman and the Curse of the Working Classes', *Edinburgh Review* 95 (1996): 105–12 (p. 107).
- 3 Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 140.
- 4 Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 40.
- 5 Most conspicuously, see Neil McMillan, 'Wilting, or the "Poor Wee Boy Syndrome": Kelman and Masculinity', in *Edinburgh Review*, 108 (2001): 41–55; Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).
- 6 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 15.
- 7 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 198.
- 8 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 245.
- 9 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 159.
- 10 James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Picador, 1990 [1989]); *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Vintage, 1998 [1994]); *You Have To Be Careful In The Land Of The Free* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004).
- 11 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2011), pp. 11–12.
- 12 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham UP, 2005), p. 111.
- 13 Jennifer Jeffers, *Beckett's Masculinity* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 5, 4.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 15 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 22.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 3.
- 20 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 167.
- 21 Freud, p. 243.

- 22 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 170.
- 23 James Kelman, 'Make Yer Point', *Guardian Review* (11 August 2007), pp. 6–7.
- 24 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 197.
- 25 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 30.
- 26 James Kelman. "And the Judges Said . . ." *Essays* (London: Vintage, 2003 [2002]), p. 38.
- 27 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 4.
- 28 Moya Lloyd, p. 146.
- 29 Robert E Watkins, 'Vulnerability, vengeance, and community: Butler's Political Thought and Eastwood's *Mystic River*', in Terrell Carver and Samuel A Chambers (eds), *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 193.
- 30 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 95.
- 31 McRobbie, p. 94.
- 32 Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholia', in Gilroy et al (eds), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 21–29.
- 33 Aaron Kelly, *James Kelman: Politics and Aesthetics* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 122.
- 34 Judith Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso: 2000), p. 24.
- 35 Moya Lloyd, p. 149.
- 36 McRobbie, p. 149.
- 37 Moya Lloyd, p. 148.
- 38 Kelman, *A Dissaffection*, p. 306.
- 39 Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), p. x.
- 40 Genevieve Lloyd, "Rationality." In Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Blackwell Publishing, 1999). Blackwell Reference Online. 9 January 2015 [www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9780631220671.chunk.g978063122067117](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9780631220671.chunk.g978063122067117) This provides a succinct introduction to the feminist critique of reason.
- 41 McMillan, p. 40.
- 42 Knights, p. 192.
- 43 Simon Jenkins, 'An Expletive of a Winner', *The Times* (15 October 1994), p. 20.
- 44 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 2.
- 45 Kelly, p. 9.
- 46 James Kelman, *Kieron Smith, Boy* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008); *Mo said she was quirky* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012).
- 47 The following passage is a development of ideas presented in Carole Jones, 'Kelman and Masculinity', in Scott Hames (ed.), *Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2010), pp. 111–20.
- 48 McRobbie, p. 117.
- 49 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 179.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 196–97.
- 51 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 23.
- 52 Homi Bhabha, 'Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt', in Lawrence Grossberg et al (eds), *Cultural Studies: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 66.
- 53 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 190.
- 54 McRobbie, p. 117.
- 55 Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, p. 184.



56 Ibid., p. 195.

57 Andrew O'Hagan, 'The Paranoid Sublime'. *London Review of Books*, 16.10 (26 May 1994), p. 8.

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