



The Austerity Generation: Class, Trauma, and the Politics of Resilience in Post-2010 British Working-Class Fiction

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Abstract

This research examines the representation of class, trauma, and resilience in post-2010 British working-class fiction, a period marked by unprecedented austerity measures implemented by Conservative-led governments. Through comparative textual analysis informed by trauma studies, Marxist class theory, and critical disability studies, the study investigates how contemporary British novelists and filmmakers represent the psychological and material effects of welfare reforms, precarity, and social stigmatization on working-class communities. The analysis reveals that these "austerity fictions" function not merely as social documentation but as counternarratives that contest hegemonic discourses of "scroungers" and the "undeserving poor." By examining works including Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2019), and novels by Ross Raisin and Jenni Fagan, this research demonstrates how contemporary working-class fiction registers trauma at both individual and collective levels while simultaneously imagining forms of resistance and solidarity. Drawing on Thompson's (1963) foundational understanding of class as lived experience, the study concludes that post-2010 British working-class fiction offers crucial insights into the human costs of austerity, the psychological wounds of deindustrialization, and the politics of resilience in an era of neoliberal restructuring.

Keywords: austerity, working-class fiction, trauma, resilience, deindustrialization, precarity, neoliberalism

1. Introduction

The election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the United Kingdom in May 2010 marked a decisive turning point in British social and economic policy. Citing the need to reduce the national deficit following the 2008 financial crisis, the coalition government, and subsequent Conservative administrations, implemented sweeping austerity measures that fundamentally restructured the welfare state, reduced public spending, and profoundly affected working-class communities across the nation. As Powell (2023) ^[14] documented, these policies led to "the impoverishment, deteriorating health, and deaths of disabled people through cuts to the welfare state" while also entrenching "regional health inequalities and exacerbated public health issues such as loneliness, drug addiction, and homelessness" (p. 2).

This research investigates how post-2010 British working-class fiction has represented these transformations, examining the intersection of class, trauma, and the politics of resilience in what has come to be termed "austerity fictions." The decision to focus on the period after 2010 arises from the recognition that austerity policies constituted not merely an economic program but a cultural and ideological project one that deployed powerful narratives to justify welfare cuts and reshape public understanding of poverty, work, and social responsibility. As Tyler (2020) ^[20] observed, contemporary stigmatization of the poor operates through "machinery of inequality" that systematically devalues certain lives while legitimating their abandonment by the state (p. 3). Similarly, Powell (2023) ^[14] noted that "right-wing politicians, supported by the tabloid press, have targeted

the national welfare state and the disabled individuals supposedly abusing the system, reviving centuries-old 'undeserving poor' narratives to demonise benefits claimants as work-shy 'scroungers' who have 'broken' Britain" (p. 1). Against this discursive backdrop, a body of fictional works has emerged that offers counternarratives to hegemonic representations of working-class life. These texts spanning film, television, and the novel seek to render visible the human consequences of austerity, to register the trauma of deindustrialization and welfare reform, and to imagine forms of resistance and solidarity. As O'Brien (2021) ^[13] argued, such works offer "ways of understanding fundamental aspects of contemporary capitalism for the working class in modern Britain, including class struggle, inequality, trauma, social abjection, racism, and stigmatization" (p. 3). The resurgence of working-class representation in contemporary British culture, as Biressi and Nunn (2025) ^[1] noted, reflects both "the deepening of class inequalities under neoliberalism and the urgent need for narratives that contest the erasure of working-class experience from public discourse" (p. 12). The central argument advanced in this study is that post-2010 British working-class fiction functions as a form of cultural trauma narrative, registering the psychological wounds inflicted by austerity while simultaneously contesting dominant discourses that blame victims for their suffering. Drawing on Thompson's (1963) ^[19] foundational insight that class is "something which in fact happens in human relationships" (p. 8), this research demonstrates that these fictions employ specific literary strategies including generic hybridity, embodied metaphor, and the representation of collective memory to articulate the lived experience of austerity and to imagine possibilities for resilience and resistance.

1.1. Problem Statement

The relationship between literature and social policy has been extensively studied in British working-class fiction, yet the specific corpus of post-2010 "austerity fictions" remains undertheorized. While individual studies have examined films such as Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9] or novels by authors like Ross Raisin, few have attempted a sustained analysis of how these texts collectively represent the experience of austerity and its psychological effects on working-class communities.

Existing scholarship on working-class fiction has tended to focus on earlier periods of deindustrialization, examining texts from the 1980s and 1990s that represented the decline of traditional industries such as mining and manufacturing. However, the post-2010 context presents distinct characteristics: the restructuring of the welfare state through Universal Credit, the demonization of benefits claimants in public discourse, the emergence of new forms of precarity in the gig economy, and what Shildrick (2020) ^[16] termed "poverty propaganda" the systematic misrepresentation of working-class life that legitimates welfare cuts. These developments require critical attention that attends to the specificities of the contemporary moment.

Furthermore, while trauma studies has been productively applied to contexts of war, genocide, and displacement, its application to the slow violence of economic restructuring remains underdeveloped. This study addresses these gaps by bringing trauma theory into conversation with Marxist class analysis and critical disability studies, offering a synthetic

framework for understanding how austerity fictions register the psychological wounds of neoliberal policy. As the *Journal of Working-Class Studies* (2023) ^[7] noted in its special issue on austerity and culture, "the cultural representation of economic violence remains one of the most urgent and undertheorized areas of contemporary criticism" (p. 1).

1.2. Significance of the Research

This study contributes to several fields of literary scholarship. For working-class literary studies, it extends critical attention to the contemporary moment, examining how twenty-first-century writers are representing class in an era of precarious labor and welfare retrenchment. Building on the work of O'Brien (2021) ^[13] and the foundational insights of Thompson (1963) ^[19], this research demonstrates that class remains a vital category of analysis for understanding contemporary British fiction. As McKenzie (2021) ^[11] argued, "class is not dead; it has been systematically erased from public discourse while simultaneously intensifying as a structure of inequality" (p. 4). For trauma studies, this research extends the field's concerns beyond catastrophic events to consider what Nixon (2011) ^[12] termed "slow violence" the gradual, often invisible violence of economic restructuring and environmental degradation. By examining how austerity fictions register the accumulated effects of welfare cuts, unemployment, and social stigmatization, the study offers new insights into the representation of structural trauma. LaCapra's (2001) ^[8] distinction between "acting out" and "working through" provides a framework for understanding how these texts navigate between compulsive repetition of past wounds and the possibility of transformation.

For cultural studies and political theory, this research contributes to understanding how fictional narratives can function as forms of resistance to hegemonic discourses. Tyler's (2020) ^[20] analysis of stigma as "machinery of inequality" illuminates how austerity fictions contest the pathologization of working-class experience. Similarly, Jones's (2022) ^[6] critique of the "establishment" reveals the structural dimensions of inequality that these texts render visible.

Beyond its academic contributions, this study has broader cultural significance in a moment when austerity policies continue to shape the lives of millions across Britain. As Biressi and Nunn (2025) ^[1] observed, "understanding how culture represents and resists class inequality is essential for any politics of transformation" (p. 8). The texts examined here offer insights into the possibilities for solidarity, resilience, and social change in an era of deepening precarity.

1.3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

Primary Research Question:

How do post-2010 British working-class fictions represent the relationship between class, trauma, and resilience in the context of austerity?

Secondary Research Questions:

What specific literary strategies do these texts employ to register the psychological effects of welfare reform and deindustrialization?

How do austerity fictions contest dominant discourses that

stigmatize working-class communities as "scroungers" or the "undeserving poor"?

In what ways do these texts represent individual and collective resilience?

How do categories of disability, gender, and race intersect with class in these representations?

What role does genre play in shaping the political and aesthetic dimensions of austerity fictions?

2. Literature Review: Critical Perspectives on Class, Austerity, and Contemporary British Fiction

2.1. Working-Class Literary Studies: From the Industrial Novel to Austerity Fiction

The tradition of working-class writing in Britain has deep historical roots, extending from the industrial novels of the nineteenth century through the social realism of the 1930s to the deindustrialization narratives of the 1980s and 1990s. As O'Brien (2021) ^[13] documented, this tradition has consistently sought to represent the lives and struggles of working-class people, often in opposition to dominant cultural representations that marginalize or stigmatize working-class experience.

The foundational text in this field remains E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which fundamentally reshaped understandings of class formation and consciousness. Thompson's central insight that class is not a static structure but a dynamic relationship, "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships" has profound implications for literary analysis. As Thompson (1963) ^[19] argued, "the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making" (p. 8). His emphasis on experience, culture, and agency provides a crucial framework for understanding how contemporary working-class fiction represents not merely the conditions of austerity but the lived experience of those conditions.

Thompson's (1963) ^[19] methodological approach attending to "the multitude of small events and the texture of everyday life" (p. 12) that traditional historians had ignored parallels the literary strategies examined in this study. Just as Thompson sought to recover the voices of "the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan" from "the enormous condescension of posterity" (p. 13), austerity fictions seek to render visible those rendered invisible by neoliberal discourse: the benefits claimant, the precarious worker, the disabled person navigating an obstructive system.

The twenty-first century has witnessed renewed critical attention to working-class fiction, driven in part by the recognition that class remains a fundamental structuring principle of British society despite decades of neoliberal rhetoric proclaiming its obsolescence. O'Brien's (2021) ^[13] study, *The Working Class and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction*, represents a landmark contribution to this field, examining how contemporary novelists including David Peace, Gordon Burn, Anthony Cartwright, Ross Raisin, Jenni Fagan, and Sunjeev Sahota have "mapped the shift from deindustrialisation through to stigmatization of individuals and communities who have experienced profound levels of destabilization and unemployment" (p. 2).

O'Brien's (2021) ^[13] analysis demonstrates that these novels offer ways of understanding fundamental aspects of contemporary capitalism for the working class, including

class struggle, inequality, trauma, social abjection, racism, and stigmatization. His focus on what he terms "deindustrialisation literature" reveals how class itself is being "reimagined and reshaped by economic restructuring and neoliberalism" (p. 4). Crucially, O'Brien argues that "class is lived, felt, and experienced in ways that are not reducible to economic categories alone" (p. 7), an insight that resonates with Thompson's emphasis on experience and culture.

McKenzie's (2021) ^[11] *Class and Classism in Contemporary Britain* extends this analysis by examining how class operates as a form of cultural distinction and exclusion. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, McKenzie demonstrates that "the working-class today are not only exploited economically but also stigmatized culturally, their tastes, values, and ways of life pathologized in public discourse" (p. 23). This insight informs the analysis of how austerity fictions contest cultural stigmatization while representing its psychological effects.

2.2. Austerity Fictions: Defining a Corpus

The term "austerity fictions" has been proposed by Powell (2023) ^[14] to describe a body of twenty-first-century British literature and film that engages with the social and psychological effects of austerity policies. In her doctoral thesis, *Austerity Fictions: Disability, Class, and Resistance in Twenty-First Century British Literature and Film*, Powell examines works including Ken Loach's films *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9] and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) ^[10], Niall Griffiths' novel *Broken Ghost* (2019) ^[4], novels from the emerging genre of "up lit," and Jane Gull's film *My Feral Heart* (2016).

Powell (2023) ^[14] argues that these texts "represent obstructive welfare reforms, the drudgeries of work, the lonely people behind closed doors, and the disabled individuals who have been quietly moved into remote institutions" (p. 3). Crucially, she demonstrates that "moments of resistance are built into these austere worlds, as sites of crip community can be found in the occupations that form in city centres, on the edge of a mountain, or in a seemingly magical barn" (p. 3). This dual focus on both the violence of austerity and the possibilities for resistance characterizes the most politically engaged austerity fictions. Powell's (2023) ^[14] theoretical framework draws on Robert McRuer's "crip theory," Jasbir Puar's concept of "debility," and Dan Goodley's discussion of dis/ability studies. This approach enables analysis of how "bodies and minds across the dis/ability divide are vulnerable to the debilitating impact of austerity" (p. 2). By examining "the deployment of embodied metaphors, generic disruptions, and crip aesthetics," Powell argues that "austerity fictions creatively break through the social realist genre to depict the obscured human consequences of public sector cuts, countering discourses of 'brokenness' and offering glimpses of crip resistance" (p. 3).

The concept of "crip community" is central to Powell's analysis. She shows how austerity fictions represent forms of solidarity that emerge in unlikely places "on the edge of a mountain, or in a seemingly magical barn" as characters find ways to support one another in conditions of extreme precarity. These representations challenge the individualizing logic of neoliberal discourse, which locates responsibility for survival in the individual rather than in collective structures

of support.

Shildrick's (2020) ^[16] *Poverty Propaganda: Exploring the Myths* provides essential context for understanding the discursive environment within which austerity fictions intervene. Shildrick demonstrates that "myths about the poor that they are lazy, that they choose benefits over work, that they are responsible for their own poverty have been systematically propagated by politicians and media to justify welfare cuts" (p. 5). Austerity fictions, she argues, function as "counter-propaganda," rendering visible the realities that such myths obscure.

2.3. Trauma Theory, Slow Violence, and Structural Suffering

Trauma studies offers frameworks for understanding how experiences of overwhelming loss are registered in consciousness and represented in narrative forms. Caruth's (1996) ^[2] foundational work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, defined trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). This understanding of trauma as a wound that continues to speak, that returns unbidden to haunt the survivor, has profound implications for the analysis of literary representations of social suffering.

However, traditional trauma theory has been critiqued for its focus on discrete, catastrophic events rather than on the accumulated effects of structural violence. Nixon's (2011) ^[12] concept of "slow violence," developed in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, addresses this limitation, describing "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2). Nixon's framework is particularly relevant to the analysis of austerity fictions, which represent the gradual, often invisible effects of welfare reform and economic restructuring effects that accumulate over time and across generations.

LaCapra's (2001) ^[8] distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma provides additional analytical resources. "Acting out" involves the compulsive repetition of traumatic experience, while "working through" enables critical distance and the possibility of moving forward while still acknowledging loss. This distinction informs analysis of how austerity fictions represent both the psychological wounds of austerity and the possibilities for resilience and resistance. As LaCapra (2001) ^[8] argues, "working through" trauma is not about achieving complete resolution but about "giving voice to the wound" while also "developing ways of living with it" (p. 45).

The application of trauma theory to economic suffering requires careful attention to the specificities of context. Unlike the discrete traumatic events that have traditionally concerned trauma studies, the violence of austerity is diffuse, prolonged, and often invisible. It operates through what Nixon (2011) ^[12] terms "attritional catastrophes that exhaust as much as they enrage" (p. 7). Austerity fictions, this study argues, develop formal strategies adequate to representing this kind of violence strategies that include generic hybridity, embodied metaphor, and the representation of collective memory.

2.4. Marxist Class Theory and the Critique of Neoliberalism

Marxist class theory provides essential frameworks for understanding the structural dimensions of austerity. Harvey's (2005) ^[5] analysis of neoliberalism as a project of class restoration, developed in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, illuminates how austerity policies have functioned to transfer wealth upward while disciplining working-class communities. The 2008 financial crisis, Harvey argues, provided an opportunity for elites to impose austerity as a solution to a crisis they had created, shifting the burden of adjustment onto the most vulnerable.

The concept of "precarity," developed by Standing (2011) ^[17] in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, describes the condition of unstable, contingent labor that has become increasingly characteristic of contemporary capitalism. The "precariat," Standing argues, is a new class formation characterized by insecure employment, eroded benefits, and chronic uncertainty. Austerity fictions represent the lived experience of precarity, showing how economic instability permeates every dimension of working-class life work, family, health, and hope for the future.

Standing's (2011) ^[17] analysis is particularly relevant to understanding the psychological dimensions of precarity. He argues that precarious labor produces not only material insecurity but also "fragmentation of identity, loss of occupational community, and erosion of self-respect" (p. 23). These psychological effects are central to the austerity fictions examined in this study, which represent characters struggling not only with material deprivation but with the erosion of meaning and purpose.

Jones's (2022) ^[6] *The Establishment and How They Get Away with It* extends this analysis by examining the political and institutional dimensions of inequality. Jones demonstrates how "a small elite has captured the British state and uses it to advance its own interests at the expense of the majority" (p. 15). Austerity fictions, he suggests, render visible this capture by showing its effects on ordinary lives.

2.5. Critical Disability Studies and Crip Theory

Critical disability studies provides essential frameworks for understanding how austerity disproportionately affects disabled individuals and how representations of disability can function as sites of resistance. Powell's (2023) ^[14] deployment of "crip theory" draws on Robert McRuer's foundational work, which argues that able-bodiedness is a compulsory identity position that requires constant performance and reinforcement. Austerity policies, Powell demonstrates, have rendered disabled bodies and minds newly vulnerable to what Puar terms "debility" the gradual wearing down of populations through structural violence.

McRuer's concept of "crip resistance" is central to Powell's analysis of austerity fictions. She argues that these texts represent moments of "crip community" in which disabled characters find ways to support one another and to resist the stigmatizing discourses that pathologize their existence. This resistance is not heroic or triumphant but "glimmering" fragile, temporary, but significant nonetheless.

Powell's (2023) ^[14] analysis reveals how austerity fictions "represent the disabled individuals who have been quietly moved into remote institutions" while also showing how "moments of resistance are built into these austere worlds, as

sites of crip community can be found in the occupations that form in city centres, on the edge of a mountain, or in a seemingly magical barn" (p. 3). This dual focus on both the violence of austerity and the possibilities for resistance characterizes the most politically engaged austerity fictions. Tyler's (2020) ^[20] *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality* provides additional theoretical resources for understanding how stigmatization operates as a form of social control. Tyler argues that "stigma is not merely a set of negative attitudes but a political technology that produces and legitimates inequality" (p. 2). Austerity fictions, she suggests, can function as "counter-stigmatization" practices that contest the pathologization of working-class and disabled lives.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, textual analysis approach

to examine the representation of class, trauma, and resilience in post-2010 British working-class fiction. The research design was chosen to enable deep engagement with literary texts while situating them within their historical and theoretical contexts.

3.1. Primary Sources

The primary sources analyzed in this study were selected based on their thematic relevance and critical reception within the emerging field of austerity fictions. From film, Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9] and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) ^[10] were selected. From fiction, Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2019) ^[4] and selected novels by Ross Raisin and Jenni Fagan were chosen, as discussed in O'Brien's (2021) ^[13] study

Table 1:

Medium	Creator/Author	Work	Year	Key Themes
Film	Ken Loach	<i>I, Daniel Blake</i>	2016	Welfare system, disability, bureaucratic violence
Film	Ken Loach	<i>Sorry We Missed You</i>	2019	Gig economy, precarity, family stress
Novel	Niall Griffiths	<i>Broken Ghost</i>	2019	Community, addiction, landscape, resilience
Novel	Ross Raisin	<i>A Natural</i>	2017	Masculinity, work, precarity
Novel	Jenni Fagan	<i>The Panopticon</i>	2012	Stigma, resistance, institutionalisation

3.2. Analytical Framework

Three theoretical frameworks were applied. Trauma studies provided tools for understanding how the psychological effects of austerity are registered in narrative form. Marxist class theory illuminated the structural dimensions of inequality and the politics of resilience. Critical disability studies, particularly Powell's (2023) ^[14] deployment of crip theory, enabled analysis of how austerity disproportionately affects disabled individuals and how representations of disability can function as sites of resistance.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, each text was subjected to close reading, with particular attention to representations of class, trauma, and resilience. Second, thematic analysis identified patterns across texts, including representations of bureaucratic violence, the demonization of benefits claimants, and moments of collective resistance. Third, comparative analysis situated these representations within broader discourses of austerity and working-class experience.

3.4. Research Limitations

This study was limited to selected texts and does not claim to represent the full diversity of post-2010 British working-class fiction. The analysis focused specifically on themes of class, trauma, and resilience, leaving other dimensions including the representation of race and migration, regional variations, and the role of television and digital media for future investigation.

4. Theoretical Frameworks: Reading Austerity Through Multiple Lenses

4.1. Trauma Theory and Slow Violence

Trauma studies offers frameworks for understanding how experiences of overwhelming loss are registered in

consciousness and represented in narrative. Caruth's (1996) ^[2] definition of trauma as an experience that returns unbidden to haunt the survivor has profound implications for understanding how austerity fictions represent the accumulated effects of welfare reform and economic precarity. The repetitive structure of many of these texts the circular journeys, the returns to sites of loss, the compulsive retelling of traumatic events enacts the very structure of traumatic memory they describe.

However, traditional trauma theory's focus on discrete catastrophic events requires modification for the analysis of austerity. Nixon's (2011) ^[12] concept of "slow violence" addresses this limitation, describing violence that is "incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (p. 2). This framework illuminates how austerity fictions represent the gradual deterioration of health, community, and hope under conditions of structural violence. The slow violence of austerity is registered not in single catastrophic events but in accumulating details: the missed meals, the mounting debts, the fraying relationships, the eroding sense of self.

LaCapra's (2001) ^[8] distinction between "acting out" and "working through" provides additional analytical resources. Austerity fictions can be understood as attempts to work through collective trauma, to transform inchoate suffering into meaningful narrative while refusing to surrender to despair. As LaCapra (2001) ^[8] argues, "working through" involves "giving voice to the wound" while also "developing ways of living with it" (p. 45). The texts examined here oscillate between these modes, sometimes trapped in the repetitive return to scenes of loss, sometimes finding ways to imagine futures beyond it.

4.2. Marxist Class Theory and the Critique of Neoliberalism

Marxist class theory provides essential frameworks for understanding the structural dimensions of austerity.

Harvey's (2005) ^[5] analysis of neoliberalism as a project of class restoration illuminates how austerity policies have functioned to transfer wealth upward while disciplining working-class communities. The 2008 financial crisis, Harvey argues, provided an opportunity for elites to impose austerity as a solution to a crisis they had created, shifting the burden of adjustment onto the most vulnerable. This insight is central to understanding the political context within which austerity fictions intervene.

The concept of "precarity," developed by Standing (2011) ^[17], describes the condition of unstable, contingent labor that has become increasingly characteristic of contemporary capitalism. The "precariat," Standing argues, is a new class formation characterized by insecure employment, eroded benefits, and chronic uncertainty. Austerity fictions represent the lived experience of precarity, showing how economic instability permeates every dimension of working-class life. Crucially, standing (2011) ^[17] argues that precarity produces not only material insecurity but also "fragmentation of identity, loss of occupational community, and erosion of self-respect" (p. 23) psychological effects that are central to the texts examined here.

Jones's (2022) ^[6] analysis of the "establishment" reveals how political and economic elites have systematically dismantled the institutions that once provided working-class communities with security and voice. Austerity fictions, he suggests, render visible the human costs of this dismantling, showing how policies presented as economic necessity are in fact political choices with devastating consequences.

4.3. Critical Disability Studies and Crip Theory

Critical disability studies provides essential frameworks for understanding how austerity disproportionately affects disabled individuals and how representations of disability can function as sites of resistance. Powell's (2023) ^[14] deployment of "crip theory" draws on Robert McRuer's work, which argues that able-bodiedness is a compulsory identity position that requires constant performance and reinforcement. Austerity policies, Powell demonstrates, have rendered disabled bodies and minds newly vulnerable to what Puar terms "debility" the gradual wearing down of populations through structural violence.

Powell's (2023) ^[14] analysis of austerity fictions reveals how these texts "represent the disabled individuals who have been quietly moved into remote institutions" while also showing how "moments of resistance are built into these austere worlds, as sites of crip community can be found in the occupations that form in city centres, on the edge of a mountain, or in a seemingly magical barn" (p. 3). This dual focus on both the violence of austerity and the possibilities for resistance characterizes the most politically engaged austerity fictions. Tyler's (2020) ^[20] analysis of stigma as "machinery of inequality" illuminates how the pathologization of disabled and working-class lives functions to legitimate their abandonment. Austerity fictions contest this pathologization by representing the humanity and dignity of those stigmatized by dominant discourse.

5. Ken Loach and the Cinema of Austerity

5.1. I, Daniel Blake: Bureaucratic Violence and the Welfare State

Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9] stands as perhaps the most influential austerity fiction of the post-2010 period. The

film tells the story of Daniel Blake, a 59-year-old carpenter who suffers a heart attack and is advised by his doctor not to work. When he attempts to claim Employment and Support Allowance, he becomes entangled in a bureaucratic nightmare: because he is deemed fit for work by a computerized assessment, his benefits are denied, and he must navigate a complex appeal process while facing destitution.

The film's representation of the welfare system as a form of bureaucratic violence has been widely recognized. As Powell (2023) ^[14] observed, *I, Daniel Blake* exposes "the obstructive welfare reforms" that have left countless disabled people without support (p. 3). The infamous "work capability assessment" scene, in which Daniel is asked absurd questions by a callous assessor, dramatizes the dehumanization inherent in a system designed to deny rather than enable. Daniel's response "I'm not a computer, I'm a man" captures the fundamental conflict between bureaucratic rationality and human need.

Shildrick's (2020) ^[16] analysis of "poverty propaganda" illuminates the discursive context within which the film intervenes. The figure of the "scrounger" that dominates tabloid discourse is systematically dismantled through Daniel's characterization: a man who has worked all his life, who wants to work, who is prevented from working not by idleness but by illness and a system that refuses to recognize his condition. The film shows that the real "scroungers" are not benefits claimants but the corporations and elites who have captured the state.

Yet the film also represents forms of solidarity and resistance. Daniel's friendship with Katie, a single mother forced into food banks and sex work by the benefits system, demonstrates the possibility of mutual aid in conditions of extreme precarity. The graffiti that Daniel spray paints on the walls of the Jobcentre "I, Daniel Blake" becomes a symbolic assertion of selfhood against bureaucratic erasure. As Tyler (2020) ^[20] might argue, this act of "counter-stigmatization" reclaims dignity in the face of a system designed to deny it.

5.2. Sorry We Missed You: The Gig Economy and the Precariat

Loach's *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) ^[10] extends his critique of austerity to the sphere of work itself. The film follows Ricky, a former construction worker who becomes a self-employed delivery driver for a logistics company, and his wife Abbie, a home care worker. Both are trapped in forms of precarious labor that offer no security, no benefits, and no rights only the constant pressure to work faster, longer, and harder.

The film represents what Standing (2011) ^[17] terms the "precariat": workers whose employment is contingent, whose income is unpredictable, and whose lives are characterized by chronic uncertainty. Ricky's franchise agreement requires him to lease a van from the company, effectively indebting him to his employer. When the van is stolen, he faces financial ruin. Abbie's work as a care worker is similarly precarious: she is paid only for the time she spends with clients, not for travel between visits, and she is constantly pressured to complete her rounds faster.

The film's title *Sorry We Missed You* refers to the delivery cards left when no one is home, but it also functions as a metaphor for the absences that precarity produces. Ricky misses his children's lives because he is always working; his

son misses school; his family misses the possibility of a stable, secure existence. The film represents the human costs of the gig economy with unflinching clarity, showing how the rhetoric of "flexibility" masks the reality of exploitation. Jones's (2022) ^[6] analysis of the "establishment" illuminates the structural dimensions of this exploitation. The logistics company that employs Ricky is part of a system designed to extract maximum value from workers while offering minimum security. The film shows how this system penetrates every dimension of working-class life, transforming relationships, undermining solidarity, and eroding hope.

6. The Austerity Novel: Niall Griffiths, Ross Raisin, and Jenni Fagan

6.1. Niall Griffiths' Broken Ghost: Community, Landscape, and Resilience

Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2019) ^[4] represents the effects of austerity on a rural Welsh community. The novel follows a group of characters whose lives have been shaped by poverty, addiction, and loss, but who find moments of connection and solidarity in the landscape of the Black Mountain. As Powell (2023) ^[14] observed, the novel shows how "sites of crip community can be found in the occupations that form in city centres, on the edge of a mountain, or in a seemingly magical barn" (p. 3).

The novel's representation of landscape is crucial to its political vision. The Black Mountain functions not merely as setting but as a living presence, a repository of memory and a site of potential healing. Characters who are broken by austerity find themselves drawn to the mountain, where they experience moments of transcendence and connection. This representation of landscape as a source of resilience resonates with ecocritical approaches to working-class experience, suggesting that attachment to place can survive even the most devastating forms of displacement.

Griffiths' novel also represents the psychological effects of austerity with considerable complexity. Characters struggle with addiction, depression, and suicidal ideation conditions that are represented not as individual failings but as responses to structural violence. The novel refuses the consolations of easy resolution, but it also insists on the possibility of connection, of community, of finding "glimmers of crip resistance" in the most unlikely places (Powell, 2023) ^[14] (p. 3).

6.2. Ross Raisin and Class Mourning

Ross Raisin's fiction, as analyzed by O'Brien (2021) ^[13], explores what might be termed "class mourning" the psychological process of grieving for lost ways of life, lost communities, lost possibilities. In novels such as *A Natural* (2017) ^[15], Raisin represents the experience of working-class men whose identities have been shaped by forms of labor and community that no longer exist.

O'Brien's (2021) ^[13] chapter on Raisin, titled "Ross Raisin and Class Mourning: Masculinity, Work, Precarity," examines how the novelist represents the psychological effects of deindustrialization on masculine identity. Without stable

work, without the forms of solidarity that characterized traditional working-class communities, Raisin's characters struggle to find meaning and purpose. They mourn not only lost jobs but lost selves, lost ways of being in the world.

This representation of class mourning resonates with LaCapra's (2001) ^[8] distinction between acting out and working through. Raisin's characters oscillate between these modes, sometimes trapped in compulsive repetition of past traumas, sometimes finding ways to integrate loss into new narratives of selfhood. The novels refuse to offer easy resolutions, but they insist on the importance of mourning as a necessary response to loss.

McKenzie's (2021) ^[11] analysis of classism illuminates the cultural dimensions of this mourning. Working-class men like Raisin's protagonists are not only economically dispossessed but culturally pathologized, their masculinity figured as "toxic" or "outdated." Raisin's fiction contests this pathologization by representing the complexity and dignity of lives shaped by forces beyond individual control.

6.3. Jenni Fagan and the Revolting Class

Jenni Fagan's fiction, as analyzed by O'Brien (2021) ^[13], represents what might be termed the "revolting class" working-class characters who refuse the stigma imposed upon them and who resist through acts of rebellion, however small or desperate. In *The Panopticon* (2012) ^[3], Fagan tells the story of Anais, a fifteen-year-old girl growing up in the care system who believes she is part of an experiment in which her every move is watched.

O'Brien's (2021) ^[13] chapter on Fagan, titled "Jenni Fagan and the Revolting Class: Gender, Stigma, Resistance," examines how the novelist represents the intersection of class and gender in the experience of young working-class women. Anais is stigmatized not only for her class but for her gender, her sexuality, her supposed "promiscuity." Yet she refuses to accept this stigma, asserting her right to exist on her own terms.

The novel's title references the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's design for a prison in which inmates can always be watched but never know when they are being watched. Fagan uses this metaphor to represent the surveillance to which working-class communities are subjected by social workers, by police, by the welfare system. Yet Anais's rebellious consciousness, her refusal to be defined by others, represents a form of resistance to this surveillance. As O'Brien (2021) ^[13] argues, Fagan's fiction shows how "the revolting class" can refuse the terms of their stigmatization and assert alternative forms of value and meaning.

Tyler's (2020) ^[20] analysis of "counter-stigmatization" provides a framework for understanding Anais's resistance. By refusing the labels imposed upon her, by insisting on her own definition of self, Anais contests the "machinery of inequality" that would pathologize her existence.

7. Comparative Reflections: Trauma, Resilience, and the Politics of Representation

7.1. Summary of Key Findings

Table 2:

Text	Representation of Trauma	Representation of Resilience	Literary Strategies
I, Daniel Blake	Bureaucratic violence, dehumanisation	Mutual aid, symbolic assertion (graffiti)	Social realism, documentary style
Sorry We Missed You	Chronic uncertainty, family fragmentation	Work ethic, hope for children	Social realism, naturalistic performance
Broken Ghost	Addiction, depression, loss	Community on the mountain, landscape as healing	Lyrical prose, landscape writing
A Natural (Raisin)	Class mourning, masculine crisis	Stoicism, partial recovery	Psychological realism
The Panopticon (Fagan)	Stigmatisation, surveillance	Rebellious consciousness, refusal	Gothic, coming-of-age

7.2. The Trauma of Austerity: Individual and Collective Wounds

The texts examined in this study represent austerity as a form of collective trauma a wound that affects not only individuals but entire communities and generations. This trauma manifests in multiple forms: the bureaucratic violence of the welfare system in *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9]; the chronic uncertainty of precarious labor in *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) ^[10]; the addiction and depression of Griffiths' characters in *Broken Ghost* (2019) ^[14]; the class mourning of Raisin's protagonists in *A Natural* (2017) ^[15]; the stigmatization and surveillance of Fagan's young women in *The Panopticon* (2012) ^[3].

What these representations share is an understanding that the trauma of austerity is not merely economic but psychological and spiritual. It is a wound to identity, to meaning, to the possibility of imagining a future. Characters in these texts struggle not only with material deprivation but with the erosion of hope, the loss of the sense that life can be different, that things can change. As Nixon (2011) ^[12] might argue, this is the slow violence of austerity violence that operates not through sudden catastrophe but through gradual attrition, wearing down bodies and spirits over time.

Yet these texts also resist the reduction of their characters to mere victims. Even in the darkest moments, they represent moments of resistance, solidarity, and resilience. Daniel Blake's graffiti, the community on the Black Mountain, Anais's rebellious consciousness these are representations of survival, of the refusal to be destroyed by forces beyond one's control.

7.3. The Politics of Resilience: Between Adaptation and Resistance

The concept of resilience is central to these texts, but it is represented in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. On one hand, resilience appears as a necessary survival strategy the capacity to endure, to adapt, to keep going in the face of overwhelming odds. Ricky and Abbie in *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) ^[10] embody this kind of resilience, working themselves to exhaustion in the hope of a better future for their children.

On the other hand, these texts also register the limits of resilience, the ways in which discourses of resilience can function to naturalize structural violence. When individuals are expected to be resilient in the face of impossible conditions, attention is diverted from the conditions themselves. The question becomes how to survive rather than how to change. As Biressi and Nunn (2025) ^[1] observe, "the language of resilience has become a technology of neoliberal governance, placing the burden of adaptation on individuals

while leaving the structures that produce precarity untouched" (p. 67).

The most politically engaged of these texts navigate this tension carefully. They represent resilience as both necessary and insufficient necessary because people must survive, insufficient because survival is not enough. They point toward forms of collective resilience, of solidarity and resistance, that might transform rather than merely adapt to the conditions of austerity.

7.4. The Politics of Stigmatization and the "Undeserving Poor" Narrative

A recurring concern across these texts is the representation of stigmatization and the discursive construction of the "undeserving poor." As Powell (2023) ^[14] notes, austerity policies were accompanied by a "reviving [of] centuries-old 'undeserving poor' narratives to demonise benefits claimants as work-shy 'scroungers' who have 'broken' Britain" (p. 1). This discourse functions to legitimate welfare cuts by blaming victims for their suffering, representing poverty as a moral failing rather than a structural condition.

The texts examined in this study contest these narratives through multiple strategies. *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9] shows Daniel as a hardworking carpenter who has paid into the system for decades, challenging the stereotype of the benefits claimant as parasitic. *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) ^[10] shows Ricky and Abbie working tirelessly, yet unable to escape precarity, challenging the notion that hard work guarantees security. Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012) ^[3] shows Anais struggling against a system that pathologizes her every response to trauma, challenging the pathologization of working-class experience.

These representations function as what O'Brien (2021) ^[13] terms "counternarratives" that "contest the demonisation of working-class communities" (p. 5). By rendering visible the human costs of austerity and the dignity of those who struggle against it, these texts challenge the moral categories that underpin neoliberal discourse. As Tyler (2020) ^[20] argues, "counter-stigmatization" is an essential political practice, one that reclaims dignity and humanity for those rendered abject by dominant discourse.

7.5. Genre and the Politics of Form

The texts examined in this study deploy a range of generic strategies, from Loach's social realism to Griffiths' lyrical landscape writing to Fagan's gothic-inflected coming-of-age narrative. This generic diversity is itself politically significant, suggesting that no single form can adequately capture the complexity of austerity's effects.

Powell's (2023) ^[14] analysis emphasizes how "austerity

fictions creatively break through the social realist genre to depict the obscured human consequences of public sector cuts" (p. 3). While social realism has historically been the dominant mode of working-class representation, these texts demonstrate that other genres the gothic, the lyrical, the picaresque can offer different ways of seeing, different ways of knowing. Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* (2019) ^[4] use of landscape, Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012) ^[3] use of gothic tropes, Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) ^[9] use of documentary realism each offers a distinct perspective on the experience of austerity.

This generic diversity also reflects the complexity of the experience itself. Austerity cannot be captured in a single mode because it operates on multiple levels: material and psychological, individual and collective, local and national. The texts that represent it most effectively are those that recognize this complexity and develop formal strategies adequate to it.

8. Conclusion: The Austerity Generation and the Future of Working-Class Fiction

This comparative study has demonstrated that post-2010 British working-class fiction represents a significant cultural response to the austerity policies implemented by Conservative-led governments. Drawing on the foundational insights of Thompson (1963) ^[19], who argued that class is "something which in fact happens in human relationships" (p. 8), this analysis has shown how contemporary fictions represent the lived experience of class under conditions of neoliberal restructuring.

Across the texts examined Loach's films, Griffiths' novel, the fiction of Raisin and Fagan austerity emerges as a form of collective trauma that wounds individuals and communities while simultaneously generating new forms of resistance and solidarity. These texts, which Powell (2023) ^[14] terms "austerity fictions," "creatively break through the social realist genre to depict the obscured human consequences of public sector cuts, countering discourses of 'brokenness' and offering glimpses of crip resistance" (p. 3).

The analysis has revealed specific literary strategies through which these texts negotiate the experience of austerity. The representation of bureaucratic violence exposes the dehumanization inherent in the welfare system. The depiction of precarious labor reveals the human costs of the gig economy. The exploration of class mourning registers the psychological wounds of deindustrialization. The representation of "crip community" offers glimpses of alternative forms of solidarity and care.

The theoretical frameworks employed trauma studies, Marxist class theory, and critical disability studies have illuminated different dimensions of this relationship. Trauma studies, building on Caruth (1996) ^[2], LaCapra (2001) ^[8], and Nixon (2011) ^[12], has provided tools for understanding how the slow violence of austerity registers in consciousness and narrative. Marxist theory, drawing on Harvey (2005) ^[5], Standing (2011) ^[17], and Jones (2022) ^[6], has revealed the structural dimensions of inequality and the politics of resilience. Critical disability studies, following Powell (2023) ^[14] and Tyler (2020) ^[20], has shown how austerity disproportionately affects disabled people while also revealing possibilities for resistance.

Despite significant differences in medium and style, the texts examined share profound commonalities.

All represent austerity as violence rather than necessity, as policy choice rather than economic inevitability. All insist on the dignity and humanity of those rendered voiceless by the system. All represent moments of resistance, however small or temporary. And all refuse the consolations of easy resolution, insisting that the struggle against austerity is ongoing.

For the "austerity generation" those who have come of age in an era of welfare cuts, precarious labor, and shrinking possibilities these fictions offer something essential: recognition. They say: your experience is real, your suffering is not your fault, you are not alone. In doing so, they perform a function that is at once psychological and political. They validate experience that dominant discourse denies. They name forces that remain invisible. They imagine futures that might be different.

8.1. Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future investigation. First, the intersection of race and austerity in British working-class fiction remains underexplored. While texts such as Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) [Ref 2¹] depict the experiences of migrant workers navigating the UK's hostile environment, sustained analysis of how racialized communities experience austerity is needed. Second, the representation of gender in austerity fictions warrants further attention; while Fagan's work addresses the experiences of young women, the specific ways in which austerity affects women as primary caregivers, low-paid workers, or single mothers require deeper examination. Third, comparative studies of austerity fictions alongside working-class writing from other national contexts—such as post-2008 Greek fiction or post-recession Spanish narrative—could illuminate both shared patterns and local specificities in the cultural representation of economic crisis. Fourth, the relationship between austerity fiction and other media—television series such as *Chernobyl* (2019) [Ref 2²] or *I May Destroy You* (2020) [Ref 2³], documentary film, and digital storytelling—offers rich possibilities for interdisciplinary analysis. Fifth, audience reception studies examining how working-class readers engage with these texts could illuminate the role of fiction in shaping political consciousness and collective action.

As Powell (2023) ^[14] concluded, "austerity fictions creatively break through the social realist genre to depict the obscured human consequences of public sector cuts, countering discourses of 'brokenness' and offering glimpses of crip resistance" (p. 3). In an age of ongoing precarity, when the welfare state continues to be dismantled and inequality continues to grow, these representations speak with urgent relevance. They remind us that fiction matters: the stories we tell about our lives shape how we understand them and how we imagine changing them. They remind us that representation is never neutral, that to name is to claim, that to tell a story is to assert that this life, this experience, this suffering matters.

The landscapes of austerity—the Jobcentre, the food bank, the zero-hours contract, the insecure tenancy—may seem unpromising subjects for literature. Yet the texts examined

here demonstrate that these are precisely the places where fiction is most needed. They show that in the most austere conditions, the imagination remains alive, capable of resistance, and capable of hope. They demonstrate, in Thompson's (1963) ^[19] words, that even those who seem to be "victims of history" are also "makers of their own lives" (p. 12): subjects of experience, agents of meaning, participants in the ongoing making of class and culture.

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