



# Unspeakable Injuries and Neoliberal Subjectivities in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*

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Touted as “the first great millennial author” (Cain 2018), Sally Rooney explores in her debut *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and follow-up *Normal People* (2018)<sup>1</sup> the experiences of a disaffected youth that has come of age in a post-crash Ireland which, while having endured the woes of financial crisis and discarded the optimism of previous years, still preserves neoliberal principles constructing people’s social and affective

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<sup>1</sup> An instant commercial success, *Conversations with Friends* was shortlisted for both the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Rathbones Folio Prize. Another bestselling, *Normal People* was the 2018 Irish novel of the year (Irish Book Awards), won the Costa Novel Award and Encore Award, and became Waterstones Book of the Year.

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lives. Instead of reversing the process, post-Celtic Tiger Ireland has apparently reinforced “the inculcation of norms of individual accountability and self-empowerment” (Kiersey 2014, 356). The flaws of the system, Rooney explains in an interview, inform her protagonists’ erratic and unstable behaviour, for neoliberalism fails to provide an “ethical outlook” on one’s and others’ “immense suffering” (Nolan 2017). In Rooney’s work, this suffering becomes intensified by silence and miscommunication, and the writer highlights the chasm between her characters’ social and private selves. In an age of self-branding and constant self-projection, all this amplified by an omnipresent Internet culture affecting human interaction, Rooney’s characters engage in conversations on radical politics and alternative lifestyles, but they nonetheless struggle with emotional intimacy, and their relationships become affected by neoliberal constraints like class-based distinctions and prejudice, as well as gender and sexual hierarchies often established through (self-)objectification.

Rooney’s novels may be located in a continuum of contemporary Irish women’s fiction (by authors like Danielle McLaughlin, Lisa McNerney and Naoise Dolan) offering critical explorations of today’s neoliberal value systems, from a gendered perspective.<sup>2</sup> Set in the early 2010s Ireland, Rooney’s texts recreate a recessionary scenario where the cherished promise of prosperity for all has already been rejected. In the figures of characters (e.g. Frances in *Conversations* and Connell in *Normal People*) that both despise and desire material gain, her texts reflect a post-Celtic Tiger sense of scepticism about the possibility of social justice and equality. Rooney simultaneously addresses a postfeminist sensibility of self-discipline and “female resourcefulness” that contradictorily retains certain forms of “traditionalist femininity” (Negra and Tasker 2014, 7), of being likeable and docile, especially in the domains of family and romantic relationships. The novels feature two college-age women, Frances in *Conversations* and Marianne in *Normal People*, who consider themselves awkward and unworthy. In the two texts, central characters involve themselves in cross-class relationships which, while being emotionally rewarding, enact crises of increased vulnerability and undesired dependency. Rooney’s protagonists face the task of reorienting their relationships and affective lives, in order to ease their previous isolation and escape toxic and negative self-judgement.

<sup>2</sup> See Bracken and Harney-Mahajan (2017) for a more detailed analysis of Irish women’s writing in the post-Celtic Tiger period.

Of special interest to this study is how Rooney strategically deploys silence as a structuring and stylistic device to emphasise the shortcomings and failures of neoliberal culture. On some occasions, silence signifies a refusal to conform, which, while implying resistance, may lead to marginalisation. Silence is also prominent in Rooney's portrayals of her characters' self-regulation, their incapacity to deal with emotional damage, their use of irony to mask frustration, as well as their personal pressures to hide vulnerability. Communication between lovers is often hampered by reluctance and avoidance, misunderstandings and, sometimes, willful blindness towards the distress of the other. Rooney's protagonists can hardly verbalise their emotional crises, which manifest on the body as the bearer of pain. After all, these characters operate in social contexts where, as Sara Ahmed puts it in her critique of neoliberalism, "to feel better is to be better" in the eyes of others (2010, 8).

Drawing on research on neoliberal affects (Anderson 2016; Adams et al. 2019), postfeminism as a neoliberal sensibility (Negra and Tasker 2014; Gill 2017; Rutherford 2018), and the connections between neoliberalism and abjection (Tyler 2013), this study argues that millennial culture in Rooney's novels loses its glow of full and free self-expression, as it reimposes silences and reconfigures old types of shaming. At interpersonal levels, some physical and emotional injuries—like mental illnesses, self-harm or realities like domestic violence and financial stringency—are experienced as unspeakable, as they continue to be constructed and internalised as signs of abnormality and weakness, in a competitive society which equates vulnerability with failure, and routinely represents unhappy people as "deprived, as unsociable and neurotic" (Ahmed, 9). If such ways of thinking are difficult to resist, as several theorists have explained, it is because, socially, neoliberalism makes its rationality the condition for self-advancement and well-being, thus shaping the formation of human subjectivity and affects. The main characters' self-awareness—what one critic of Rooney's work negatively calls a "reflexivity trap" (Waldman 2020)—heightens a sense of millennial disaffection. None of Rooney's novels proposes a model of radical social change, as her protagonists can hardly transform external circumstances. Change is produced on interpersonal levels, when characters confront their self-abjection, achieve positive human connection and manage to express (and come to terms with) what once remained unspoken, achieving a renewed sense of freedom away from previous restrictions.

“I JUST LET IT FALL OFF INTO SILENCE”:  
NEOLIBERALISM AND THE ETHICS OF CARE  
IN *CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS*

Set in Dublin, *Conversations with Friends* centres on the dynamics of a four-way relationship between Frances (the protagonist, a talented aspiring author) and Bobbi (Frances’s ex-girlfriend, now her best friend at college), and a rich, glamorous married couple in their early thirties, Melissa (a famous writer and photographer) and Nick (an actor). Of the four, Frances is the only character coming from a working-class background. As the sole narrator of *Conversations*, Frances remains the “psychological presence” of the story, and thus the style conveys her evolving “levels of awareness” and “the particular cultural position she’s in” (Nolan), as the intellectual millennial she is.

In the book, Rooney not only inserts numerous references to the unsaid and the unsayable to dramatise the protagonist’s inner life, but also uses silence as a structuring device. Much of the dramatic power of Part One centres on the secrecy and subterfuge surrounding Frances’s affair with Nick, a “trophy husband” (11) who represents everything that is stereotypically attractive about heterosexual masculinity and rich people’s “posh houses” (47). Frances’s fascination with Nick compromises her Marxist principles—co-established in conversations with Bobbi, herself also inconsistent about her anti-capitalist views<sup>3</sup>—and jeopardises the professional contact with the powerful Melissa. While Part One finishes when Bobbi accidentally discovers the affair, Part Two moves towards the tensions and frustrations created by other secrets, like Frances’s silence about her newly diagnosed disease, endometriosis, a physical condition that has no socially recognisable name: “I searched ‘can’t tell people I’m’ and Google suggested: ‘gay’ and ‘pregnant’” (308). In love with Nick, Frances feels defective (her illness might not allow her to have children) and can barely control her silenced insecurities and anxieties, which find their way out through self-destructive reactions. A narrative thread between Part I and Part II is the protagonist’s trauma concerning her father’s alcoholism, a chilling reminder of an unhappy childhood and adolescence. A sense of resolution occurs in the final chapters, when

<sup>3</sup> Frances is aware of her rich friend’s contradictions when it comes to her anti-capitalism: “[Bobbi] did not apply her otherwise rigorous anti-establishment principles to her relationship with [her father], or at least not with any consistency” (31).

Frances reconciles herself with Nick and Bobbi by verbalising long-hidden emotions and experiences, and by acknowledging and welcoming their needs and weaknesses too.

In the figure of Frances, there is an evolution from a self-obsessed to a more open and caring individual (it takes her long to realise that Bobbi, Nick and Melissa are vulnerable like her). Interviewed by Yen Pham, Rooney relates that, while writing *Conversations*, she had been inspired by her readings on care ethics,<sup>4</sup> which made her imagine alternatives to “our whole way of life”, which disregards the “human need for consolation”, and thus “destroys” us in an “awful, pathological way” (2017). In *Conversations*, Frances’s self-defensive silences have to be understood in the larger context of a society that has abandoned fundamental practices of care.<sup>5</sup> Following some of the principles of care ethics, Rooney’s novels stage-manage the crisis of neoliberal, individualistic perceptions of autonomy, of personal achievement in a competitive society, just to favour a sense of autonomy as “relational”, which posits the idea that individuals gain “self-respect” and “moral maturity” not through markers of social success like money, popularity or sex appeal, but through their ability to “make and sustain connections with others” (Keller 1997, 154).

One example of Rooney’s use of a care ethics approach can be found in the relationship between Frances and Bobbi. Although Frances exudes an air of poise and confidence, she is burdened with a sense of inferiority in her relationships with the other main characters. She cultivates a deeply affectionate friendship with Bobbi, but has not coped with her sense of humiliation after becoming her abandoned partner. Frances silently resents her need to seek Bobbi’s validation, so, when she expresses her raw emotions towards her in a published short story, this friend bitterly complains: “I think I’ve learned more about your feelings in the last twenty minutes than in the last four years” (265). Rooney has Frances and Bobbi remake their friendship on new terms—devising “an alternative

<sup>4</sup> Theorists of care ethics insist that we should assess the type of care we provide (without losing one’s freedom), being aware that “the relations and responsibilities of care are a basic and centrally important feature of human life” (Robinson 2011, 847), and that vulnerability and dependency are not conditions to be overcome, but “normal ways of being human” (859).

<sup>5</sup> In Rooney’s portrayal, even healthcare workers are lacking in empathy towards their patients; suffering extreme pain at hospital, Frances receives a humiliating treatment by a young doctor, another millennial: “I probably looked like a spooked dog, but he didn’t ask me if I was all right” (170).

way of loving each other” (299)—the moment her characters start voicing their past and present hurts, not in a spirit of competition<sup>6</sup> (who should be considered the victim, or the one to blame), but of reciprocity and good faith: “We talked about our break-up for the first time that night. It felt like opening a door that’s been inside your own house all along, a door that you walk past every day and try never to think about” (301). Much of *Conversations* revolves around silenced issues that, when finally unveiled, help Frances develop a more positive, psychologically healthy relationship with herself and others.

In what ways is silence, then, represented in Rooney’s text? At one point, after a terrible break-up with Nick, an anxious Frances cuts a hole on the inside of her left thigh, entertaining the illusion that she was “a very autonomous and independent person” (288), precisely because of “all the things [she] had never told Nick about [her]self” (287). Yet, as if protesting against her silence, her wound “kept on throbbing badly even after it stopped bleeding” (288). Readers are in this way reminded that silence is not a void but a “gesture” within communication, usually recognised as an “embodied phenomenon” that produces its own “emotional and physical symptoms” (Acheson 2008, 547). In both *Conversations* and *Normal People*, the characters’ bursts of frustration and self-loathing—provoked by their inability to find consolation—have an immediate impact on the body, in the form of discomfort and aching, illnesses (endometriosis makes its first appearance just as the mother silences Frances about her trauma regarding the father’s alcoholism), objectification (more prominent in *Normal People*) and self-inflicted injuries (Frances cuts herself several times to relieve the stress of her unspoken worries). In these two novels in which the body suffers the effects of dysfunctional silences, Rooney seems to be making a statement precisely about how our current neoliberal culture exploits the body as an element of social value.

As indicated above, the culture of neoliberalism is all-pervasive in Rooney’s novels, and its values and principles, though sometimes mocked, criticised or resisted by her characters (Frances momentarily turns to religion as an alternative moral philosophy), cannot be evaded, as they have already infiltrated into every area of life. A late twentieth-century

<sup>6</sup> Frances had experienced her love relationship with Bobbi as a competition between the two: “When you broke up with me I felt you beat me at a game we were playing together, and I wanted to come back and beat you” (298).

development of liberalism, neoliberalism was initially characterised by increased privatisation and the dismantling of welfare provisions to satisfy the demands of a more aggressive market economy.<sup>7</sup> For many people, these economic measures led to growing precarity, so neoliberalism had to find ways to legitimate itself ideologically. Researchers on neoliberal subjectivities, like Ben Anderson (2016), theorise that, to maintain their hegemony, neoliberal regimes have to operate “affectively” (734), organising the “feelings of existence” within societies, thus “animat[ing] neoliberal reason as it emerges, circulates and changes” among individuals (736). Through media culture, neoliberalism hails the credo that, to fulfil the promise of happiness, one should be guided by self-interest and a conscious will to improve oneself within predetermined parameters of social success. This situation requires constant work on the self, and weakens solidarity with others. Since there is an insistence on self-responsibilisation to overcome any type of constraints, neoliberalism often occludes structural oppression, and stigmatises negative emotions and life conditions as being produced by one’s “poor choices”, “lack of willpower” or “deficient attributes” (Adams et al. 2019, 203). Many of the silences explored by Rooney originate from her characters’ needs to hide the shame of their failures, perceived as personal frailties.

Neoliberalism in Rooney’s fiction is hardly discernable from today’s postfeminist culture, the “new normal” for millennial women (Gill 2017, 609). Postfeminism entails a deactivation of feminist ideals of social equality—Frances jokes that “there’s a distinct lack of female arms dealers” (64)—advocating that female empowerment depends on individualism, consumerism and body image. Through certain forms of modern femininity, what Frances calls “being a fun girl” (308), young women are prompted to look “confident, carefree and unconcerned” (Gill 2007, 155). One typical way to transmit such message in postfeminist romances, Gill notes (2007), is through the heroine’s adoption of “ironic distance”, as the “internal defence against ambivalent feelings”, like anger and anxiety (162). Ironic distance in Rooney’s texts is nothing but damaging; it equals (self-)deception, and only becomes a symptom of unease and discomfort. In an email, Melissa warns Frances that Nick would never abandon his marriage and social status for her, and congratulates her rival for making him a more lovable husband: “I could ask you to stop seeing

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account on neoliberalism as economic ideology, see MacLeavy (2020).

him, but why should I? Things are better now” (237). Yet, some time later, in a garbled conversation with Frances, a hurt Melissa cannot help expressing the humiliation of feeling defeated and “pathetic” (296). This example and others demonstrate how, in contrast to popular postfeminist romances where ironic distance is hardly problematised, *Conversations* exposes the flaws of such tactic, and the insecurities it hides, in the figures of female characters that cannot comfortably silence their vulnerability for too long.

As suggested, Rooney’s highly vulnerable characters are bombarded with insecurities, because the culture of neoliberalism (and by default postfeminism) relies on a “revolting aesthetics” (Tyler 2013, 25) which not only vilifies non-conforming attitudes, but also supervises the appearance and presentation of the body. Negative self-reflection accompanies a depreciation of one’s body. It is no coincidence that, in both *Conversations* and *Normal People*, as they struggle with a nagging sense of inferiority, the female protagonists also see themselves as undesirable (ironically, they have sexual partners that clearly desire them). Looking at herself in the mirror, a troubled Frances inspects her body parts, and her “repulsion get[s] deeper and deeper” (181). Abjection becomes internalised, but is not a property of the individual, as there has to be a “disgust consensus” involving “community-wide complicity” (Tyler, 23). Whereas in *Conversations* Frances’s past as an outcast in school hardly features, in the early chapters of *Normal People* Marianne’s non-conventional behaviour makes her an “object of disgust” among her classmates (3), who spread rumours that she has been to mental hospital, an impression which is reinforced by her perceived failure to take care of her body: “People have said she doesn’t shave her legs or anything” (3). Despite the existence of a neoliberal rhetoric of choice and freedom, the millennial culture Rooney depicts in both texts is one where conformism remains the norm, and where there are increased pressures on the body. Thus, as Richard Bingham aptly puts it, in Rooney’s work “the appearance of generational change only highlights the resilience of ingrained hierarchies” (2019).

If Rooney’s stories feel fresh and contemporary to young audiences, it is partly due to her skilful portrayal of the presence of the Internet and social media in everyday life, showing how these technologies influence personal relationships and our perceptions of others (Frances, for instance, checks Google to form an impression of Melissa and Nick). In their respective analyses, Madeleine Gray (2020) and Orlaith Darling (2021)

agree that the Internet offers Frances a sense of control over her interactions with people, helping her “curat[e] an image of herself” (Darling, 546). Tellingly, while Frances is characterised by “communicative incapacity” in face-to-face conversations, she becomes more eloquent behind the screen, “through her technologized, written self-construction across text messaging” (Gray, 77). Thanks to online communication, she exploits strategies—long pauses and silences, the careful editing of a message for particular effect and so on—that serve to curtail fluid expression and manipulate the other. Talking to Nick via email and text messaging, Frances surrounds herself with an aura of invulnerability and frivolity (e.g. she challenges him to have sex with a co-worker), but, when tensions erupt, she becomes evasive and passive aggressive<sup>8</sup>:

me: maybe I’m actually upset  
 Nick: are you  
 Nick: I never have any idea what you feel about anything  
 me: well it doesn’t really matter now, does it. (89)

The conversation ends there and, when Nick sends an email asking her to speak, she reacts with sarcasm: “Forget about it. See you in September, I hope the weather is good in France” (91). Instead of expressing herself, Frances uses ironic distance to silence her lover. Such control cannot always be maintained, as she acknowledges that, when she is with Nick, it is “impossible to act indifferent like [she] did in the emails” (71). Yet Frances displays traits of her Internet personality when she playfully tells Nick that “we can sleep together if you want, but you should know I’m only doing it ironically” (114). At this point, the reader has already learned about her intense attachment to him, so Frances’s words sound insincere, a performance, creating in Nick the initial impression that she is not emotionally invested in the relationship.

Because it is used as a space for human interaction, the Internet increases one’s possibilities of self-projection and capacity to manipulate others. An expert in social media, Melissa uses Facebook to share a romantic video with her husband, making Frances feel jealous and replaced, to the extent that she now devalues her relationship with Nick:

<sup>8</sup> Passive aggressive behaviour, Kennan Ferguson argues, wields silence “to punish someone who relies on verbal interaction within a relationship” (2003, 58). This is one of the ways in which Frances tries to exert control on her relationship with Nick.

“Anyone could see from the video how much they loved each other” (292).<sup>9</sup> Though a message for Frances (that Melissa is Nick’s legitimate partner, and that their crisis is over), the Facebook video avoids interpellating her by means of its ubiquity and dissimulation (it apparently has no specific addressee or intention). Melissa’s manoeuvre leaves the protagonist in uncomfortable silence; Frances’s body bears this suffering, and endometriosis reappears, afflicting her for days. *Conversations* highlights how the increasingly dominant Internet and social media cultures promote diverse forms of communication and yet breed new configurations of silence and objectification. In *Normal People* too, today’s digital world plays a similar role, for instance, through the shaming and silencing produced by the sharing of naked pictures of sexual partners.

As has been argued so far, in Rooney’s *Conversations* (in *Normal People* too) the characters’ silences on certain personal conditions (e.g. illnesses and childhood traumas) and emotional states (e.g. frustration and jealousy) manifest themselves as individual phenomena that require to be analysed in connection with our contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist cultures. Reinforced by the Internet and social media, today’s imperative to regulate oneself and be likeable requires adherence to behavioural scripts which have to be internalised as positive and “freely chosen” (Rutherford 2018, 626). Aware that there are roles to play in social life, like the “smiling girl” (19), Rooney’s protagonist wants to embody different types of personhood, but her failure to do so only makes her a cruel observer of herself. In the final chapter, there is a crucial moment in the conversation Frances and Nick, after he says that he understands her unhappiness about his marriage:

I wouldn’t have minded, if...

I tried to think of a way to finish this sentence without saying: if I were different, if I were the person I wanted to be. Instead I just let it fall off into silence. (319)

For much of *Conversations*, the protagonist uses silence to conceal her feelings and construct an image of self-confidence and invulnerability,

<sup>9</sup> As if evoking here the relevance of Baudrillard’s theories, Rooney has Frances experience the fiction of a (carefully edited) video as something real, which emphasises the manipulative power of social media. Ironically, earlier in the story Frances says that she is familiar with the philosopher’s theories of simulacra and simulation, even though she has read none of his texts.

which becomes an obstacle to intimacy and the expression of emotional truths. This time, however, her silence means a refusal to speak as “if [she] were different” (319), thus inaugurating a new willingness to abandon pretences, giving way to a more open and honest communication with Nick. Interdependency is in this way affirmed, a situation where caring for one another takes precedence over false illusions of self-sufficiency and personal independence.

“THEY HAD THE SAME UNNAMEABLE SPIRITUAL  
INJURY”: VULNERABILITY, OBJECTIFICATION  
AND SILENCE IN *NORMAL PEOPLE*

Like *Conversations*, *Normal People* centres on relationship dynamics, and how individuals may change one another for good once they learn to embrace and respect their own and the other’s vulnerabilities. In Rooney’s second novel, narrative focalisation alternates between Marianne and Connell, who, as highschool classmates in the fictional town of Carricklea, Co. Sligo, begin a tender but tormentuous love relationship which continues intermittently until their last year at Trinity College Dublin. Through her use of dual perspectives, Rooney creates vivid portrayals of her two protagonists’ “emotional landscapes”, all this framed by what she calls “externalities”, that is, Marianne’s trauma due to family violence and Connell’s class-based anxieties (Clark 2018). More crude than *Conversations*, *Normal People*—also set in the post-crash scenario of the early 2010s—describes millennial existence as being governed by rigid hierarchies and neoliberal principles.<sup>10</sup> Cruelty becomes normal behaviour, and most friendships resemble a “commodity market” (194), as Rooney’s Marianne eventually realises. In *Normal People*, Rooney not only explores issues of vulnerability, but also expands on the uses of silence as refusal and resistance to underscore the systemic problems and instabilities of today’s competitive, individualistic culture.

Marianne is rich, but her family has always been disliked in Carricklea, which may partly explain her isolation. Once she moves to Dublin to study at Trinity, she easily turns from being an ostracised individual into becoming a popular girl. Connell’s economic precarity and class

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of *Normal People* as an innovative *Bildungsroman* of recessionary Ireland, see Barros-Del Río (2022).

consciousness render him the odd one among the upper-middle-class students at Trinity, but in Carriclea he compensates his disadvantaged background by making conscious efforts to be likeable (his attractive looks and masculine demeanour are also helpful). Because his mother works as a cleaner in her house, Connell interacts with Marianne away from the gaze of others, and their intimate moments feel like “opening a door away from normal life” (7). In Rooney’s novels, “normal” reads as socially acceptable, and what is left outside normative parameters is shrouded by silence. In the early chapters, despite their moments of connection, Connell imposes secrecy on his relationship with Marianne and, for years, cannot dispel the notion that his attraction to her endangers his desire to be a normal, well-adjusted person: “He was never damaged like she was. She just made him feel that way” (169). For much of the story, Connell identifies his dependence on Marianne as a personal weakness, and can hardly verbalise his need for her (something similar happens to Frances with Nick in *Conversations*).

Marianne, in contrast, does express her feelings for Connell (only to him), but she is also largely characterised by silence. Her refusal to be open about certain matters is judged as disruptive and unsettling by her schoolmates in Carriclea, and then ruins her popularity among her Trinity friends. Silence as “sabotage” signifies a “dismissal of the pressure for explanation”, when subjects are called on to speak and define themselves, but refuse to do so, thus subverting “the regimes of communication endemic to capital” (Kanngieser and Beuret 2017, 369). This type of silence destabilises “cultural norms” and “power structures” (Acheson, 537), defying the logics of neoliberal thinking. The inadapted Marianne seeks no praise or popularity, and remains outwardly indifferent to others’ opinions. It is no surprise that Connell describes Marianne’s awkwardness by referring to her silence: “Marianne has never been with anyone in school, no one has ever seen her undressed, no one even knows if she likes boys or girls, she won’t tell anyone. People resent that about her” (6). In this oversexualised millennial environment, power structures are so firmly established that, when a schoolboy remarks that Marianne is not so bad-looking after all, the most popular girl’s instinctive reaction is to insult her: “Yeah, she’s just mentally deranged, said Rachel” (53). Paradoxically, because of her silence, the highly vulnerable Marianne is perceived as resistant to the same values affecting others, whose reaction is to humiliate her further. Because they display a “disgust consensus”

against her (Tyler, 23), the classmates' cruelty becomes an example of how the mechanism of social regulation operates affectively.

Rooney further explores this notion of silence as refusal in Marianne's crisis at Trinity. There, the protagonist transforms herself in the eyes of others, but this change is more contextual than personal (even if the protagonist starts wearing make-up and hosts fabulous houseparties). Marianne attracts new friends and potential lovers, and is aware of "acting a part" (134) when she satisfies a boyfriend's desire for power, objectifying herself in sexual relationships involving violence and subjugation. To destroy her reputation after she abandons him, Jamie—the boyfriend, whose father, not a coincidence, is one of the men that "caused the financial crisis" (124)—shares sexual pictures of her, and ridicules Marianne as a "mental case" (178). Marianne evades the imperative to speak and explain herself publicly, and her silence precipitates a conflict with her friend Peggy, who, after insisting that "people are talking" (192), sides with Jamie not to risk her popularity. As also happens in the early episodes, the protagonist's silence is both sabotage—she now despises the systemic cruelty that Peggy and Jamie represent—and self-condemnation, as her refusal of explanation makes her lose her "footing in the social world" of Trinity (192). Even the passive resistance derived from silence comes with personal costs in this millennial, neoliberal scenario depicted by Rooney.

As illustrated by Peggy's betrayal, Rooney's women often disregard issues of female solidarity and mutual empowerment, so it therefore seems that, in both novels, postfeminist values have already replaced feminist ones. Whereas Rooney's depictions of millennial women's emotional lives have received the admiration of relevant Irish writers with feminist credentials, like Claire Kilroy (2017) and Anne Enright (2018), critic Becca Rothfeld (2020) addresses the presumably toxic sexual politics of *Conversations* and *Normal People*, and stresses similarities with the bestselling novels by Stephanie Meyer, *Twilight* (2005), and E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). Likewise, Katy Waldman (2020) takes issue with Rooney's handling of sexual passivity and women's search for male approval:

Rooney's women suffer in modes that are precisely palatable—even glamorous—to the market. They invite men to hurt them; they have eating disorders; they despise themselves and try endlessly, futilely, to be 'good'. Such characters suggest less a challenge to capitalism than a capitalist wet dream.

Implied in Waldman's observation is that, for many readers, Rooney's work derives its appeal from images of a fetishised, patriarchally oriented femininity. I would argue that Rothfeld and Waldman overlook the ways in which the writer problematises an omnipresent, oppressive neoliberal and postfeminist culture where, especially for women, likeability gravitates towards self-objectification, which then becomes normal behaviour. In an early chapter, one of Connell's friends exhibits on his phone the naked pictures one girl had sent him (Connell himself will ask Marianne for one of those). Objectification intensifies sexism and thwarts empathy; when Connell first hears Marianne talk about her family situation, he later concludes, under the influence of other boys, that "girls made up stories about themselves for attention" (52). In Rooney's fiction, objectification affects women more than men, and thus "gender roles are often attached to the binary male social success versus female body commodification" (Barros-Del Río 2022, 183), a kind of objectification that Marianne eventually resists.

For much of the story, objectification inevitably leads to miscommunication and an invasion of privacy. If Connell and Marianne form a lasting bond at the beginning, it is thanks to a shared sense of intimacy where "anything unsaid is a welcome interruption" (25). This situation recalls Stuart Sim's exaltation of silence as a "state of reflection" (also as resistance or sabotage), and a prerequisite for alternative socialisation away from "the politics of noise" (e.g. the normative behaviours and hierarchies among millennials in *Normal People*) so characteristic of our neoliberal times (2007, 2). As they remake their relationship away from the social dynamics of highschool, Rooney's protagonists develop an attentiveness to silence, which favours an atmosphere where "total communication" becomes possible (25). In those early episodes, Rooney describes their conversations as being punctuated by meaningful pauses and silences, which open up a space for the appreciation of human connection and emotional truths; Connell, for instance, chooses to study at Trinity College, when, after a "very intense" silence between them (27), he realises Marianne's genuine feelings towards him. Even at times when they have other romantic partners, what is highlighted is the "private language" they speak (161) and what constitutes the unique nature of the relationship between Marianne and Connell. This intimacy opposes objectification and permits them to "experience their true selves" together (Eppel 2020).

However, some dysfunctional silences remain along the story, provoking separations and misunderstandings between the protagonists. In both *Normal People* and *Conversations*, one source of dysfunctional silence is the female protagonists' traumas, which develop within the context of the "recessionary postfeminism" that flourished during the economic depressions of the early 2010s (Negra and Tasker 2014; Gill 2017). In the face of generalised uncertainty and the circulation of tropes of white masculinity in crisis, recessionary postfeminism designates a perceived "surge in traditionalist discourses of gender" (Negra and Tasker, 5), especially in the arena of "domestic femininities" (6). Such backlash becomes apparent in Rooney's recreation of a millennial world of exacerbated sexism. Aside from contending with neoliberal pressures on body and behaviour, both Frances and Marianne are traumatised victims of a patriarchal ideology reinforced by their respective mothers. Pressurised by her mother to be a loving daughter to her father, Frances cannot be open about her trauma; Marianne, on her part, becomes defenseless against her brother's violence, as her mother has always impelled her to submit to Alan's authority. If a postfeminist scenario emerges here, it is because both protagonists lack a feminist sensibility which, in the present time of the story, would help them defy gendered obligations to be "good", likeable and docile within the family. Frances, for instance, feels guilty for not loving her father, and Marianne endures passive suffering until the moment Connell confronts her violent brother. Aggravated by their postfeminist depoliticisation, Frances's and Marianne's helplessness weakens their defence against trauma, a psychological condition which "calls for a silence filled with hauntings", a distress that manifests "in the guise of seemingly inexplicable and compulsive behaviours" (Goarzin 2011, 11). As indicated, the sometimes "inexplicable" behaviour of Frances and Marianne reflects their inability to communicate and come to terms with their emotional injuries, and, as typical of Rooney's narrative style, the body is made to suffer.<sup>11</sup> In the two stories, neoliberal/postfeminist culture—which manifests in the pressures for objectification, the silencing of vulnerability and the norms of likeability—is depicted as nothing but an obstacle to the protagonists' recovery from trauma.

<sup>11</sup> While in *Conversations* Frances harms herself, or feels the urge to do so, when interacting with her father, in *Normal People* Marianne believes that she is not "fit to be loved by any person" (43), and therefore brings such demeaning self-image into sadomasochistic relationships where her body feels like "a piece of litter" (190).

In this scenario, economic precarity is also internalised as a personal weakness, and social class difference consequently features as a taboo subject. Like Frances in *Conversations*, Connell struggles with class-related anxieties; when he enters the social circles of Trinity, he develops “a sense of crushing inferiority” (68), as his class status undermines his confidence. He now resents that he may be seen as Marianne’s “working-class friend” (171), and realises that “he and Marianne never talked about money” or about the fact that “[Marianne’s] mother paid his mother money to scrub their floors” (122). For long, Connell remains affected by a class-based inferiority complex, even after earning a prestigious scholarship that puts an end to his financial problems. His relationship with the snobbish, upper-class Helen revives his cravings for social approval and likeability: “What they had together was normal, a good relationship” (170). The silences between them, though, reveal his unease and discomfort when, for example, Helen jokes about his Sligo accent—“he had to laugh then” (165)—or judges his friendship with Marianne: “Feeling suddenly cornered, [...] Connell fell silent again” (168). Produced by his desires to embrace normality with Helen, Connell’s defensiveness points to his unacknowledged submissiveness to the power hierarchies of his class-based society.

Connell’s class-related silences stand in direct contradiction with his constant criticism of capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Just as several critics excoriate the perceived anti-feminism of Rooney’s fiction, some others read the anti-capitalist politics of her texts as “mostly gestural” (Lorentzen 2017) and “more setting than subject” (Delistraty 2019). The two novels are certainly not imbued with radical politics, but Rooney’s characters do change on interpersonal levels. Drawing on the author’s remark that her stories develop in a post-crash Ireland where young people have become highly aware of inequality yet unable to fight against it (Nolan), Darling argues that Rooney’s characters represent “the paralysis of capitalism, in which millennial experiences and choices are pre-determined by crippling capitalist norms” (542). Because it requires an acceptance of one’s vulnerability, deviation from these “capitalist norms” comes, at first, with suffering. After the tragic suicide of Rob (a former classmate), a deeply affected Connell identifies with his late friend’s silenced fears and

<sup>12</sup> As also happens to Frances and Bobbi in *Conversations*, social media activism (posting or liking certain news or comments) is “the most strident political action [Connell] has ever taken in his life” (80).

insecurities: “[Rob] just wanted to be normal, to conceal the parts of himself that he found shameful and confusing” (209). Connell’s fall into depression,<sup>13</sup> though emotionally devastating, leads to maturation and a rejection of social pressures to be likeable. From then on, vulnerabilities are more openly discussed; Connell and Marianne regain their previous intimacy, and progressively break their silences on their past hurts and misunderstandings.

Silence remains prevalent throughout *Normal People*, partly because neoliberalism not always provides millennials with a language that can be used to identify the sources of their anxiety and discomfort. Thus, aware that she is not “like normal people” (181), Marianne obsessively wonders “what’s wrong with her” (181). Unable to understand what unites him to Marianne, Connell notices that “they had the same unnameable spiritual injury” (169), but, for long, tries to escape her influence. By the end of the story, Connell and Marianne have already endured personal crises that make them lose faith in social parameters of normality and likeability. Even though neoliberal culture tends to individualise failure and construct “injury as a personal shortfall” (Scharff 2016, 222), healing only becomes possible when human needs and longings are addressed in mutually enriching and caring relationships. The protagonists’ relationship ultimately evolves in such a way as to accommodate their vulnerabilities and mutual dependence. As in *Conversations*, in *Normal People* interdependency emerges not as a sign of weakness, but of fortitude, as Marianne tells us: “They’ve done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another” (266).

## CONCLUSION

In one of her articles on vulnerability and care ethics, Judith Butler indicates that “the life of the other, the life that is not our own, is also our life, since whatever sense ‘our’ life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others,

<sup>13</sup> His medical treatment is influenced by neoliberal principles that silence and depersonalise Connell as a patient; he is diagnosed on a questionnaire, the consultant only engages with him via formulaic questions, and, as he speaks, he is not sure whether the consultant has “understood or tried to understand what he’s said” (217). If he regains his peace of mind, it is thanks to his medication, which was “doing its chemical work inside his brain” (242).

constituted in and by a social world” (2012, 140–1). Such vindication of interdependency contradicts current neoliberal principles of autonomy, individualism, competition and materialism, which hinder the recognition of our embeddedness in the lives of others. In her fiction, Rooney takes her readers into a millennial world of normative behaviours and ingrained prejudice and hierarchies along the lines of gender and social class. These attitudes foster objectification, and construct emotional injury as a personal shortcoming and a sign of abnormality. Against this framework, Rooney articulates a notion of the self as relationship-oriented, where suffering is eased, and one’s own problems re-assessed, thanks to honest communication, mutual caring and acceptance of one’s and the other’s vulnerability.

In *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, Rooney’s protagonists display an uneasiness that lays bare the inequalities and deceptions of their neoliberal culture. This crisis of neoliberal values, as explained, is powerfully evoked through silence. Plot events are described so as to foreground the lies, omissions and frustrations of dysfunctional silences, which feature as embodied experiences with their own psychological and physical symptoms (e.g. Frances’s self-harming behaviour). In their social circles, Rooney’s characters repeatedly adopt self-management strategies such as passing, concealment and ironic distance, which, instead of offering a sense of reassurance and well-being, end up damaging relationships and aggravating emotional injuries. Implicit in these characters’ silences is an aversion to admitting vulnerability and emotional dependence. Even at times when silence emerges as a necessary condition to escape the “noise” of social norms and expectations, the sometimes withdrawn and taciturn behaviour of characters like Marianne becomes derided or even pathologised, as it does not fit within predetermined parameters of likeability. Yet, in the intimacy of close relationships, silence as refusal—the abandonment of all pretences—allows for a healthier, more genuine connection with the other. Through her careful attention to interpersonal silences and communication, Rooney embraces the ethics of care and interdependency as an alternative philosophy to today’s dominant neoliberal values.

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