

## Befriending the Other: Community and Male Camaraderie in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*

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ÁNGELA RIVERA IZQUIERDO

Institution Address: Universidad de Granada. Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Campus de la Cartuja. C/Profesor Clavera s/n. 18011 Granada. Spain.

E-mail: [angelarivera@correo.ugr.es](mailto:angelarivera@correo.ugr.es)

ORCID: 0000-0002-8257-650X

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**Abstract:** Set in post-Thatcherite Scotland, critics generally agree that Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) mirrors the emergence of rampant individualism and the disintegration of working-class communities in the UK. To support this view, they consider the lack of a sense of fraternity in the group and the characters' fear of intimacy as indicative of individualism. However, it is possible to see Welsh's 'trainspotters' not as atomised individuals, but as members of an alternative communitarian assemblage, as theorised in continental, post-phenomenological philosophy. Using a masculinities approach, this paper proves that the characters' emotional detachment is representative of homosocial interactions among men trying to adhere to idealised types of masculinity and that, therefore, cannot be restricted to their alleged individualistic character. Contrarily, the kind of male friendship that Welsh describes can be considered as a paradigmatic example of Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of the inoperative community, characterized by transcendence and exposure to alterity.

**Keywords:** Inoperative community; alterity; masculinity; homosociality; camaraderie.

**Summary:** Introduction: "Jist Associates" or in Search of a New Model of Community in *Trainspotting*. "Ah'm No a Buftie Pal:" Masculinity in Crisis. "Yir One Ay the Best, Man:" Homosocial Interaction and the Welcoming of Alterity. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** Situada en la Escocia postthatcheriana, los críticos suelen coincidir en que *Trainspotting* (1993) de Irvine Welsh representa el surgimiento de un individualismo creciente y la desintegración de las comunidades obreras en el Reino Unido. Esta teoría se basa en la falta de sentimiento fraternal en el grupo y en el miedo de los personajes a intimar, rasgos que se consideran propiamente individualistas. Sin embargo, este estudio considera a los 'trainspotters' de Welsh no como individuos aislados, sino como miembros de un tipo alternativo de comunidad, tal y como propone la filosofía posfenomenológica continental. Adoptando el punto de vista de los Estudios de Masculinidades, este trabajo demuestra que el distanciamiento emocional de los personajes es característico de la interacción homosocial entre los hombres que tratan de seguir patrones idealizados de masculinidad y que, por tanto, dicho distanciamiento no puede atribuirse únicamente a su supuesto carácter individualista. Por el



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contrario, el tipo de amistad masculina que Welsh describe puede considerarse un ejemplo paradigmático de la idea de comunidad inoperante propuesta por Jean-Luc Nancy, caracterizada por la trascendencia y la exposición a la alteridad.

**Palabras clave:** comunidad inoperante; alteridad; masculinidad; homosocialidad; camaradería.

**Sumario:** Introducción: “Jist Associates”: En busca de un modelo nuevo de comunidad en *Trainspotting*. “Ah’m No a Buftie Pal:” Masculinidad en crisis. “Yir One Ay the Best, Man”: Interacción homosocial y aceptación de la alteridad. Conclusiones.

## INTRODUCTION: “JIST ASSOCIATES” OR IN SEARCH OF A NEW MODEL OF COMMUNITY IN *TRAINSPOTTING*

Irvine Welsh’s debut novel, *Trainspotting* (1993), takes the form of a fragmented collection of short stories which depict the heroin subculture in 1980s Edinburgh. Although the novel has a large, almost entirely male cast, the narrative focuses on a core group of four ‘mates,’ namely Mark Renton ‘Rents’ or ‘Rent-Boy,’ Simon ‘Sick Boy’ Williamson, Daniel ‘Spud’ Murphy and Francis ‘Franco’ Begbie. Of these, the closest to a protagonist is 25-year-old Renton, the most prominent narrator and the pivotal character around whom events unfold. Despite the novel’s fragmented and episodic structure, Renton’s attempts to kick heroin serve its main plot-line.

Set in post-Thatcherite Scotland, *Trainspotting* has been said to mirror the triumph of consumer capitalism and the politics of competitive individualism. Thatcher’s government directly attacked the welfare state and the organised working-class, hastening the demise of manufacturing and heavy industry and privileging neoliberal economics. In such socio-economic scenario, the Scottish working-class youth became a vulnerable, marginalised subgroup, forced into deprivation and unemployment. Although drug addiction in the novel might be considered as a subcultural response to the working-class youth situation, the addicts often voice the dominant ideology of the time. Johnny Swan claims that there are “nae friends in this game. Jist associates” (Welsh 1994: 6), an idea repeated by Renton: “it sounds good in ma heid: ‘We are all acquaintances now’” (Welsh 1994: 11). Many critics have therefore questioned whether it is possible to talk about a sense of community in *Trainspotting*. Susanne Hagemann states that in the novel “community and continuity are conspicuously absent” (1996: 13). Cairns Craig identifies a sense of community in Welsh’s text but this is merely “a community of dependency —welfare-dependency, drug-dependency,

money-dependency— which is the mirror image of the society of isolated, atomised individuals of modern capitalism” (1999: 97). Similarly, Morace contends that *Trainspotting* symbolises “the triumph of the bourgeois self and the market-place ethos of competitive individualism” (2001: 34). Scholars who support this view usually allude to the lack of a sense of brotherhood among Welsh’s male characters — although Kelly mentions “the highly forced and coercive” one inculcated by Begbie (2005: 59–60). Moreover, they consider Renton’s final ‘rip off’ as the culmination of extreme individualism. Renton’s betrayal has been said to chime with Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy and its fixation on the individual at the expense of the community. According to Burke, the novel’s ending is symptomatic of “a culture in which association has replaced friendship, signifying at a wider level the fracturing of the bonds of community” (2000: 67–68). For Haywood, it proves that the characters “have absolutely no interest in the ideals of liberty, equality, or fraternity,” codes that he deems as “dead narratives” (1997: 158).

As common to postmodern texts, *Trainspotting* is profoundly sceptical of the totalising nature of metanarratives and foundational myths, including the traditional notion of community. However, to reduce the text to a mere representation of the anti-social logic of neoliberalism is rather simplistic. In fact, the novel’s style and structure shed light on its complex and contradictory nature. *Trainspotting* is mostly written in a heavily accented first-person, sometimes stream-of-consciousness style, although small parts are narrated in Standard English, usually by a third-person omniscient narrator. The narrative cycles through a variety of characters who are often introduced without back-story, which makes it sometimes hard for the reader to figure out who the narrator is. However, Welsh is careful to identify each narrator with particular patterns of speech, so that language is always a clue. This use of language becomes thus ambivalent, since it serves to emphasise the subjectivity of each character while also creating a vibrant sense of community. This paradox epitomises the conflicting nature of postmodernity as a period that can be twofold. On the one hand, it can be understood “as a period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism” (Cova 1997: 300). On the other hand, it can be said “not to crown the triumph of individualism but the beginning of its end with the emergence of a reverse movement of a desperate search for the social link” (300). As Bauman puts it, “postmodernity, the age of contingency

*für sich*, of self-conscious contingency, is for the thinking person also the age of community: of the lust for community, search for community, invention of community, imagining community” (1992: 136).

In this view, postmodern communities —or (neo)tribes, as Maffesoli (1996) calls them— are described as “inherently unstable, small-scale, affectual and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society,” and are held together “through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, senses of injustice and consumption practices” (Cova 1997: 300–301). These communities are always *in statu nascendi* or *moriendi* rather than *essendi*, keeping open the issue of whether or not they actually exist (Bauman 1992: 137).<sup>1</sup>

The notion of community as temporary and always in process is key to understanding Jean-Luc Nancy’s ontological account of the ‘inoperative community.’ During the 1980s and early 1990s thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot or Jacques Derrida heralded a new trend that problematised the traditional understanding of community. The community or social arrangement that is generally taken for granted is called ‘organic’ or ‘operative’<sup>2</sup> by these thinkers. Organic or operative communities are rooted on myth and based on essentialist tropes of nation, class, race, and/or gender. These communities are bound by a collective identity, which results from removing the alterity of each member so that all can fuse together into an undifferentiated whole. Thereby, these communities are ‘immanent,’ meaning that they are characterized by closure, and tend to protect themselves from alterity through a process that Roberto Esposito (2011) calls ‘immunization’ (exclusion of and protection from otherness). Alternatively, Nancy proposes the inoperative community as a collectivity that rejects closure, continuity, unity and universalism. In these communities persons are not seen as atomistic, egocentric individuals but as ‘singularities.’ Singularities are necessarily inclined towards other singularities and can only exist in plurality (Nancy calls this inclination *clinamen*<sup>3</sup>). Singular beings open themselves to *transcendence* in a contact with alterity

<sup>1</sup> For an examination of the tribal aspects of consumption in *Trainspotting*, see Ryan, McLoughlin and Keating (2006).

<sup>2</sup> These two terms derive from Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* dichotomy and Émile Durkheim’s later theorisation.

<sup>3</sup> *Clinamen* is a term that Nancy borrows from Lucretius. It refers to the spontaneous, unpredictable movement of atoms to join other atoms.

through communication;<sup>4</sup> what Nancy calls 'being-together' or 'being-with.' However, each singularity possesses a secret otherness that cannot be communicated to any other singularity, which precludes them to fall into spiritual fusion or communion. According to Maurice Blanchot (1998), this community also necessarily has to be unavowable, meaning that it cannot be publicly avowed, but rather remains secret. Jacques Derrida, for its part, dislikes the connotations of the term 'community' and proposes a (non)community of dissimilars, of *non-semblables* (Hillis Miller 2011: 25).

As already mentioned, critics generally agree that it is not possible to talk about a sense of community in *Trainspotting*. They label Welsh's characters as free-standing, competitive individuals, who have no interest in the notions of brotherhood and fraternity, and who are characterized by "their fear of intimacy" (Morace 2007: 44). However, if we understand community in Bauman's and Maffesoli's terms, as highly ephemeral and unstable, and following Nancy's theorisation of community beyond essentialism, it is possible to identify a certain community sentiment in Welsh's text. In what follows, the novel's protagonists will be analysed as a homosocial community in which gender does not act as a homogenising factor. It will be shown that the emotional restraint, competitiveness and homophobia that pervade the text cannot be considered as properly individualistic traits. Rather, it will be proved that these shared meanings characterize interactions among potentially emasculated men facing a crisis of masculinity. Moreover, the lack of a sense of brotherhood and homogeneity among the characters will be read in positive terms, as a paradigmatic example of Nietzsche's and Derrida's conception of friendship as a relationship to alterity, and "beyond the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema" that dominates traditional discourse (Derrida 1997: 306).

## 1. "AH'M NO A BUFTIE PAL": MASCULINITY IN CRISIS

According to Michael Kimmel, "gender is constructed from cultural and subjective meanings that constantly shift and vary, depending on the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Communication' is not to be understood in instrumental terms as the transfer of information from one person to another, but rather as a common 'dis-location,' as the openness to and difference from one person to another that makes possible a distant closeness and the acceptance of alterity.

time and place” (1995: 254). In her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler contends that, rather than being a biological occurrence, gender is a performance, an active *doing* that enforces phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality. Gender is thus defined as a regulatory fiction sustained through repetitive, ‘stylised’ acts already socially and culturally established that actors perceive as natural and inevitable, and which emphasise binary ideals of masculinity and femininity. Even though gender can be performed and reenacted in myriad ways, only certain practices are considered to be normative, i.e. expected or approved. The most privileged form of masculinity is called “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1995, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), and represents the ideal of manliness to which all men should aspire but which is never fully attained. Hegemonic masculinity promotes men’s dominant position in society by means of the subordination of women and other alternative ways of being a man. Central to the displaying of this form of masculinity is the avoidance of any traits traditionally considered ‘feminine,’ as well as the promotion of heteronormativity.<sup>5</sup> In Connell’s model of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, working-class men are considered subordinate to hegemonic masculinity, which is predominantly middle-class, white and Western. While middle-class masculinity is usually associated with rationality and well-controlled bodies, working-class masculinity involves excess and grotesque corporeality (Morgan 1993: 82-85). This type of masculinity is characterized by heavy manual labour, strength, endurance and toughness, a lack of tolerance for emotional issues and homophobia.

Disdained by the middle-classes, Berthold Schoene has argued that “Scottish masculinity would not normally be described as ‘hegemonic,’ but rather as a ‘marginalised’ or ‘subordinate,’ or perhaps all too frequently ‘complicitous,’ kind of masculinity” (2002: 93). Indeed, working-class masculinity can be said to be complicit in hegemonic masculinity in that it contributes to the prevalence of a patriarchal model of hierarchical domination. Even though only hegemonic practices circumscribe access to dominance, it is also necessary to account for the agency of subordinated groups (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 848).

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<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi define “heteronormativity” as “the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organise homosexuality as its binary opposite” (2003: 4).

Hegemonic masculinities can be analysed at the local, regional, and global levels. Therefore, although working-class men lack institutional power, they represent a type of masculinity that is relevant to their own regional and local context.<sup>6</sup> This way, it is also possible to talk about hegemonic or predominant practices inside subordinate types of masculinity, including the working-class masculine ideal.

In Scotland, 'tough,' working-class masculinity has a long-standing social value. As Young contends, "in a country where for over two centuries national wealth became dependent on heavy industry, for the working-class male manual labour reaffirmed his masculinity" (2007: 71). Tough masculinity is epitomised in the figure of the 'hard man,' a working-class male with willingness to fight, a propensity towards physical violence, and a disregard for his own personal safety. The figure of the hard man, although particularly associated with the city of Glasgow, became normative in post-industrial urban contexts in general. According to Whyte, Welsh's *Trainspotting* has "sizeable debts to Glasgow fiction, in particular to the 'hard man' icon" (1998: 238). This has also been noticed by Jones, who observed that "Irvine Welsh is infamous for his portrayal of men and masculinities, most notably his 'hard men'" (2010: 54). Nonetheless, it is important to place Welsh's male characters within the context of a masculinity in crisis.

Social changes affecting the British working-class during the 1980s not only led to the need to re-think the notion of community, but also that of masculinity. Welsh's *Trainspotting* is set in a moment when working-class communities are no longer working and manual labour had gone into a decline. As Whyte explains, the hard man portrayed in Welsh's fiction is a "dysfunctional urban man," who is "often represented as unemployed, and is the victim of injustice and discrimination on a class basis" (1998: 274). The decline of manufacturing and heavy industry in Scotland in the last sixty years has given the Scottish man the "status of victim and loser," which makes him "the focus of a surprising but persistent pathos, a pathos that oddly 'feminises' a figure who wants to be so resolutely and absolutely masculine" (274). Unemployed young men like Renton and his lot are unable to live up to the traditional male-breadwinner standard, whose decline has been closely tied to the so-

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<sup>6</sup> As Hinote and Webber highlight, regional hegemonic masculinity usually represents what is largely accepted as a masculine ideal, embodied often in cultural or folk heroes like film actors or sport figures (2012: 296). Local masculinities, though normally compatible with and drawing on regional masculinities, are created through daily interaction in communities and thus may vary.

called crisis of masculinity. This very issue was raised in a speech given by Labour MP Diane Abbott to the think-tank Demos on May 2013. The Shadow Home Secretary suggested that Britain was facing a crisis of masculinity due to the pressures that rapid social and economic changes have placed on masculine identity. Abbott lamented that British manhood was now “shaped more by market expectations – often unachievable ones – than by fathers, family values, a sense of community spirit and perseverance” (2013: 3), and praised a bygone era when men “prided themselves on being providers – for their spouses, families and themselves” (5).

Together with unemployment, the role of women in Welsh’s text certainly contributes to emasculate male characters. Although often physically and psychologically abused by men, women in *Trainspotting* are not always portrayed as passive martyrs. However, female empowerment is normally represented in ‘masculine’ terms, through the exercise of violence and domination over the male body. An example of this can be found in “The First Shag in Ages,” when Renton has a one-night stand with an adolescent called Dianne. Despite her young age, Dianne is portrayed as being exceptionally mature and quick-witted, and does not hesitate to dictate her rules to Renton. She takes control of the situation while Renton feels “nervous, awkward and virginal” (Welsh 1994: 140). After having sex, Dianne tells him to go, shattering Renton’s “fragile sexual ego,” and leaving him “feeling empty and confused” (142).

Heroin addiction also contributes to the characters’ feeling of emasculation. Continued and excessive use of heroin is a known cause of low libido and sexual dysfunction, causing male users to fear poor sexual performances. Moreover, the drug is presented as a better alternative to sex for female users. As Alison puts it, heroin “beats any meat injection . . . beats any fuckin cock in the world” (Welsh 1994: 9, ellipsis in the original). This claim causes an outburst of Freudian castration anxiety in Renton, who feels the urgent need to “feel ma ain genitals through ma troosers tae see if they’re still thair” (9). Schoene comments on the emasculating power of heroin as follows:

The male anatomy suffers a radical devaluation within heroin culture, phallic imagery persists as the drug itself becomes a kind of über-phallus, symbolically represented by the syringe. Irrespective of their biological



sex, the experience of heroin users is one of the climax induced by penetrative sex. (2010: 72)

Furthermore, under the influence of the drug the characters seem more prone to having homosexual experiences. After consuming heroin, Raymie kisses Sick Boy “hard oan the lips” (Welsh 1994: 8), to which he reacts violently. However, after his own hit, Sick Boy, the womaniser *par excellence*, ends up hugging Swanney tightly, “keeping his airms around him (...) like lovers in a post-coital embrace” (10). It is perhaps this emasculating potential of heroin that makes Begbie, the most hypermasculine figure in the novel, reject the drug.

These emasculating forces are best embodied by the character of Spud. In “There Is a Light That Never Goes Out,” Spud is said to be unable to chat freely with women unless under the effects of amphetamine, and to be “too shy when straight or sober, and too incoherent when stoned or drunk, to make an impression on women” (Welsh 1994: 267). He does not even dare to put his arm around a girl called Nicola, whom he liked and seemed to like him back. Spud recognises that it was fear that prevented him from doing it and decides to “[jack] up in a bedroom with Rents and Matty, enjoying blissful freedom from the anxiety of wondering whether or not he’d get off with her” (267). His effeminacy is also manifested in his encounter with Laura, “a girl with an awesome sexual reputation” (268) who takes Spud home and ties him up before having sex. Spud is then described in very passive, ‘feminine’ terms: “Spud felt vulnerable and strangely coy. He’d never been tied up before, and never been told that he was beautiful” (268). Spud’s vulnerability and anxiety increase after discovering that the “Sex Goddess” (269) committed her ex-boyfriend to a psychiatric hospital tired of his depression but, above all, of his impotence. The scene hilariously ends with Spud having his member covered in Vicks Vapour Rub by Laura, who could not find any better lubricant, and the two never having sex together. Spud does not react aggressively to the emasculation that he experiences. In fact, he is portrayed as a very sympathetic character; a kind-hearted, animal-loving peacemaker who condemns all forms of violence. However, this is not the case with all Welsh’s trainspotters. Very frequently, the characters’ fear of emasculation leads them to (over)compensate for their sense of powerlessness through repetitive and exaggerated *macho* performances, usually taken to the level of ludicrousness. In so doing, they take up what

Connell (1995) has coined a “protest masculinity.” Protest masculinity “develops in a marginal class situation, where the claim to power that is central in hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated by economic and cultural weakness” (Connell 1995: 116). This form of masculinity is commonly enacted by unemployed or under-employed working-class men in the context of deindustrialisation, and is characterized by violence, crime, heavy drug/alcohol use, sexism and racism. According to psychiatrist Anthony Clare, this destructive, hypermasculine posturing may sometimes arise from the fear of being feminine that flourishes in the absence of male role models, especially in father-absent households (2000: 174). In those cases, men tend to “struggle with their peers in short-term sexual competition, exhibiting in the process aggressive, exhibitionist and exploitative behaviours” (174). This seems to apply to both Begbie and Sick Boy, who grew up with a weak or completely absent father figure.<sup>7</sup>

Francis Begbie is the most violent and brutal character in the novel. Although chemically clean, he is a hard-drinker addicted to violence; a “total fuckin crazy psycho” (Welsh 1994: 198), who bullies his friends and beats up his pregnant girlfriend. Begbie is read by Renton’s parents as an “archetypal model of manhood Ecosse” (198), as the mythical Scottish hard man. However, he is denigrated by Renton as someone who is “intae baseball-batting every fucker that’s different; pakis, poofs, n what huv ye” (78). As Iglesias Díaz has noticed, Begbie “can be said to incarnate the myth of the Clyde; a tough, hard-drinker macho-man always ready for a good fight” (2009: 45). Begbie’s mythology is nonetheless deconstructed by Renton, who presents him not as a respected, courageous figure, but as a rather pathetic one, only capable of defending his masculinity against the weakness of others. As Kelly claims:

Welsh’s fiction is strewn with working-class men who struggle to embody the myths of masculine power propagated by patriarchy that are ultimately irreconcilable with their daily lives. Yet, Welsh’s many disempowered characters do still seek to assert control over others that they

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<sup>7</sup> In *Trainpotting*, Renton and Begbie encounter a homeless man at Leith’s long-abandoned railway station. The “auld drunkard” turns out to be Begbie’s father, whom he immediately recognizes (Welsh 1994: 309). In *Porno*, Sick Boy describes his father as “a fucked-up, bitter, old has-been, who’s achieved nothing except give a good and saintly woman a hell of a life for years,” and who considered his son as “a competitor” to be “shunned and undermined at every corner” (2003: 227–228).

perceive to be weaker than themselves, whether they are women, homosexuals, ethnic others and so on. (2005: 20)

Welsh's alpha predator Sick Boy is depicted as a charismatic charmer, able to seduce almost any women. He usually impersonates Sean Connery/James Bond, copying the former's accent and the latter's suave, clean-cut, bourgeois appearance. Although he generally rejects physical violence, he is a blatant misogynist who takes pleasure in manipulating and abusing women. Furthermore, he is a transparent homophobic who believes that "there's no way you can get HIV in Edinburgh through shagging a lassie" (Welsh 1994: 31), and that the virus is more a thing for "sleazy fuckin queen[s]" (31). He is described as "just a sick cunt" (3), a fiendish narcissist who gloats over his mates' sexual jealousy: "Sick Boy never goes into any details about his sexual adventures. His discretion, however, is only observed in order to torment his less sexually prolific friends rather than as a mark of respect for the women he gets involved with" (131).

From a gender perspective, Welsh's iconic antihero seems particularly intriguing. Renton is a very contradictory character, able to fluctuate smoothly along the spectrum of masculinities. He very often uses the same sexist language as his friends, as when he raves about his disastrous sex life with Hazel, who was sexually abused by his father. However, what sets him apart from Bebgie and Sick Boy is his ability to be truly affectionate and sporadically show empathy towards women. This is further developed in *Skagboys* (2012), the prequel to *Trainspotting*, which explores his softer and more emotional side. Renton is also linked to both metrosexuality and homosexuality, thus drifting apart from idealised working-class masculinity. He is said to be self-conscious about his looks, dying his ginger hair and eyebrows black in an attempt to look more attractive to women. Moreover, one of his nicknames, Rent Boy, associates him with male prostitution and homosexual male sex. This is stressed by his homoerotic encounter with a man called Giovanni, suggestive at least of Renton's bisexuality. While in a bar, Giovanni approaches Renton and puts his hand on his thigh. In a bout of homosexual panic, Renton reacts aggressively, crying that "Ah'm no a buftie pal (...) No homosexual, ah point at masel" (233). However, he soon realises the absurdity of such a statement:

What a fuckin daft thing tae say (...) How the fuck dae ah ken ah'm no a homosexual if ah've never been wi another guy? Ah mean, really fir sure?

Ah've always hud a notion tae go aw the wey wi another guy, tae see what it wis like. Ah mean, yuv goat tae try everything once. (233)

Overall, Renton shows a very open-minded view of sex and sexuality. He admits having had reciprocal oral sex in the past with a man and claims that:

It wis a good blow-job he gave, technically speaking (...) Anywey, ah didnae mind gaun aw the wey wi a gagde, if it felt right. Jist fir the experience. Problem is, ah only really fancy birds. Guys jist dinnae look sexy. It's aw aboot aesthetics, fuck all tae dae wi morality. (234)

Renton's claims seem to support a social constructionist view of gender and sexuality, rejecting essentialist and moralist explanations of sexual desire, behaviour and identity. This is made much more explicit in John Hodge's script for Danny Boyle's film adaptation of *Trainspotting*, when Renton challenges heteronormativity and prophesies a genderless future:

Diane was right. The world is changing. Music is changing. Drugs are changing. Even men and women are changing. One thousand years from now there will be no guys and no girls, just wankers. Sounds great to me. It's just a pity no one told Begbie... You see if you ask me, we are heterosexual by default not by decision. It's just a question of who you fancy. It's all about aesthetics and it's fuck all to do with morality. But you try telling Begbie that. (*Trainspotting*, film)

Renton's attitude symbolises "the disruption of inherited paradigms of masculinity" (Kelly 2005: 39). It is reminiscent of the transgressive expressions of masculinity and femininity that erupted out of the drug culture of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the 'heroin chic,' which revelled in androgyny and gender-bending.

As shown, *Trainspotting* deconstructs archaic gender roles through grotesque exaggeration and presents alternative forms of masculinity that transcend traditional boundaries. The characters' multiple ways of performing masculinity allow to understand identity beyond gender essentialism. Welsh describes a male-only community in which gender does not act as a totalising factor, as a basis for mutual identification. The male working-class protagonists struggle to conform to gender expectations and experience a constant scrutiny of their gender and sexual behaviours. As Stefan Herbrechter observes, Welsh's antiheroes "are portrayed in their psychotic world of self-destructive masculine

identity and sexuality,” and in “their parasitic and anachronistic position with contemporary ‘postfeminist’ and ‘postgender’ culture” (2000: 109). Many scholars have deemed the trainspotters’ fear of intimacy and their competitive strivings as indicative of individualism. However, these critics overlook that the characters’ interactions are distraught by their fear of emasculation in the context of a ubiquitous crisis of masculinity. The following section will be devoted to determine the possible factors that may cause the apparent shortcomings in male bonding in the text. Moreover, it will prove that these very factors cannot be solely considered as distinctive of extreme individualist behaviour.

## **2. “YIR ONE AY THE BEST, MAN”: HOMOSOCIAL INTERACTION AND THE WELCOMING OF ALTERITY**

Following Charles Horton Cooley’s classic formulation of “the looking-glass self,” it can be argued that men construct their masculine identity through their own understanding of the perception that other men may hold of them. As Kimmel contends, “we [men] are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval” (1994: 128). Masculinity is then described as “homosocial enactment.” Men test themselves, perform heroic defeats and take enormous risks just because they want other men to grant them their manhood. So understood, masculinity is “fraught with danger, with the risk of failure, and with intense relentless competition” (129).

According to Sharon R. Bird (1996), there are three main shared meanings that dominate homosocial relations among heterosexual men and contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. These are emotional detachment, competitiveness and the sexual objectification of women. With regard to emotional detachment, Bird contends that men tend to suppress their emotions so that they do not look feminine. Femininity is associated with emotional self-disclosure, whereas masculinity is associated with emotional restraint. For men, “to express feelings is to reveal vulnerabilities and weaknesses” (122). Therefore, they withhold such expressions to project power and control, key attributes of hegemonic masculinity. This way, emotional detachment helps maintaining clear gender identity boundaries. Lewis (1984) also identifies the aversion for vulnerability as one of the barriers to emotional

intimacy among men. Following Jourard (1971), Lewis argues that the aversion for vulnerability and openness not only handicaps attempts to achieve intimacy between men but “imposes a terrible burden upon many men, imposes extra stresses, consumes much personal energy, and consequently is a factor related to males’ relatively shorter life-span” (1984: 186).

Bird (1996) argues that men engage in constant competition with their peers to assert their masculinity and risk losing status and self-esteem unless they do so. The relationship between masculinity and competitiveness was also stressed by Pierre Bourdieu, who claimed that the “masculine *habitus*” is “constructed and accomplished only in connection with the space that is reserved for men, a space in which, *among men*, the serious games of competition are played” (qtd. Meuser 2009: 41, italics in the original). Michael Meuser (e.g. 2006, 2007) has further developed Bourdieu’s remarks, suggesting that competition does not necessarily separate men from each other but can actually tie them together.

Among the forms of competition in which men engage are those that involve the objectification of women. The denigration of women as mere objects provides a base on which male superiority is maintained, serving to assert men’s power over women (Bird 1996: 123). Sexual objectification of women and men’s competitiveness over objectified women pervade Welsh’s text. The trainspotters usually compete for women, as when they are “playing them off against each other” (Welsh 1994: 138) to take Dianne’s friend Lisa home. This is best exemplified by Tommy, who claims that being with Lizzy is quite an achievement since “even Sick Boy’s jealous ay me. Being Lizzy’s boyfriend does confer status” (72). The demonstration of sexual prowess confers in-group status and reaffirms masculinity. As a result, characters such as Renton or Spud feel the relentless pressure of having to constantly pick up girls.

Homophobia also plays a significant role in the conception of ‘real’ manliness. In fact, in their study of men’s same-sex friendships, Bank and Hansford (2000) found out that intimacy between men was mostly constrained by emotional restraint and homophobia. Homophobia, Kimmel writes, is more than the irrational fear of gay men; it is the result of men’s fear of other men unmasking them, emasculating them, revealing to them and to the world that they are not real men (1994: 131). Men are afraid of being revealed unmanly, but they need to hide this fear

because its mere recognition would entail vulnerability and be taken as proof of their lack of manliness. This way, men are constantly dominated by the fear of being seen as “sissy” (131).

The traditional ideal of working-class masculinity that Welsh's trainspotters try to attain certainly comes at a price to them, particularly as regards their ability to develop empathy, understanding and emotional intimacies. To defeat effeminacy, to be successful, powerful and heterosexual, they are ‘forced’ to behave as unemotionally as possible. As Morman and Floyd suggest, expressing affection does not go without risk for men, including the misinterpretations of the expressions as sexual overtures (1998: 871). Therefore, men “may explicitly refrain from expressing affection to their male friends overtly, out of fear of being seen as homosexual” (873). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has observed, “the diacritical opposition between the ‘homosocial’ and the ‘homosexual’ seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men” (1985: 2). For Sedgwick, male homosocial relations are based on homosocial desire, as well as homosexual panic. Homosocial desire refers to a wide range of male bonds and intimate interactions. Homosexual panic stands for the fear and anxiety experienced by heterosexuals or people of uncertain sexual orientation that others may see them as homosexuals in a homophobic environment. Homosexual panic usually leads to queer-bashing or gay-bashing, whether through language or physical violence. This whole situation is effectively depicted in “Strolling Through the Meadows”:

He [Renton] likesay, grabs a haud ay us [Spud] n hugs us. —Yir one ay the best, man. Remember that. That's no drink n drugs talkin, that's me talkin. It's jist thit ye git called aw the poofs under the sun if ye tell other guys how ye feel about them if yir no wrecked . . . Ah slaps his back, n it's likesay ah want tae tell him the same, but it would sound, likesay, ah wis jist sayin it cause he sais it tae me first. Ah sais it anyway though.

We hear Sick boy's voice at oor backs. —You two fuckin buftie-boys. Either go intae they trees n fuck each other, or come n help us find Beggars n Matty. (Welsh 1994: 161, ellipsis in the original)

Despite Sick Boy's dismissive and aggressive reaction, Renton and Spud burst into laughter because they both know that Sick Boy, “for aw the cat's desire tae rip open every binliner in toon, is one ay the best n aw” (Welsh 1994: 161). Even though Renton considers him a “sexist cunt” (28), he repeatedly calls him one of his best friends, and repents his

scathing comments about him because “Sick Boy has his anxieties, his personal pain” (208). Similarly, although referring to his friends as “losers, no-hopers, draftpaks” (30) and the like, Sick Boy remains always a solid member of the group. This also applies to Bebgie, who belongs to the group despite being considered a *bona fide* psychopath. Renton even recognises the “insanity of being a friend of a person he obviously dislikes” (142), but claims that “he’s mate n aw. Whit kin ye dae” (84). Bebgie, in his own personal way, also cares about his friends: “Any injury to a friend he took as a personal insult. He prided himself on looking after his mates (...) [That] was the principle (...) You have to back up your mates” (293).

*Trainspotting* presents us with a group of men trying to behave as manly as possible in a Scotland in which traditional notions of masculinity are in decline. As Lewis highlights, a man’s efforts to meet “traditional male role expectations strongly reinforces his efforts to be competitive, to fear homosexuality, and to avoid personal vulnerability,” all of which make “emotional intimacy between men more difficult to attain” (1984: 187). In this situation, humour and aggression—from derogatory nicknames and curses to violent embraces—can serve to produce and validate closeness and affection (Kaplan 2005; Kaplan and Rosenmann 2014). Through this ambivalent language of relatedness, Welsh’s male characters engage in what Swain (1989) refers to as “covert intimacy,” which signals intimacy or closeness indirectly and often non-verbally.

From the previous discussion it can be drawn that the traits that critics have normally considered as indicative of individualism in *Trainspotting* (e.g. the characters’ fear of intimacy or their highly competitive behaviour) are also features proper to male homosocial interactions. Moreover, the so-criticised lack of a sense of brotherhood in the group allows for an alternative conception of friendship in the text. Renton and his circle do not stand for Montaigne’s notion of friendship as “souls that mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them” (qtd. Nardi 1992: 1). Their friendship is not based on similarities (despite their condition as addicts), and it is proof of their ability to accept alterity. As Kim suggests,

The compelling dynamic of love and hatred between Renton and his lot in *Trainspotting*, is not only indicative of the Scottish masculinity handled by universal-liberal capitalism, but also suggestive of an alternative model



of male camaraderie that is not interested in eliminating differences and antagonism between them. (2010: 130)

Hence, Haywood (1997: 158) is right in stating that the characters in *Trainspotting* have no interest in the ideal of fraternity since fraternity, understood as a project of fusion, does not characterize their relations. Indeed, Welsh's text can be understood as a deconstruction of that very term, as presented by Nietzsche and developed by Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship* (1997). According to Derrida, the naturalisation or fraternisation of friendship always involves a neutralisation of difference. Fraternity determines who belongs to a certain group and who does not. It behaves as a mechanism of identification, consisting in two movements: making the other my brother (*semblable*), that is, making him or her somehow similar to me; and excluding those who are not my brothers, i.e. those who are not like me (*non-semblables*). In so doing, a group of friends or a community based on fraternity appears always as homogenous, since all its members' alterity has been cancelled for them to be brothers, that is, to be all 'equals.' Even if the term 'fraternity' is taken in all its non-naturalness, it relates to the idea of filiation; of a *Gemeinschaft* or a community based on blood, a common nation, a common race, or a common purpose. Undoubtedly, this is not the type of friendship that Welsh describes. The trainspotters' camaraderie is clearly not one based on any rational considerations: it has no manifest purpose, and it is surely not based on utilitarianism. It is rather the result of an inner necessity to communicate with the (usually toxic and immoral) other as *an other*. Renton and his friends do not aim to homogenise differences between them; their singularity is always respected, not engulfed. This is accompanied by a sense of strangeness between them that, Lévinas contends, "marks the irreciprocity of the ethical relationship between the other and me, I who am never on equal terms with the Other" (qtd. Rodríguez Salas 2013: 67–68). Welsh's antiheroes encounter alterity face-to-face and welcome it. This way, they exemplify Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of the inoperative community. Nancy rejects community as the sharing of a common property, a common substance. Community is the name of a *relation* to alterity. Rather than being predicated on having something in common, community is the result of *existing* in common. We are in-common; we share the public spatiality of existence, being our exposure to others the condition for that

very existence. It is precisely because of what they have shared that Renton regrets ripping-off his mates at the end of the novel:

He thinks about Sick boy, and all the things they went through together. They had shared some good times, some awful times, but they had shared them. Sick Boy would recoup the cash; he was a born exploiter. It was the betrayal. He could see Sick Boy's more-hurt-than-angry expressions already (...) Renton's real guilt was centred around Spud. He loved Spud. (Welsh 1994: 342–343)

Renton perfectly typifies both views of postmodernity as a) a period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism, and b) an era characterized by the desperate search for communitarian links. Although he certainly betrays his friends and flees to Amsterdam with their money, he does so not to become a perfectly-detached individual, but to crawl up in mainstream, consumerist society and be part of another (more privileged) community. This is better represented at the end of Danny Boyle's film adaptation when Renton breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience:

So why did I do it? I could offer a million answers, all false. The truth is that I'm a bad person. But, that's gonna change. I'm going to change. This is the last of that sort of thing. Now I'm cleaning up and I'm moving on, going straight and choosing life. I'm looking forward to it already. I'm gonna be just like you. The job, the family, the fucking big television, the washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electric tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three piece suite, D.I.Y, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine-to-five, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing gutters, getting by, looking ahead to the day you die. (*Trainspotting*, film)

This idea is further developed in Welsh' sequel *Porno* (2002) and Boyle's 2016 film *T2*. In Boyle's film, we witness Mark Renton becoming the perfect 'product' of society: he kicks heroin, has a healthy diet, a respectable job and a gym membership. However, his remorse makes him go back to Leith to try to reconnect with his crew and repay them. Although in the novel it is actually Sick Boy who tracks Mark to Amsterdam, both novel and film demonstrate that the characters' friendship, their *sharing*, is strong enough to open the path for reconciliation. This is true even with Begbie, who Renton thought

“would demand the severest penalty” (Welsh 1994: 343). Particularly moving is Mark’s reencounter with Begbie in *Porno*. When chasing Renton through the streets of Leith, Begbie gets severely injured after being hit by a car. Instead of feeling relieved, Renton is overwhelmed by sadness and rushes to help him:

The car hit Franco at force just a few feet away from me. He was thrown right over the top of it and he crashed down onto the road. He lay there immobile, the blood trickling out of his nose.

I’m over there without consciously knowing what the fuck I’m doing. I’m down at his side, supporting his head, watching his busy eyes blaze and jive, brimming with baffled malevolence. I don’t want him like this. I really don’t. I want him punching me, kicking me. — Franco man, ah’m sorry . . . it’s oot ay order . . . ah’m sorry, man . . .

I’m greeting. I’m holding Begbie in my arms and I’m greeting. I’m thinking of all the old times, all the good times and I’m looking into his eyes and the rancour is leaving them, like a dark curtain being drawn back, to let in a serene light as his thin lips twist into a wicked smile.

He is fucking well smiling at me. Then he tries to talk, says something like: — Ah eywis liked you, or maybe I’m just hearing what I want tae hear, maybe there’s a qualification. (2003: 470, ellipsis in the original)

Although betrayal is still present in Welsh’s sequel, both *Trainspotting* and *Porno* have a palpable potential to deconstruct the notions of friendship and community, being both based on difference and an unpaired, touching love-hate set of relations. As Sick Boy aptly describes Begbie: “he is such a prick you can’t even hate him. It’s beyond that (...) —The man is beyond love or hate . . . he simply . . . *is*” (Welsh 2003: 456, ellipsis and italics in the original).

## CONCLUSIONS

Through the lens of post-phenomenological communitarian theory, it is possible to interpret *Trainspotting* not as a mirror image of competitive individualism, but as a reflection of the possibility of partaking in an alternative communitarian assemblage. The male homosocial group depicted by Welsh represents a social arrangement that opposes both traditional notions of community and rampant individualism. The protagonists are not portrayed as atomised, isolated individuals, but rather as singularities who feel the necessity to communicate with other singularities. This way, their unconventional community can be said to

epitomise the ontology of being-together or being-in-common at the core of Nancy's theorisation of the inoperative community.

The characters' interactions get distraught by their fear of emasculation in a perceived crisis of masculinity. They try to adhere to the archetypal construction of manhood in Scotland, as typified in the figure of the 'hard man.' This comes at a price to them, particularly as regards their ability to develop empathy, understanding and emotional intimacies. Every act indicative of a more progressive type of masculinity is censored or punished in a bout of homosexual panic. Renton and his friends feel forced to compete with each other and behave as unemotionally as possible to assert their masculinity. They are aware that public expressions of affection might be misinterpreted as sexual overtures, which prevents intimacy between them. Nevertheless, in their own personal way, they show loyalty and affection towards each other. Therefore, the trainspotters' so-called 'fear of intimacy can be said to be proper to male same-sex interactions and not an indicator of extreme individualist behaviour.

The trainspotters' friendship cannot be understood in terms of fraternity, since fraternity conceals a project of homogenisation and fusion of equal brothers. Rather than being predicated on having something in common, Renton and his lot stand for a community of friends who *exist* in common. Their friendship does not aim to eradicate differences between them, but to accept and welcome every member's alterity. In an indirect way, Renton and his friends show intimacy and loyalty to each other, however unscrupulous or devious the other might be. As such, male bonding in the text stands for Nietzsche's and Derrida's conception of friendship beyond the political distinction between friend and foe.

Renton's betrayal has been generally considered as the indisputable indicator of rugged individualism and the fracture of communitarian links. However, the fact that he abandons his local community to join another more privileged one indicates a desperate search for belonging. Moreover, his nostalgic return to Scotland in *Porno*, and the emotional undertones of the friends' reencounters denote the existence of a latent communal feeling, an inclination or *clinamen* towards the other, a communitarian pulsation that ultimately redeems Welsh's trainspotters.

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