

Listening to James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late*

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In describing “working class culture” in *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, Raymond Williams prioritized its sense of community, calling its identity social rather than individual. Working class cultural representations were not to be found so much in individual works of art or literature or theory, said Williams, but rather in the significant communal productions of the “collective democratic institution, whether in trade unions, the cooperative movement, or a political party” (313). Writers of working class fictions, then, would be located in a liminal cultural area, a part of, but apart from, the usual cultural representations of the working class. When he decided that he wished to write stories, James Kelman also determined that he wanted “to write and remain a member of [his] own community.” As he explains in “The Importance of Glasgow in My Work,”¹⁾ Kelman chose to write out of a Glaswegian working class background

as normal or abnormal as anyone else’s. Born and bred in Govan and Drumchapel, inner city tenement to the housing scheme homeland on the outer reaches of the city. Four brothers, my mother a full-time parent, my father in the picture framemaking and gilding trade, trying to operate a one-man business. And I left school at 15 etc. etc. (81)

But at the same time that Kelman chooses the Glaswegian working class community as the site of his stories, he aligns the specific locality of his writing with an awareness of other communities and the pervasive global aspect of political and economic power relationships. Just as his use of “homeland” to locate the public housing in which he grew up in Glasgow simultaneously speaks of political repression elsewhere, Kelman lets direct experience be sideshadowed and informed by the stories of others: “Socrates and Agamemnon is just as much a part of my socio-political background as the old guy who stands in the pub

telling me of the reality of war as experienced by his grandfather in the Crimea War” (84). From such a position, Kelman writes from both within and beyond the working class community of Glasgow; located, as Homi K. Bhabha might describe it, in an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” where

the present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence; our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities (4).

In other words, Kelman recognizes “working class” as an identity category no more stable than “gender,” and, like the latter, “an effect of institutions, practices, and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (Butler xi).

If Williams moderately maintains in *The Long Revolution* that “we are still not sure whether the determining factor, on our membership of a social class, is our birth or our adult work”(343), Kelman is confident that his work of an artist and his birth in the working class do not disqualify him from membership in either community²⁾. However, he maintains that the ability to accommodate both of those ideas at once will determine his visibility to others, and that indeed one of the ways to identify the artist is through the nature of social relationships. As he explains in “Artists and Value,” one of the ways he used to intuit “a painter from a painter who is also an artist, was how they treated the servants, how they treated the folk who work behind the bar in the Art Club, the folk who serve the grub down in the refectory, the ones who carry the pictures up the stairs and hang them” (12). Coming from a family where father, grandfather, and uncles were picture framers and gilders and restorers, Kelman as a twelve-year-old often carried paintings from shop to gallery. Later, “at a time when I wasn’t earning enough as a writer and having to go beyond my own work to earn a few bob” (12), Kelman again did delivery work, and one day found himself

standing between two so-called artists in a lift, me balancing the painting while they had a smoke and a blether. The concept of ‘invisibility’. I knew from the conversation that it wouldn’t have crossed their minds that the chap carrying the picture could understand what they were on about. They saw themselves as ‘artists’. The chap who transports their work was the

chap who transports their work. They have an inner spiritual life. But the chap doesn't, the chap is a pleb, a servant, brutalized. Servants may be heroic or not heroic but they're never fully-formed human beings, never particular people. (13)

This 'concept of invisibility' also holds in the absence of literary representations that reflect Kelman's background. In "The Importance of Glasgow in My Work," Kelman recalls his search as a young writer for such characters, and how few he found of them, and how always they were "kept in their place;" the speech of these marginal characters seemed a strange language rendered in a profusion of apostrophes, "a hotchpotch of bad phonetics and horrendous spelling" (81). It was clear to Kelman, as it was clear in the lift, that the narrative was owned by the English masters of the literary universe, and expressed only their thoughts and feelings, verified the exclusive existence of their spiritual lives while "[w]e all stumbled along in a series of behaviouristic activity... folk who could be scrutinized" (82). This is the traditional role of the literary stereotype, used as a psychic constriction on cultural identity, but as Bhabha suggests, in an interview with David Bennett and Terry Collits, such stereotypes can be emancipatory when they are re-positioned and re-read.

[F]orms of displacement and exploitation might show us the other face of modernity and might then enable us to construct cultural signs, symbols and temporalities by which we might, for instance, begin to renegotiate what it is that we consider to be forms of communal living, what the ethics of the recognition of personhood are, or, indeed, what cultural interaction may be. (239)

In other words, public context, as well as self-presence and public image, are at issue in Kelman, along with the complacency with which a citizen might accept that the society they belong to is a democratic one. Kelman's awareness of this complex narrative position is evident in his comments on Franz Kafka's use of third party narrative. In "Artists and Value," the writer describes how Kafka "doesn't necessarily detail a thing that exists. What he often does is refer to a space that he then fills with a crowd of things that either don't exist, or maybe don't exist. He fills the pages with absences and possible absences,

possible realities” (6). Kelman recognizes in this technique

something extremely political, something extremely subversive; by the very application of his literary technique, or artistic method, entire value systems can no longer be taken for granted, they become problematic, they are open to question. (6)

In *How Late it Was, How Late*, a tense and intimate hearing of unemployed Sammy Samuels, a man struggling for some control of a life marked by chronic economic desperation and waylaid by 11 years in prison, Kelman uses this awareness of the political power of language and narrative to disrupt a reader/citizen's sense of complacency by a text filled with the 'absences, and the possible absences' of signs of the visual as he replaces visual representation with modes of surveillance, ways of seeing replaced by ways of being watched. When Sammy is beaten by the 'sodjers' and loses his sight, he must move through time and space by sound, touch, and memory. Temporal relationships are altered as time slows and fills to attend to the risk of the present moment. Without access to the ocular, Kelman has readers, too, listen to how invisible power relationships function. Speaking to and from a different subject position, the words on the page are not so much read as sounded through the language Sammy speaks and the stories that he tells, an animus performed in a language ignored by those in power. In this paper, I would like to consider how Kelman challenges the social representations of power by upsetting the coordinates that allow innocuous and seemingly safe passage through daily life. Resisting moral and intellectual integration into a system that he finds corrupt, the writer engages in a critical interrogation through a powerful local language that counters the world picture promoted by capitalist development of a booming global economy of free markets and free peoples, using linguistic code-switching to create a language of gaps; and shifting representation from the visual to the auditory to highlight the control and contrivance of imagery, and the intimidation democratic social institutions exert on the culturally-devalued.

Kelman is an activist in his own urban community. As a member of Workers' City, he agitated against the political project, Culture City 1990, which promoted Culture with a capital C and a smiley-face logo, in solidarity with those citizens of Glasgow who were arguing "for their right to disassociate themselves

from a decision that was made on their behalf but over which they had no control"(4). Insisting on his rights as an artist and as a citizen to participate in social decisions and voice dissent in public gatherings and in print, Kelman's outrage was and continues to be largely with the established left, the Labour opposition who represent themselves as advocates of the people, the working class, and as such "always demand solidarity, urging the people of Scotland to ignore these fringe-type-crypto-radicals who persist in fighting the Tories instead of siding with themselves in their fearless struggle to implement Tory policy" ("Foreword," *Recent Attacks* 4). Kelman is aware of the smug assumptions of democracy and alarmed by the social control exercised by those in authority. "It isn't so much we are told downright lies -- although very often we are-- just that we are not told the truth, mainly this is done by negation. We are told what is not the case, either that or we get told nothing at all; we are given an absence of information, an absence of truth, we are given silence" ("Artists and Value" 11).

We are also given stereotypes that allow the government to deal in generalities, ignoring scrutiny of such details, for example, as who actually comprises the working class. "What exactly is the proletariat," asks Kelman in "Artists and Value." "How do you recognize a class of folk? Or a race of people" (11). You recognize them by general characteristics, as ideas or abstract entities; "it is a way of looking that by and large is the very opposite of art"(11) and accepts that

big handsome men and slender beautiful women will always be seen as such no matter who is doing the looking. And by quick extension of that:

Everybody on the broo is lazy. Jews are greedy. Black people are criminal. Red-haired people are bad tempered. Irish people are ignorant. Peasants are hamfisted, Glaswegian working-class males are drunken wife-beaters. (9)

Further extrapolation: the working class does not appreciate Art, and indeed, an artist cannot really be a member of the working class. Just as Bhabha argues that there is a "damaging and self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged" (19), Kelman finds that within conventional left- and right-wing circles, "the myth that art with a capital 'a' is both product and property of society's upper orders is taken for

granted” (30). This myth can similarly be embraced by a working class socialist faction to become the basis for dismissing art as “elitist”:

It never crosses the mind of the vanguard that people living in Castlemilk, Drumchapel, Easterhouse, Craigmillar or Muirhouse, or any other housing scheme in Britain, might prefer a play by Chekov or a painting by Cezanne or a piece of music by Puccini to whatever else is being forced down their throat. A case will be advanced by those and others for what is euphemistically termed “community art,” ie. art of the ‘workshop’ variety; apart from administrative and basic material costs it is produced for next to nothing, and helps keep idle hands at work--thus groups of teenagers trying to survive on no money per se are given a tin of dulux and told to paint their face, or maybe pensioners are asked to write their memoirs which are eventually photocopied and stapled together, and then dumped into the shredder when the next administration takes over. (“Art and Subsidy, and the Continuing Politics of Culture City,” 31)

Kelman’s character, the bold Sammy, may initially seem a version of the “blind and stupefied” proletarian poor depicted by Chaplin in *Modern Times*, defined by the immediate character of his needs, and his total alienation at the hands of his masters” (Barthes 39). Certainly he was recognized as such by dissenting Booker Prize judge, Julia Neuberger, who dismissed him along with the book as “just a drunken Scotsman railing against bureaucracy” (Gilbert 231). Sammy is struggling with what it means to be an unemployed member of the working class; to be the son of staunch trade unionists, but also someone who has spent more than a decade of his young adult life in prison. His thinking is not “grounded in great theories, great ethical positions, complete or totalized forms of knowledge; rather, [he is] struggling to make those meanings” (Bhabha 240) with only the knowledge that he is being denied access to information on the basis of the way he speaks and where he comes from. He has heard of happy endings, of a bright future ahead, but he has spent most of his life dealing with one problem after another; being suddenly blind is just a new one:

Everyday was a fucking problem. And this was a new yin. So ye thought it out and ye coped. That was what a problem was, a thing ye thought out and

then coped with, and ye pushed ahead; green field round every corner, sunshine and blue skies, streets lined with apple trees and kids playing on the grass, the auld authorities and head man up there in his wee central office, good auld god with the white beard and the white robe, sitting there watching ye from above, the gentle wee smile, leading the children on [...] It was just the now. It was this minute here. That was all; once ye got through it ye were past it. (37)

With limited resources available on a daily basis, and the subaltern's oblique relationship to the general story and the national idiom, Sammy recognizes his own stories as his most effective strategy for survival, knowing when to talk and who to tell them to: "stories, stories, life's full of stories, they're there to help ye out, when ye're in trouble, deep shit, they come to the rescue, and one thing ye learn in life is stories" (52).

The title of Kelman's 1994 Booker Prize-winning novel, *How Late it Was, How Late*, signals the belated arrival of a Glaswegian working class voice in a modern world where "[s]tate, culture, economy and finance all amalgamate into one unpurviewable complex system within which the practices of everyday life are inexorably constituted" (Holub 176). Sammy is waking up or coming to, but unable to fill in the gap of the lived experience of the last few days, an experience that is lost and remains nebulous throughout the novel. "Ye wake up in a corner" begins the novel, as Sammy edges into consciousness, wondering, "Where in the name of fuck [...] He was here"(1). Inconsistently using the second and third person, and rarely the first, Kelman articulates Sammy's thoughts from a vague position which seems to be the reader's, narrator's, and the character's, all at once, without being conflated and unified. Possibilities pass quickly through Sammy's mind as he searches for meaning for why he is lying among the weeds; why he is wearing his good trousers instead of his jeans; and why his new leather shoes have been replaced by trainers. But such personal considerations are cut short when Sammy squints into the brightness and sees people, "eyes looking. These eyes looking. Terrible brightness and he had to shield his own cause of it, like they were godly figures and the light coming from them was godly or something but it must have been the sun high behind them" (2). Eyes looking and telling him who he is. It seems, in fact, the eyes belong to tourists:

strangers to the city for some big fucking business event. And here they were courtesy of the town council promotion office, being guided round by some beautiful female publicity officer with the smart tailored suit and scarlet lips with this wee quiet smile, seeing him here but obliged no to hide things; to take them everywhere in the line of duty, these gentlemen foreigners, so they could see it all, the lot, it was probably part of the deal otherwise they werenay gony invest their hardwon fortunes, that bottom line man sometimes it's necessary, if ye're a business man, know what I'm talking about. So fair enough, ye play yer part and give them a smile, so they can tell ye know a life different to this yin where what ye are is all

where what ye are, that it's part of another type of whole (2).

Code switching occurs as Sammy inserts the untranslated language of the business and political community into his summation of the appearance of this group of 'tourists'. Even groggy, Sammy can see that this is a call for 'municipal solidarity' and is ready to scramble to his feet and give a smile, regretting that he does not look his best to help the cause. But while he assumes knowledge of the tour's intention, he also wants to convey an awareness of a life "different to this yin where what ye are is all." In the blur of commercial and political interests, Sammy distinctly stands out as someone who lacks the necessary forms of moral, linguistic, and financial capital to play more than a lowly part in them. Sammy should know this, he has been conditioned to know this, by education and punitive institution, but the break in the line suggests the narrator/writer's intention to indicate a gap, or hybrid site, that opens into the possibility of another life-world, an alternative universe with more relaxed rules of entry based on democratic access. This is an early moment in the novel where Kelman "marks and politicizes the fact that 'ordinary circumstances' are not coherent" (Gilbert 227) and that the myth of the 'ideal speaker' is a repressive and misleading linguistic and social paradigm. The code-switching and gaps here shatter the "illusion of linguistic communism which haunts all linguistic theory" in its concern with "an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogenous speech community" (Bourdieu 467), and foreground the bias in the construction of a single linguistic community reproduced by the imposition of social institutions that ignore a real world of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Moving along, Sammy is aware that everyone is looking at him. "How come

they were all fucking 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"(3). Catching sight of the tourists again, Sammy sees that they are not tourists, or at least, this time he sees "sodgers, fucking bastards, ye could smell it; even without their uniforms. A mile away. Sammy knew them, ye can aye tell, their eyes; if ye know these eyes then ye aye see them, these kind of eyes, they stay with ye"(3). Sammy's eyes mistake tourists for sodgers, or maybe not. The code switching blurs the military and municipal police, in perhaps an intertextual nod to Kelman's play, *Hardie and Baird*, and so to Scotland's history of conflict with authority³). Sammy's eyes register the interrelation of the commercial and public interests, though he pragmatically accepts the gaze of former while to the latter he shows his animosity. Detecting a similar partnership in the municipal government's interest in 'Culture', Kelman finds such relationships far from healthy. In his Foreword to *Some Recent Attacks*, Kelman protests the use of partnerships between business and politics, and the use of marketing strategies and corporate slogans to mask local and global power plays. He challenges the notion that "Glasgow somehow exists because of the tireless efforts of a tiny patriotic coalition of fearless 18th century entrepreneurs and far-sighted politicians. These same merchants and politicians made the bulk of their personal fortunes by the simple expediency of not paying the price of labour" (2). And, Kelman continues, a belated awareness of the damage of political and commercial collusion has been disastrous to the working class;

the full legacy left by the farsighted shipping magnates is only now being realized in the form of horrific asbestos-related terminal diseases, contracted by more than 20,000 shipyard workers since the last war alone, making Glasgow's death-rate from these diseases some eight times higher than the UK average (and that's the official figure). And the legendary heroes were well aware of the dangers, in other words they knowingly and cynically exposed tens of thousands of Clydeside workers to one of the deadliest substances known to humankind. (2)

As a construction worker on a building site, Sammy has worked with asbestos ("Fucking clouds of it; auld asbestos man everything. Up yer nose and down yer

throat. When ye spat up first thing in the morning it came out like a lump of fucking dross" (159)), and has taken the advice of another worker on how to breathe more easily. He does not blame commercial interests for the substitution of dross for a social voice or his economic predicament, but he is sure that the sodjers are not operating in his best interests.

Knowing the risk of engagement with the law manifest in these hostile forces, Sammy nevertheless asks them for a pound, and as he does so, explains why he will be denied: "these fucking sodjers man if ye're no fucking millionaire or else talk with the right voice, they don't give a fuck" (4). The audacity of someone with the wrong voice speaking critically and rudely to them draws the sodjers' prompt disapproval, but just as one of them shoves him, Sammy makes a decision and "lets him have one, right on the side of the jaw, and his fucking hand, it felt like he had broke it. And sodjer number 1 was grabbing at him but Sammy's foot was back and he let him have it hard in the leg" (4). Sammy runs, but is caught, and beaten before being handcuffed and thrown into a patrol car. The antagonism is startling, perhaps, but it is a familiar routine to Sammy. "It was black, things seemed black. It was usual, it was usual; that was what he was thinking, the words in his head, it was the usual. Then they had him in the poky and it was more of the same"(6). A familiar enough routine to others, too, it would seem, given the demographic Kelman notes in his essay, "Prisons," that the proportion of young people behind bars in Scotland is higher than anywhere else in Western Europe (53). In light of that statistic, Kelman wonders "what sort of effect does this have on them, on their future, on their friends and families, the future of their friends and families ... What does it tell us about the young people in Scotland, how we treat them, how the legal system treats them, how the police treat them?" (53). Raising such questions may suggest an atmosphere of tolerance in a social system which welcomes criticism as a method to instigate change but Kelman points out

the fact of this present discussion implies we live in a society which allows us to beresponsible, allows us to take part in the decision-making process in a meaningful way, the assumption being that we live in an open and democratic society. But unfortunately, this is something we can't assume easily. Not only do I not assume it, I don't believe it: our society is certainly not open and it's only with some linguistic juggling you could describe it as

democratic. (54)

At this stage, our feelings about Sammy's decision to engage the police may range from sympathy to anger for having courted trouble when he might just have easily kept a low profile. But belligerent Sammy will not let things be, will not be kept in his place even when bodily confined. In his cell, aware of the eye watching him from the peephole, he performs, miming intention as he pulls up his shirt to assess the damage of the beating,

letting the screw know he knew the score, like he was making notes for future reference, once he stuck in the auld compensation claim I mean ye cannay go about knocking fuck out of cunts and expect them no to submit their claim through the proper channels, no if ye're an official servant of the state I mean that's out of order, banging a citizen. (8)

If it seems that Sammy is trying to convince himself that he has a right to protest a police beating, and code switches (from "I mean ye cannay go about knocking fuck out of cunts" to "submit their claim through the proper channels") in order to assert his right more publicly, then it is probably because he suspects what Kelman knows, that "nothing's more threatening to the authorities than an investigation of the system itself; it implies a structural fault. Better that those on the lower end of the social scale are punished and victimized than our democracy is revealed for what it is" ("Some Recent Attacks on the Rights of the People" 38).

Sammy sits in his cell, aware of being watched, and of the presence of surveillance so much a part of daily life it is hardly noticed. Cameras are in the bank, in the elevator, and in the stores where Sammy shoplifts. For the camera in the cell, Sammy censors his own gestures to hide information. He wants to urinate but is unsure of his body and uncertain of how he will appear and his behaviour construed:

he was trembling like fuck and the pee missed the pail and hit the floor and he jerked back, just managing to stop his prick getting caught in the fly else he would have pished down the inside leg christ man the shaking he was doing, and the piss streamed out, he imagined the sodjers watching the VTR,

notebooks in hand: 'peed the floor'. (9)

Not Foucault but eleven years in prison have taught Sammy that the central principle of the penitentiary is "total visual access to the inmate's every move" (Pfeiffer 91), following the paradigm of the 18th century Panopticon developed by Jeremy Bentham. While the inmates cannot see each other, but only the guard tower, the observer in the tower sees all. This ocular relationship of being scrutinized while being denied visual access is prevalent elsewhere in society and within literature, and is an insidious example of psychological intimidation. As Foucault points out, no single prisoner is being watched all the time, but the panoptical technique works to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (299). Its abstract center "imposes order while simultaneously preventing the oppressed from visualizing power" (Sundaram 275).

But "there's something far far wrong" (1) happening to Sammy that essentializes the viewing arrangement in the jail: he has gone blind. Not only visual, but also temporal and spatial orientation collapse. In spite of this, Sammy is initially neither staggered nor deeply despondent about being blind. On the contrary, he seems pleased by the promise of change:

He was definitely blind but. Fucking weird. Wild. It didn't feel like a nightmare either, that's the funny thing. Even psychologically. In fact it felt okay, an initial wee flurry of excitement but no what ye would call panic-stations. Like it was just a new predicament... this was a new stage in life, a development. A new epoch! A fucking new beginning, that was what it was! (10-11)

Sammy has no doubt been taught in school that suffering "builds character," and is often ready to reproach himself when he starts to sound sorry for himself, for complaining instead of coping. To accept the destiny script of deprivation and endurance with good humour is an important lesson in life for the working classes to learn: "Folk take a battering ... they get born and they get brought up and they get fuckt. That's the story; the cot to the fucking funeral pyre" (16). That is the received wisdom in the maxims Sammy uses as coping mantras in an effort to control his rage at his social destiny. If the beating was not as severe as

feared, the job not so miserable, he is grateful for small mercies. No matter what hardships were encountered, there was “the auld saying: life goes on” (58). Ad-libbing, departing from the script means trouble, and that explains why Sammy has had his share. Leading him from the cell into the warmth of their office, the police dismiss Sammy’s claim of blindness, calling him instead “drunk and incapable,” blaming his character for his physical condition. And sitting there in the police station, Sammy recalls a test he took once in London:

It was for a job, he had to sit it; him and another ten thousand and 96 guys, all stuck in a long corridor; people looking at them; stupid fucking questions; general knowledge shite; all bullshit man the whole fucking deal; and this arsehole in a sharp suit walking up and down, the mediator or something, there to see ye didnay cheat, giving ye piercing glances and all that ye felt like setting about the cunt. Fucking bampot he was. And all these stupid questions. But ye felt like there was some key they had to crack yer answers, and then the whole of yer life would be there, all laid bare, all yer dirty wee secrets; and them studying them when ye were away home, logging the info into the central bank. (14)

Bourdieu has discussed the intimidation of this “secret code” which darkens the seemingly insignificant details of daily life. “[W]ays of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent, or even of speaking (‘reproachful looks’ or ‘tones’, ‘disapproving glances’, and so on) are full of injunctions which are powerful and hard to resist precisely because they are silent and insidious, insistent and insinuating” (471). They tell you bad things happen because “ye’re just no a good man” (1). This is where class judgements seep into the ground level of consciousness and deeply affect a personal sense of worth.

The police let Sammy go and he makes his way home. It will require heightened care, but Sammy does not think that being blind will much alter the familiar idea “of walking long distances, skint and fucking starving, cold and fucking with naywhere to go man all that kind of deprivation shite. Fuckall new in this game” (46). But walking home in fact is new and accompanied by an escalation of paranoia: people whisper and Sammy stiffens with dread.

Other people were there, he knew they were there he heard them, he heard

them kind of talking or something it was like some weird wind, like a draught or something, loud, it was voices, like these voices being carried on the wind, right next to him man. Christ almighty, christ almighty ye think of all the bastards ye've had trouble with ower the years, it could be any one of them, any fucking one of them. (53-4)

Unilaterally viewed and confined to the margins of the streets to make his way by touch, tapping patty cake patty cake against the walls, Sammy is "fuckt, drained, knackt, totally, felt like he had run a marathon" (54), the journey home a compressed version of how he lives: "step by step, by step, ye keep going, ye just dont cave in man that feeling, hanging there, but ye dont let it cover ye ye keep going ... this was nay the fucking worst man" (57). In "The Poor and the Proletariat," Barthes has observed that to "see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of *what* he does not see (40)" but Sammy is the blind subject, and not only is he aware of what he cannot see, but of all the possibilities of what they might be.

Finding Helen, his girlfriend, not at home, Sammy sits down exhausted and listens to the radio, using it to time himself. There are a variety of programmes that Sammy likes to listen to, but most of all, he enjoys music, especially country and western. However, even when relaxing to music, Sammy notices a difference in the way different kinds of music are presented, an apprehension of class evident in the deference or lack of it extended to the listener. In the case of country music,

ye hardly got it on the radio, they dont like ye listening to it, the powers-that-be, know what I'm saying, adult music, they dont like ye listening to it. Mind you but this programme Sammy was tuned into, the cunt that did his DJ had a bad habit of talking ower the intros I mean they dont fucking do that for the classical stuff, the cunts wouldnay dare dream of talking ower the opening bits, the first movement, these fucking MPs man they would ask questions in parliament if they started that kind of carry on, the House of Lords and aw that, there would be fucking revolution man these MPs and their constituents. (156)

Lyrics fill the novel, snatches of songs by Kris Kristofferson and Bob Dylan, Woodie Guthrie and Willie Nelson. Sammy's head is filled with these songs and

ones of his own; he sports a lonestar belt buckle, and dreams of going to Texas, riding away with Willie and Waylon. Music, in other words, lets him imagine a way out, just as for Kelman, as he said at the Sydney Writers' Festival in 1997, rock music made him feel "he had permission" to be a writer. Music, like memories and dreams, is the kind of cultural production, says Bhabha, that people create when "those two grand options M--the grand opera on the one hand, or the grand overthrow of the state on the other--are not available" (Interview 239), but even given their availability, it is not certain that the other options might not still be more attractive.

In "Toward a Periodization of Listening: Radio and Modern Life," Kate Lacey suggests that the plurality of listening positions assumed in listening to news or music or a talk-show on the radio may ... foster a sense of fragmented identity" (280). In Sammy's case, it offers private access to a public world largely off-limits. But although he enjoys the information it offers, it is a fragile pleasure that can be disrupted suddenly when the disembodied voices and accents from another world fill him with rage at social inequity:

Sometimes the voices drowned ye out. The incredible lives being led elsewhere in this poxy country, like a fucking fairy story. Ye couldnay believe yer ears at some of the stuff ye heard. Ye go about yer business eating yer dinner and all that, washing the dishes; and ye listen to these voices. Ye think fucking christ almighty what the fuck's going on. Sammy couldnay even see. He couldnay even fucking see man know what I'm talking about, and he still had to listen to them, these fucking bampot bastards. And ye get angrier and angrier, angrier and angrier, till ye feel like ramming yer fist through the fucking kitchen window and with a bit of luck ye'll slice right through the main artery (119).

Sammy's rage at the radio may be the intrusion into his private space, into his leisure time, of the same voices that exclude him in public space, addressing an imaginary audience in a still exclusive singular. Sammy senses what Raymond Williams has pointed out in "The Technology and Society, that "broadcasting can be diagnosed as a [...] powerful form of social integration and control" (45), but that it is nevertheless a contradictory mode which centralizes transmission but privatizes reception (50). Kelman's writing, on the other hand, is acting like free

radio, working on a different logic, “a logic bottom up rather than top down” which creates a new space that is both local and transnational as it “addresses the spatiality of linguistic domination that relegates ...minority language to the sphere of private talk” (Urta 296).

A further cycle of police interrogation ensues as Sammy’s case grows more complex after a surveillance report on politically subversive Charlie Barr shows him meeting with Sammy in a bar. To complicate things further, Helen, with whom Sammy lives, has been reported missing by her employer. A computer taps away in the police station, recording Sammy’s answers to questions, his story. The technology is not programmed to accept his explanations, and he is told to change his language: “Dont use the word ‘cunts’ again, it doesnay fit in the computer” (160).

A computer is tapping, too, in the Department of Social Services, when Sammy goes there to make an application for disability, and there is a similar selectivity about the information to be recorded by the claims processor. He tentatively engages an officer in the procedure for making a disability claim, downplaying the brutality of the sodjers and taking some of the blame himself in his preliminary explanation:

a pity about yer eyes

Ach my own stupidity son a wee altercation with the sodjers; they gave me a doing. Sammy shrugged. One of these things; I was silly and so were they.

They gave ye a doing?

Aye.

And ye’re saying ye were silly?

...

The boy started hitting the keyboard again.

What’re ye writing that down? said Sammy.

Yeh.

Well I’d prefer ye no to.

I’ve got to but Mister Samuels.

How?

Cause it’s material.

...

We're required to do it.

Sammy sniffed. Ye no got a delete button?

Yeh but no for this operation. If the customer doesnt want something in they're supposed to not say it. (98)

Although the examining officer is sympathetic to Sammy, and shows understanding and knowledge of how to deal with the blind, he will not bend any rules. A smothering sense of helplessness, of being dominated, overwhelms Sammy as there seems very little he can control. "It's just how they suffocate ye; all their fucking protocols and procedures, all designed to stop ye breathing, to grind ye to a halt; ye're no to wander and ye've no to breathe, ye've no to open yer mouth" (321). Things get worse during an examination by the doctor, where the language of authority is spoken with unremitting correctness and sense of superiority coupled with a reluctance to give any information to the patient that may be of use, and a refusal to understand any other mode of expression but his own. At the same time, as part of the "cult of the expert," the doctor, like the politician, or perhaps, the literary critic or politician, frowns on and dismisses attempts by those unqualified to criticize their pronouncements. But who can criticize? "Can," for example, "a work of literature only be judged by those who are trained in making literary judgments? [...] Can someone who has trained in Moral Philosophy criticise a novel? Can someone trained in Carpentry? Or is such criticism 'invalid'? What are the grounds of validity in our society? Is it possible to be socially responsible without qualification?" ("English Literature and the Small Coterie" 20-1)

The doctor, as a medical expert, is sceptical of Sammy's claim, another version of the 'mediator's' suspicions of cheating, and a version of the vigilance at the heart of the practice of surveillance. Explaining to Sammy that "no one is unique" (222), the doctor erases the notion of difference and thus any grounds for a grievance on the basis of a disparity of class, race, religion, culture, or language. As the doctor silently writes his notes following a cryptic examination, Sammy ventures to ask about the possibility of getting a seeing-eye dog:

Eh I was wondering about things like guide-dogs and white sticks... About getting them I mean?

...

Eh how do ye go about it?

Go about it?

Eh, if ye wanted a guide-dog or a white stick; how d'ye go about getting them?

I'm afraid I dont follow.

Right eh just if've ye no got the money I mean to buy them, I mean, what do ye approach a charity?

Well I dare say that if a claim in respect of a found dysfunction is allowed then an application in respect to the customer's wants that may be consistent with the found dysfunction becomes open to discharge by the appropriate charitable agency.

So I should approach a charity?

... (223-4)

The subaltern cannot speak nor see, only consume. Both the police and the social services refer to Sammy as a "customer" in need of services, which may or may not be provided. Another writer might intend all this to be highly ironic, but if Kelman's stage directions to *Hardie and Baird* give any indication, irony is not intended here. The self-conscious superiority of that position is not assumed in Kelman's writing, though he might well agree with Barthes that "to live to the full the contradictions of my time [...] may well make sarcasm the condition of truth" (12).

Outside the doctor's office, Ally offers to "represent" Sammy more successfully in front of the social agencies' doctors and examiners. The first step, Ally says, is to fulfill people's expectations and "look" blind: get dark glasses and a white cane so that people will treat Sammy with the deference due the blind rather than the disdain reserved for the drunk, or down and out. As Ally explains, using such terms as "with respect," Sammy sneers at the "spook language," but Ally prefers to call it magic; knowing "the right words to say, it's like abracadabra... along with the rules and regulations and all the different procedures; the protocols and the formalities, when ye bow and when ye scrape; when ye talk and when ye hold yer wheesht [...]: all-important-- when to wear a tie and when to loosen the top button [...] ye have to play the game. (239) It is the superiority of grammar that can win arguments. Ally, who has also been in prison, made appeals while inside to protest his innocence, supported by an outside campaign led by his family support group. Once, as part of his appeal, he

sent a press release “to the letter pages of all the qualities” stating that “the authorities are making a major error victimising all these innocent people” (300). One newspaper chose to publish Ally’s letter to the editor, not because of its message but because of a spelling mistake:

I spelt ‘victimising’ wrong. I spelt it with an ‘o’ for ‘victom’ instead of with an ‘i’ for ‘victim’. So they just left it in. And then they done an insert, the buggars, they stuck a wee SIC beside it. That was all they done. So easy! (300)

The argument invalidated, the message rendered worthless by a spelling mistake in it, there is no point in listening to the call for help from someone in prison by mistake. More important is to show the writer “who’s boss” (300). Such structural stringency and the fastidious demands of admissible input, are parts of what Bourdieu describes as mechanisms that perpetuate the myth of a standard language. “He likens the relationship of speakers with language to the capitalist state in which language is the product, but the workers/speakers do not own the means of production” (Cashman 136). The production and reproduction of language is used to maintain authority and that authority, “[p]roduced by authors who have the authority to write, fixed and codified by grammarians and teachers who are also charged with the task of inculcating mastery” (Bourdieu 468) in turn reinforces the authority of their ‘chosen’ language.

Blindness exasperates Sammy’s desperate daily existence, but the sense of a world he can neither enter nor escape from, a world that nevertheless controls his destiny and renders him powerless is suffocating; he does not need his eyes to know they are watching him. He is not alone in his sense of paranoia. In “Against the defeat of the world,” John Berger describes the culture of globalization as “perhaps the most claustrophobic that has ever existed ...there is no glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise. The given is a prison” (3). In 1957, as he recalls in his notes to “Myth Today,” Roland Barthes, looking out on the sea, was calmed. The beach might be a plethora of signs, but the serene sea bore no message (112). In Sammy’s agitation, he reaches for a metaphor to describe his feelings and it is akin to standing and looking at the sea from

the edge of a cliff and ye look out to see and the wind’s blowing and a tanker’s way out on the opposite of hemmed in, the opposite

So what Sammy was feeling was the opposite of the opposite, in other words he was fucking hemmed in man know what I'm saying, hemmed in; and it was gony get worse, afore it got better; that was a certainty, it was gony get worse. (132-3)

"The opposite of the opposite" is the flip side of "the flip side of capitalist development" (Spivak 293): a vicious circle inscribed "by the sanctions of the linguistic market,[...]which are adjusted [...] to the chances of material and symbolic profit which the laws of price formation characteristic of a given market objectively offer to the holders of a given linguistic capital" (Bourdieu 471). The tankers of multinationals signal that the freedom of the seas is as illusory as "the drinking water we used to think belonged to us as a right" ("Art and Subsidy" 36): its waves are dominated by private interests. The signs are everywhere. But while "the opposite of the opposite" means entrapment in an oppressive discourse of global greed, it means something else besides: to be outside of it as part of another whole "where what ye are is all" (2). In counterpoint to the tapping of computers, the tapping of Sammy's stick signals a step-by-step resistance that is engaged through the ear rather than the eye. With no grand narrative to guide him, Sammy slips away, "out of sight" (374), revealing panoptic surveillance as intermittent and negotiable. Change occurs from the ground up, in local context and dialogue rather than blanket gestures of solidarity. This is Kelman Free Radio sending out low-tech soundwaves in pulses of angry energy that use whatever language is necessary to democratize access to information. Ye listening?

Notes

- 1) This essay and others by Kelman cited in this paper are found in his collection, *Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political*.
- 2) At any rate, being a Booker Prize-winning writer has not vaulted Kelman into the upper income brackets. Geoff Gilbert points out, in "Can Fiction Swear? James Kelman and the Booker Prize," that every winner of the Booker Prize "between between 1979 and 1996 -- with one exception-- appeared in Alex Hamilton's annual list of the top hundred 'fast selling' paperbacks for the year after it was awarded the prize... Kelman's novel interrupted this process" (219).
- 3) As Kelman explains in the Prologue to the play, in 1820, two weavers, John Baird and Andrew Hardie, were tried as leaders of a small band of Radicals who were led into

conflict with government troops at the battle of Bonnymuir; "neither the two men nor the Scottish Insurrection in general are ever referred to officially, while within our educational system this part of history, like so many others connected with the Radical movement, remains almost entirely neglected" (109).

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