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The Spectre of Austerity in Up Lit: Mike Gayle's *All The Lonely People* (2020) and Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017)

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Since the 2007/08 global financial crash, austerity policies have been implemented around the world with the United Kingdom leading the way. Between 2010 and 2024, successive Conservative-led governments cut billions of pounds from the welfare state and public services, measures that have led to the impoverishment, deteriorating health, and deaths of disabled people, entrenched regional health inequalities, and exacerbated public health issues such as loneliness, drug addiction, and homelessness. The politicians implementing austerity have revived centuries old 'underserving poor' narratives and employed embodied metaphors of brokenness and recovery to justify these policies. While fictional counternarratives have emerged to expose the human consequences of welfare reform, this article focuses on a different creative response to contemporary austerity Britain: the burgeoning genre of 'up lit'. Up lit has been marketed as a panacea, promising to temporarily soothe and reassure readers who seek imaginative worlds of comfort and hope in the contemporary moment of uncertainty. However, as my analysis of Mike Gayle's *All The Lonely People* (2020) and Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017) reveals, beneath the seemingly progressive representations of marginalised characters and sensitive explorations of their precarious lives, both novels reproduce the neoliberal narratives that underpin the very inequalities they claim to challenge. These best-selling up lit novels celebrate 'deserving' citizens who overcome adversity and take responsibility for their health and wellbeing while offering individual acts of kindness as the solution in the absence of state support. Paying close attention to the peripheral characters who are excluded from the central recovery narratives, I conclude that austerity haunts these up lit texts and cannot be contained within their hopeful neoliberal fantasies.

Introduction: The Emerging Genre of Up Lit and The Politics of Neoliberal Inclusion

Since the 2007/08 global financial crash, austerity policies have been implemented around the world with the United Kingdom leading the way. Between 2010 and 2024, successive Conservative-led governments cut billions of pounds from the welfare state and public services, measures that have led to the impoverishment, deteriorating health, and deaths of disabled people, entrenched regional health inequalities, and exacerbated public health issues such as loneliness, drug addiction, and homelessness. The politicians implementing austerity have employed embodied metaphors to justify these policies, as 'Broken Britain' became the Conservative party catchphrase during the 2010 general election (Slater 2012) and in 2013 George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, claimed that thanks to the government's austerity programme, 'Britain is moving out of intensive care, and from rescue to recovery' (2013). While fictional counternarratives have emerged to question these political discourses and expose the human consequences of so-called welfare reform, this article focuses on a different creative response to contemporary austerity Britain: the burgeoning genre of 'up lit'.[1]

Up lit has been described by *The Guardian* journalist Danuta Kean as 'the new book trend with kindness at its core' (2021). Kean reports that 2017 was 'a bruising year dominated by political and economic uncertainty', which has, 'publishers say, kickstarted a new trend they have branded "up lit"', having identified 'an appetite for everyday heroism, human connection and love' (2021). The central characters in up lit experience trauma, illness, social injustice, and social isolation. These dark spaces function to enhance the lightness that follows, as the protagonists are lifted from the depths of tragedy. Readers are invited to safely explore the suffering in the world, assured that it will be redressed within the confines of the novel. Penguin's online directory of up lit publications warns 'there may be tears, gasps and moments of sadness, but by the final pages of these books you'll be left with an appreciation of the good in the world, and the wonderful people in it' (Penguin Random House Australia). It also claims that 'in troubling times, Up Lit (or uplifting literature) can help elevate your mood'. This description is representative of the marketing strategy surrounding up lit which frames the genre as a panacea, promising to temporarily reassure readers who seek imaginative worlds of comfort and hope in the contemporary moment of uncertainty.[2]

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[1] Fictional counternarratives that challenge austerity and shine a light on structural inequalities include Ken Loach's films *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), and Niall Griffiths' novel *Broken Ghost* (2019). These texts stage moments of political protest and collective acts of community solidarity, evoking the Occupy movement and anti-austerity demonstrations. As such, they are distinguishable from the neoliberal co-option of community in up lit.

[2] Up lit emerged in Britain and British authors are the most prolific contributors to the genre. However, there is a burgeoning authorship in Australia (see https://www.penguin.com.au/books/lists/up-lit), America (such as Gabrielle

As a new genre within the realm of popular fiction, literary critique of up lit is scarce. In David James' inaugural lecture at the University of Birmingham in 2019, he identified the emergence of up lit and noted that uplifting literature may be dismissed by literary scholars as moralistic and sentimental. But James argues that it can function as 'a bulwark against an era of resurgent nationalism and state-sanctioned austerity', as 'enduring inequities continue to ramify materially and psychically for the elderly, the disabled, and the precariously employed' (2019). He asserts that 'we're not living in politically kind times' and considers how literature may 'answer back to these conditions. Not by making us feel better. Not by soothing or distracting us. But by making other, affirmative structures of feeling imaginable' (2019). Although James demonstrates this contention through his nuanced reading of uplifting aesthetics in two memoirs that share the writers' experiences of illness, grief, and trauma, my reading of up lit texts provides an oppositional view, revealing how uplifting depictions of kindness and empathy are specifically designed to make us feel better, soothing and distracting us from living in politically unkind times.

Exploring the progressive possibilities of uplifting literature, James argues that it imagines 'alternative behaviours through its depiction of solicitude for people living precarious lives', and that its objective is 'namely, the simulation of micro-acts of concern for the vulnerable and the lonely' (2019). Indeed, up lit authors encourage readers to emotionally invest in their characters' stories and care about their wellbeing. They promote 'concern' for these 'vulnerable and lonely' individuals. However, their circumstances are predominately framed as personal misfortunes, a consequence of their trauma rather than structural inequality or lack of public services. The employment of personal tragedy narratives to evoke concern is particularly problematic from a disability perspective, as it creates a similar dynamic to the charity model of disability, where disabled individuals are framed as tragic and deserving of non-disabled people's pity and financial donations. The torrent of excessive hardship depicted in up lit verges on 'inspiration porn', a concept popularised by comedian and activist Stella Young. Young explains that images of a disabled person carrying out an ordinary task or extraordinary feat accompanied by captions such as 'your excuse is invalid' or 'before you quit, try' (2012), are designed 'to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, "Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person"' (2014). Up lit functions in a similar way, producing inspirational messages of self-improvement and inviting readers to indulge in the protagonist's tragedy before they overcome adversity through their individual resilience, persistence, and strength.

Zevin's 2014 novel *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* which was adapted for the Hollywood screen in 2022), and in other parts of Europe, for example Swedish author Fredrik Backman's novel *A Man Called Ove* (2012) which has been made into a Swedish language film (2015) as well as an English language version starring Hollywood actor Tom Hanks, retitled *A Man Called Otto* (2022).

Up lit contributes to a trend in contemporary literature described by Parul Sehgal as the 'trauma plot', which 'reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority' (2021). Up lit novels typically open with lonely and disconnected protagonists whose traumatic backstories are gradually revealed, triggered by a disruption to their ordinary daily routines. Through making connections in the community, they start to confront their past trauma, embarking on personal journeys that involve a crisis point towards the end of the novel, after which they emerge as new. Only once they have identified the traumatic roots of their loneliness – usually a combination of grief, abuse, and family estrangement – can they overcome the challenges they face in the present. Up lit relishes in fixing broken individuals and fragmented communities. As prolific up lit author Rachel Joyce asserts: 'I like writing stories about broken people who become fixed, which seems to me, in essence, an act of kindness' (Quoted in Beckerman 2018). Such efforts to promote kindness are laudable in an age of brutal austerity, but these uplifting resolutions rely on the transformation of the protagonists, placing the burden of recovery on 'broken' individuals rather than the systems and policies that break people.

Clear parallels can also be drawn between up lit and the subgenres of romantic fiction chick lit and lad lit, which have grown in popularity since the late 1990s. Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff argue that these novels have rewritten the conventions of traditional romance through evolving constructions of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexual relationships (2006: 489). However, they also note that despite the supposedly subversive and confessional depictions of men and women's internal thoughts, both chick lit and lad lit obscure 'discussions of power' and the 'social and cultural influences' that underpin gender inequalities (2006: 500). This dynamic is also evident in up lit, for beneath the seemingly progressive representations of marginalised protagonists and celebrations of community support, lies an emphasis on the neoliberal value of individual responsibility which works to conceal the harmful impact of austerity.

Chick lit and lad lit invite similar affective responses from readers to romantic fiction. As Ria Cheyne explains, 'writers and readers of romance understand it as a particularly emotive genre whose texts – and particularly their endings – aim to generate feelings of happiness, joyfulness, and hope for the future' (2019: 135). Furthermore, 'the depiction of the central characters striving toward a worthy goal stimulates emotional investment and involvement [...]. [Romance] presents affirmative narratives of achievement in which the obstacles to a desired goal are overcome' (2019: 136). While in up lit novels, the triumph of romantic love is not central to the narrative, emotional investment is cultivated through the protagonists'

endeavours to form long-lasting community bonds as they embark on emotional journeys of self-reflection and transformation.

Cultural disability studies theorists have critiqued the historical use of recovery narratives in literature and film whereby disabled characters overcome their impairment. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's foundational concept of 'narrative prosthesis' reveals that literary depictions of disabled characters often perform a metaphorical function as their erasure through cure or death 'epitomises the act of narrative closure itself, in that a problem is repaired and the story ends with the *uplift of a successful repair*' (2000: 168, emphasis added). Classic children's fiction such as Susan Coolidge's *What Katie Did* (1872) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), provide moralistic lessons that characterise disability as inherently negative, often a form of punishment or a tragic outcome. The disabled characters are miraculously 'cured' once they learn the values of kindness, selflessness, and human connection. Overcoming narratives became popular in Victorian literature as cultural texts responded to the social and structural upheaval of industrialisation. Martha Stoddard Holmes traces the development of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' to this time, arguing that this was 'purposeful and specific cultural work; it offered a promise, however illusory, that the limitless and uncontrollable situation of unemployment and poverty would become manageable if only the undeserving were winnowed out' (2004: 113). As this article highlights, not only have the figures of the un/deserving poor been revived in contemporary austerity times, but up lit offers a reformed version of these overcoming narratives, presenting similarly moralistic messages beneath the veneer of inclusive stories.

Disability, crip, and queer theorists have explored the politics of neoliberal inclusion as certain sections of previously marginalised groups have been absorbed into mainstream markets as well as political, cultural, and social spaces (Mitchell & Snyder 2015; Robert McRuer 2010, 2018; Jasbir Puar 2007, 2017). While increased representation and meaningful inclusion should be encouraged, the restricted neoliberal vision of diversity excludes those who do not recover, inspire, or conform. Through his critical exploration of the 'ideology of diversity', Lennard J. Davis proposes that 'the term *diverse* serves as the new normalising term' and 'is well suited to the core beliefs of neoliberalism', a system that replaces governments with markets and 'reconfigures the citizen into the consumer' (2013: 1–3, original emphasis). He identifies adverts that showcase a vision of diversity to sell products, such as the cosmetic company Dove's 'campaign for real beauty', but notes that 'it's hard to imagine a commercial [...] that would include homeless people, impoverished people, [...] heroin, crack, or methamphetamine addicts' (3–4). Jasbir Puar similarly warns

that 'the biopolitical management of disability entails that [its] visibility and social acceptance [...] rely on and engender the obfuscation and in fact deeper proliferation of debility'– that is the physical and mental harm inflicted on populations through poverty, war, and social oppression (2017: xv–xvi). As my analysis of *All The Lonely People* and *Eleanor Oliphant* highlights, the dynamics of neoliberal inclusion are apparent in up lit. Both novels celebrate active, 'deserving' citizens, who overcome adversity, take responsibility for their health and wellbeing, and conform to the neoliberal demands of work, consumerism, civic responsibility, and self-care. Their recovery is contingent on spontaneous acts of individual and community kindness which are offered in the absence of state support. Both novels also include peripheral characters who are excluded from the central recovery narratives and absorb the blame for social problems, facilitating the uplifting resolutions and obscuring the policies that exacerbate loneliness.

Loneliness has been 'devasting for public health' and has become ubiquitous within contemporary political discourses and the media (Bound Alberti 2019a: 2). The Commission on Loneliness, set up by Labour MP Jo Cox before her murder in 2016, defines loneliness as a 'subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship' which is 'often associated with social isolation, but people can and do feel lonely even when in a relationship or when surrounded by others' (2017: 8). The report found that over nine million adults are 'often or always lonely' and noted that while research initially focused on the experience of loneliness in older age groups, studies have found its prevalence across all ages (8). Cultural historian Fay Bound Alberti is cautious of framing loneliness as an 'epidemic', arguing that such terminology 'leads to knee-jerk political soundbites' (2019a: 2, 4). Revealing loneliness to be historically situated and unequally experienced, Bound Alberti challenges the assumption that it is 'universal and part of the human condition [which] means that nobody is accountable, no matter how much deprivation prevails' (2019a: viii). Building on Bound Alberti's work, I frame loneliness as a form of debility, produced by oppressive structures of material deprivation and exacerbated by austerity's cuts to public services. Psychologists Laura McGrath, Vanessa Griffin, and Ed Mundy have examined the impact of austerity on mental health, categorising loneliness as one of five 'austerity ailments', as policies that 'increase isolation and loneliness [...] have a direct risk of damaging mental health outcomes in both the short and long term' (2016: 46, 49). Like Puar's concept of debility, the term 'austerity ailments' emphasises the correlation between structural inequality, policy decisions, and experiences of ill health, countering political ideologies that blame individual behaviour for social problems.

While new models of care such as social proscribing and befriending services have emerged in response to the public health crisis of loneliness, they cannot fill the

gaps left by austerity's cuts. As Bound Alberti notes, the Conservative government's loneliness strategy does not reference 'how it might intersect with [...] austerity targets, including the social care and welfare benefit cuts that created demographic inequalities in the experience of loneliness' (2019a: 2). Furthermore, austerity demands the closure of 'spaces where community [is] formed, especially in the poorest sectors of society: libraries, social care, [...] and council housing' (Bound Alberti 2019a: 233). Up lit side-steps these conditions, concluding with messages of hope through stories of individual and community action. The 'broken' protagonists and fragmented communities are repaired through the characters' capacity to reach out to one another, with minimal reference to the broader structures of inequality. While up lit emerged as a response to contemporary austerity, direct references to these policies and discourses are notably absent from the texts themselves. Following these ghostly trails, I reveal how the barely visible spectral presence of austerity haunts these up lit texts and cannot be contained within their hopeful neoliberal fantasies.

Mike Gayle's *All The Lonely People* (2020)

The best-selling lad lit author Mike Gayle has published eighteen novels over a career spanning three decades. Gayle has rejected being pigeonholed as a Black novelist who is expected to write specifically about race, asserting that 'it's almost like there's this philosophy that if it's mainstream it's white and if it's niche it's black. I am as mainstream as it gets and I will stay mainstream...and I'm black. To me that is a political statement' (Quoted in Feay 2009). *All The Lonely People* (2020) is Gayle's first foray into up lit and engages more directly with race than his other novels. It follows the life of Hubert Bird, an eighty-four-year-old man living in the London borough of Bromley. Hubert is a member of the Windrush generation, one of the 500,000 Commonwealth citizens invited to settle in England between 1948 and 1971 to help rebuild the 'mother country' after the second World War (Collinson 2018). Throughout the course of the novel the reader learns that Hubert's wife Joyce died of early onset dementia, that he lost touch with friends when caring for her, and that he has become estranged from his son David, who is homeless and struggles with drug and alcohol addiction. Hubert is ill-tempered and socially isolated, although he does have weekly telephone conversations with his daughter Rose, who the reader is led to believe lives in Australia.[3] Towards the end of the novel it is revealed that Rose died five years ago when a lorry crashed into her car. Gayle purposefully misdirects the reader as Rose apparently announces that she will be visiting England at the beginning of the novel,

[3] The protagonists in up lit are often curmudgeonly older people who are transformed by their relationships with animals and/or younger people. See for example Backman's *A Man Called Ove* (2012) and Hazel Prior's *How the Penguins Saved Veronica* (2020).

prompting Hubert's mission to make friends as he worries that she will quit her job and return to Bromley if she is aware of his isolation. Shortly after this announcement, Hubert meets Ashleigh, a single mother who has recently moved from Wales to social housing in the area. They eventually become friends, launch a community group to connect with other lonely people, and lead a campaign to end loneliness in Bromley.

The novel moves between the past and present, with the chapters titled 'Now' exploring Hubert's loneliness in the twenty-first century while the 'Then' chapters depict his experience of immigrating to England from Jamaica in 1958. Gayle captures the experiences of poverty and racism experienced by Hubert's generation and includes references to historical events which serve as a reminder of Britain's racist past. However, the novel remains predominately silent on the Windrush scandal that came to light in 2018, when 15,000 members of the Windrush generation and their children were reclassified as illegal immigrants and at least eighty-three were deported. This was part of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government's package of 'hostile environment' policies introduced in 2012, which like the reforms to the benefits system, were target driven and fed into the wider austerity agenda to reduce the number of people claiming state support. As with welfare state reform, disabled and older people were disproportionately affected as they were denied access to health care, social care, benefits, housing, and even presented with bills for previous benefits claims (Unison 2019). These injustices are left out of Hubert's reflection that 'death, disease, divorce and relocation: these, it appeared, were the four fates consuming all that remained of Hubert's generation' (Gayle 2021: 48). The novel's only reference to the Windrush scandal is swiftly passed over, as Hubert reflects that he had been 'outraged and disgusted by the whole sorry business' (223).

By the end of the novel, the historical racism Hubert has experienced is resolved when he meets his late wife's sister's great-granddaughter Melody, a name that signals the harmonious notes of the novel's ending. He learns that Joyce's family, who are white and disapproved of Hubert because of the colour of his skin, had become 'broader, richer and more accepting' (351). When Melody invites him to meet her mother, Hubert plans 'to repair the bonds that had been broken so long ago. [...] He could right this wrong' (351). Through repairing the broken bonds of one family, the novel ends with a constructed version of the seeming progress that has been made since the 1950s and diverts the reader's attention away from the wider structural injustices and prevalence of racism in the present. Despite the novel's commitment to discussing Britain's racist past in the 'Then' chapters, there is little exploration of the racist policies and demonisation of immigrants in the contemporary austerity period; these are predominately written out of the 'Now' chapters, left in the past to make way for an uplifting future.

Following the financial crash, the 2008 Green Paper, *The Path to Citizenship,* implemented 'the most sweeping changes to the immigration system for over 30 years', introducing the key policy shift towards 'earned citizenship' (Houdt & Suvarierol 2011: 413). Immigrants applying for British citizenship are now required to fulfil 'the economic and cultural conditions of membership' such as 'proficiency in English [...], economic self-sufficiency [and] joining in with the British way of life' (Houdt & Suvarierol 2011: 413, 420). Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas have also identified 'a new kind of citizenship [that] is taking shape in the age of biomedicine, biotechnology, and genomics', which they call 'biological citizenship' (2005: 439). Biological citizens take responsibility for their health and wellbeing such as 'adjusting diet, lifestyle, and habits in the name of the minimisation of illness and the maximisation of health' and are 'obliged to conduct life responsibly in relation to others' (Rose & Novas 2005: 451). In *All the Lonely People*, these values and practices are central to Hubert and Ashleigh's discussions of loneliness. Ashleigh laments that 'everyone's always passing the buck or shifting the blame on to someone else. But what if we stopped thinking about problems like loneliness as someone else's thing to sort out and started taking responsibility for it ourselves?' (164–65). Ashleigh suggests setting up a 'pressure group' and creates a flyer stating 'here's your chance to stop being part of the problem and start being part of the solution! Come and join the Campaign to End Loneliness in Bromley!' (164).[4] Beneath the enthusiastic language of political activism and the rallying cry for communal action, lies the implication that inactive citizens are to blame for the ongoing problem of loneliness. This is explicitly expressed through Hubert's reflection 'what was it people used to say? "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." Hubert didn't want to be part of the problem. Not anymore' (166). Although Hubert thinks Ashleigh's plan was a 'hare-brained scheme', he concedes that 'in the absence of any other kind, what choice was there?' (166). He accepts the absence of state support, encapsulating the neoliberal ideology that 'there is no alternative' (Thatcher 1980; Cameron 2013). The only solution put forward by Gayle is for the lonely protagonists to take responsibility and actively resolve the public health crisis of loneliness through their individual and collective commitment to biological citizenship.

Although Hubert and Ashleigh's determination to 'do something' is framed as community-minded and motivational, their language mirrors well established Conservative party discourse which blames supposedly 'work shy' individuals for the social problem of unemployment. In 2015, Ian Duncan Smith, as Conservative Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (2010–16), declared 'we won't lift you out

[4] The fictional campaign alludes to the Campaign to End Loneliness, a community interest group founded in 2011.

of poverty by simply transferring taxpayers' money to you. With our help, you'll work your way out of poverty' (Quoted in Stone 2015). This perspective is animated through Hubert's relationship with his son David, who the reader first learns about when Hubert and Ashleigh hand out flyers for the campaign. When Ashleigh walks towards a group of homeless men, Hubert shouts: 'You're wasting your time with these kind of people. [...] Drunks like them! [...] It's a disgrace! They don't care about anything but themselves' (197). There was 'real disgust in [his] voice when he spoke' (197) and he exclaims that 'if it was up to me they would not be allowed to mess up the street like that' (196–97). Hubert 'pointed at the man with dreadlocks, who was so intoxicated he could barely keep his eyes open' and tells Ashleigh 'that one's my son' (197, 198). He later wonders whether 'it was being born in this country that was to blame. People back home in Jamaica couldn't jus [*sic*] sit around on their backside and get money from the government and use it to get off their faces' (217). He also remembers the time he physically carried David home before realising that 'what everyone said was true: David was never going to change unless he wanted to' (292). Hubert cannot 'lift' him out of poverty.

The Ghost at the Feast

The novel ends with the successful launch of the campaign to end loneliness. The recreation ground 'had been transformed into a temporary festival site' where 'various charity and community groups had set up their stalls', and a large crowd gathered in front of 'a huge stage with a mammoth screen above it' (341). Prior to the event, Hubert's house has been burgled, a shock that leads to the revelation of Rose's death. After stepping down as the campaign leader and a period of self-imposed isolation, Hubert eventually decides to attend the festival where he sees Ashleigh on stage telling the story of how they first met. The feel-good moment swells when Hubert appears on the screen behind Ashleigh and she yells 'Hubert, it's you! I knew you'd come' (342). As he makes his way to the stage 'the crowd were [...] chanting his name' (343) and his speech functions as the crescendo to the uplifting festival scene. Hubert concludes:

> The key to helping other people out of them loneliness is nothing more difficult than good old-fashioned perseverance. It's not always easy [...] but you have to [...] carry on trying even if it doesn't look like it's working. You've got to refuse to give up on people, even if them given up on themselves. (344)

His call for 'good old-fashioned perseverance' and for people to 'carry on trying' evokes the language of the 'Blitz spirit', initially employed to encourage Britons to withstand Germany's bombing campaign in 1940–41. Owen Hatherley explains that the slogan

'Keep Calm and Carry On' has become ubiquitous since the 2008 financial crash and 'has been exploited by politicians since 1979. When Thatcherites and Blairites spoke of "hard choices" and "muddling through", they often evoked the memories of 1941' (2016). Gayle's nostalgic revival of this nationalistic war-time sentiment promotes the image of a stoic and socially cohesive Britain, contradicting the historical racism and social divisions depicted earlier in the novel.

Hubert also asserts that 'extraordinary things can happen to ordinary people [...] but only if we open ourselves up enough to let them' and that 'you have to be willing to keep doors open' (344–45). This simplistic solution to the problem of loneliness ignores the political landscape of the Windrush scandal in which the doors to healthcare, benefits and jobs have been firmly closed. As a representative of the Windrush generation, Hubert preaches perseverance as an individual choice that is available to everyone with the 'right' attitude. From his elevated position on the main stage at the festival, Hubert thinks 'for a fleeting moment' that he has seen David, but 'by the time [he] looked back, David, if indeed it had been him, had gone, swallowed up by a sea of people' (346). Hubert's call for perseverance does not apply to his own son and the lack of resolution for David highlights the limits of neoliberal inclusionism. Hubert's final thought on the matter is that 'if that had been his son, then at the very least he hoped he knew [...] how desperately he wanted him to be well' (346). The only sliver of hope for David, is that he has heard his father's inspiring speech and learns how to become a good biological citizen.

However, David's character can also be read through the lens of 'crip excess', depicting those who are 'at the margins' and 'not necessarily a candidate for the face of the movement' (McRuer 2012: 151). Unlike Hubert, who becomes the face of the campaign, David remains at the margins but disrupts the novel's order by refusing to be 'managed, contained, kept quiet, kept silent' (McRuer 2012: 148–49). David troubles the messages of traditional family values, perseverance, and social cohesion and is the crack that unravels the novel's simplistic solution to loneliness. He materialises as the silent spectral figure at the festival, evoking the common expression 'the ghost at the feast', which refers to a figure who has brought misery to a festive occasion, alluding to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), when Banquo's ghost haunts the banquet. David manifests as a foreboding shadow in an otherwise uplifting novel, providing a reminder of those whose difference cannot be accommodated within the neoliberal vision of an inclusive community. His appearance undermines the group's hope that the campaign will 'bring an end to the spectre of loneliness in the borough of Bromley and beyond, once and for all!' (254). For although Hubert summons Rose after her death, David is 'the spectre of loneliness' that cannot be entirely exorcised; he is the ghostly presence haunting the novel.

All The Lonely People ends with the hope that responsible citizens can overcome loneliness as long as they conform to the neoliberal vision of community, diversity, and inclusion. These right-wing undertones are buried within depictions of grassroots solidarity and empowerment which fill the novel's silence on austerity measures and racist immigration policies. In Mitchell and Snyder's terms, these uplifting moments function prosthetically. In removing the prosthesis, my analysis has explored the gaps and cracks in the novel as Gayle avoids responding to the material conditions and political decisions that produce social isolation such as immigration policies, police violence, and the lack of support for those experiencing homelessness and addiction in austerity Britain. However, the accompanying ghosts of these injustices cannot be contained within the novel, for the absence of state support and the shadow of the Windrush scandal manifest as spectres, haunting the uplifting depictions of community engagement.[5]

Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* (2017)

Gail Honeyman's debut novel *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017) explores loneliness through the first-person perspective of Eleanor, a thirty-year-old white woman who lives and works in Glasgow. As with Gayle's debut novel, *Eleanor Oliphant* received instant commercial success. The manuscript initiated a six-figure bidding war and within its first year of publication, it won the Costa Book Award and Hollywood actor Reese Witherspoon's production company, Hello Sunshine, bought the rights for the film adaptation (Armitstead 2018). While *Eleanor Oliphant* draws on the generic conventions of chick lit, it has been recognised as a foundational novel within the genre of up lit. Bound Alberti (2019b) included *Eleanor Oliphant* in *The Guardian's* 'Top Ten Books About Loneliness', highlighting its insightful depiction of social isolation in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Honeyman provides an intimate depiction of Eleanor's loneliness, alcohol addiction, struggles with mental health, and attempted suicide. However, like *All The Lonely People*, the novel explores these darker themes through Eleanor's journey of self-discovery, celebrating the transformative power of individual kindness to produce an uplifting resolution.

On the surface, *Eleanor Oliphant* captures what the late Lauren Berlant (2011) describes as the 'crisis ordinariness' of the contemporary moment. Berlant conceptualises the 'impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves

[5] As Avery F. Gordon argues, a spectre emerges when 'a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known […]. These spectres or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomise is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view', see *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociology imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p xvi.

developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on' (2011: 8). Eleanor explains that 'I have always taken great pride in managing my life alone. [...] I don't need anyone else [...]. I am a self-contained entity', before swiftly admitting 'that's what I've always told myself, at any rate' (Honeyman 2017: 8). This uncertainty is also captured in the title, which immediately signals that Eleanor is *not* fine, and escalates towards the end of the novel when she reasons: 'if someone asks you how you are, you are meant to say FINE. You are not meant to say that you cried yourself to sleep last night because you hadn't spoken to another person for two consecutive days. FINE is what you say' (270). This assertion disrupts the crisis ordinariness of loneliness and the ideology of 'Keep Calm and Carry On'. While perseverance is celebrated at the close of *All The Lonely People*, the motif that Eleanor is 'fine' highlights the harm caused by 'muddling through'. This is reflected structurally as the first part of the novel is titled 'Good Days' and follows Eleanor's attempts to suppress the traumatic memories of her past and 'scramble for modes of living on' (Berlant 2011: 8). When her carefully regulated emotions finally reach the surface in an explosive moment of realisation, the novel transitions into 'Bad Days', detailing her suicide attempt. The word 'fine' takes on new meaning as Eleanor's precarious existence and mental health unravels, and it becomes clear that there is a fine line between her 'good days' and 'bad days'.

As well as unsettling the crisis ordinariness of loneliness, Eleanor's outsider perspective allows Honeyman to question embedded social norms, revealing what Berlant calls the 'cruel optimism' of fantasies of the 'good life' (2011: 3). At times, Eleanor's voice cuts through the illusions of the good life, or 'Good Days', especially when she notes the repetitive drudgery and cruel optimism of contemporary labour. On Fridays she observes the 'palpable sense of [...] joy, everyone colluding with the lie that somehow the weekend would be amazing and that, next week, work would be different, better. They never learn' (9). However, this critical view is tempered over the course of the novel as despite Eleanor's initial rejection of work and consumerism, both are offered as the solution to her loneliness.

This dynamic shift is initiated when Eleanor finds a glimmer of hope and becomes embroiled in her own personal fantasy of the 'good life'. Her established routine is interrupted when, at an office party, she wins raffle tickets to a charity gig and develops an intense attachment to Johnnie Lomond, the lead-singer of a local band. In the days following the gig, Eleanor feels that 'things had changed. [...] I was feeling good, better, best' (9), but Honeyman suggests the cruel optimism of this attachment, for despite her otherwise astute social observations, she misreads Johnnie's narcissistic and unkind behaviour, viewing him as 'a shy, modest, self-effacing man' (145). The fantasy

is finally broken when she returns to the music venue and stands in front of the stage to see him perform, realising 'I was a thirty-year-old woman with a juvenile crush on a man whom I didn't know, and would never know' (263). This realisation breaks all the illusions Eleanor has carefully constructed to maintain her fragile existence. The devastating realisation culminates in her 'Bad Days' when she confronts 'the horror of [her] own self-delusion' (266). She acknowledges that her attachment to Johnnie created a distraction from the root causes of her isolation and as she recovers her suppressed memories, the full details of her traumatic childhood are revealed.

Like in *All The Lonely People*, Eleanor's loneliness in the twenty-first century is explored alongside the events of her past, but rather than providing clearly defined chapters depicting 'Then' and 'Now', her trauma is uncovered through flashback sequences of fragmented memories and discussions during her therapy sessions. In the final pages, the previously murky details are confirmed: Eleanor's mother physically and psychologically abused her and her sister, Marianne, and when Eleanor was ten years old and Marianne was four, she tranquilised and tied them up before setting the house on fire. Eleanor survived but was unable to save her sister and subsequently suppressed the memory of her existence. Throughout the novel, the reader is led to believe that Eleanor's mother, who she refers to as 'Mummy', calls her every week from prison. However, the final plot twist reveals that Mummy also died when attempting to escape the house fire and that, like Hubert's conversations with Rose, Eleanor's phone calls with her mother are imagined. Eleanor's loneliness and precarious mental health are eventually traced to these extraordinary experiences and Mummy's abuse. As the details of Eleanor's past and their devastating consequences intensify, the novel breaks with its exploration of crisis ordinariness. Rather than framing loneliness, as Bound Alberti does, as a 'product of socio-political and economic choices; of decisions made by governments in prioritising economic freedom over social responsibility', it becomes intertwined with Eleanor's personal tragedy (2019a: 230). A recovery narrative emerges as she overcomes her social isolation by developing new routines of self-care, undergoing a physical transformation, realising her full potential at work, and forming connections in the community. The novel therefore becomes an expression of cruel optimism, although like *All The Lonely People*, it struggles to completely exorcise the spectral injustices of austerity which produce and exacerbate loneliness.

Troubling the 'Incoherent Mash' of Disability Stereotypes

Eleanor is widely described in book reviews and blogs as a 'social misfit' due to her physical appearance and behaviour (Bound Alberti 2019b). The scarring on one side of her face and body is the result of the fire, which also caused her 'unmelodious' voice as 'smoke inhalation all those years ago [...] damaged [her] vocal cords irreparably'

(85). Eleanor is acutely aware that she does not fit in as she is regularly 'stared at, whispered about' and yearns to 'disappear into everywoman acceptability' (29–30). These descriptions not only evoke disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's 'politics of staring' (2002) but also her concept of 'misfitting' (2011), which captures the dynamic 'encounter between bodies with particular shapes and capabilities and the particular shape and structure of the world' (2011: 594). Eleanor reflects that 'after the fire, at each new school, I'd tried so hard, but something about me just didn't fit. There was, it seemed, no Eleanor-shaped social hole for me to slot into' (327). The novel explores the relationship between loneliness and misfitting, tracing the correlation between social isolation, depression, disability, trauma, and addiction. As Bound Alberti argues: 'loneliness thrives when there is a disconnect between the individual and the world' (2019a: x). However, Honeyman also deploys disability stereotypes, picking up and dropping the culturally recognisable signifiers of autism, bi-polar, and psychosis to tell a story about overcoming loneliness in contemporary austerity times.

Although in an interview with *The Telegraph* Homeyman asserts that Eleanor is not autistic (Woods 2018), her narrative voice, observations, and behaviour evoke culturally recognisable characteristics that are associated with the condition (2018).[6] Eleanor states 'I find it hard to work out people's expressions sometimes. The cryptic crossword is much, much easier' (335), she 'thoroughly research[es] all activities before commencement' (43), and her logical reasoning leads to brutally honest interactions. The depiction of Eleanor's seemingly autistic traits become problematic alongside the exploration of loneliness, as they provide a short-hand explanation for her social difficulties based on the preconceived notion of 'autism [as] a condition of withdrawal' and '"aloneness"', which can be traced back to the 1940s (Murray 2008: 115). Bruno Bettelheim's book *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (1967) compounded this perception and from the 1950s–1970s, so-called neglectful mothers were deemed to be 'triggers for the development of autism in children' (Murray 2008: 175). These pseudoscientific and thoroughly discredited ideas provide an uncomfortable undercurrent to the novel, as Mummy contributes to 'the pervasive construction of "the mad mother of a disabled child"', which as Patty Douglas, Katherine Runswick-Cole, Sara Ryan, and Penny Fogg argue, stems from the 'cold "refrigerator mother" of the 1950s', who was blamed for causing 'autism in her child through her own madness' (2021: 39). Mummy, who the reader learns in the final pages is called Sharon, is coded as bi-polar, and like the representation of Eleanor's autistic traits, this amounts to a stereotypical depiction of the condition. Eleanor recalls that

[6] Stuart Murray's foundational text *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2008) reveals how cultural representations of autism, such as Barry Levinson's film *Rain Man* (1988) and Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003), have shaped public perceptions of the condition.

when she asked Mummy about her absent father, she ‘laughed and laughed’ before ‘her tone’ switched to ‘dismissive, bored’, then ‘she leaned forward, showed me her teeth’ and finally ‘paused, regained her equanimity’ (31). Sharon’s abrupt changes in temperament signal the instability Eleanor experienced as a child and explain her detachment from others as an adult. Her withdrawal is ultimately traced to her mother’s ‘madness’ and monstrous neglect.

Eleanor’s cold fortress of isolation starts to thaw when she meets Raymond, a new colleague at work, and Sammy, an old man they help when he collapses in the street. Her resistance to physical contact begins to shift when she visits Sammy in hospital. He ‘clasped’ both of her hands in his and she notes that ‘normally I would be horrified, but he surprised me. […] I didn’t want to remove my hands from the warmth and strength of his’ (94). Bound Alberti notes that a ‘prevalent metaphor for talking about loneliness (and assuaging it) is temperature’ as ‘warmth has a physical and symbolic compensatory effect when a person is feeling disconnected […] and lonely’ (2019a: 196). While Honeyman regularly employs this metaphor to powerfully depict the affective experiences of loneliness and connection, the motif problematically coincides with the erasure of Eleanor’s seemingly autistic traits caused by her cold ‘refrigerator mother’.

As the autism narrative is dropped, the novel transitions into an exploration of Eleanor’s mental health. When she attends therapy sessions towards the end of the novel it becomes clear to her, and the reader, that her weekly conversations with Mummy are imagined. These telephone conversations, like Hubert’s transatlantic calls with his dead daughter Rose, signify the lack of support available for individuals in austerity Britain. In response to their social isolation and grief the protagonists create their own imaginary worlds to feel connected, or because they have nowhere else to turn. But despite employing the same plot device, clear distinctions are apparent. Hubert tells Ashleigh ‘me knew it couldn’t be Rose. Rose was dead’ (296), whereas Eleanor has effectively suppressed the memory of her mother and sister’s deaths. Eleanor’s telephone conversations thus contain further layers of interpretative possibility, inviting a psychoanalytical reading of her trauma and producing depictions of voice hearing that align with research from the hearing voices community.

Catherine MacMillan’s psychoanalytical reading of Eleanor’s trauma argues that the concept of the psychic crypt, developed by psychologists Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, ‘shed[s] light on Eleanor Oliphant’s telephone conversations with her dead mother, as well as on her loneliness, social difficulties and depression’ (2021: 51). MacMillan explains that a psychic crypt is formed as a response to trauma when there is an ‘unconscious refusal or inability to mourn a deceased love object’, causing them

to be 'entombed' in the 'subject's psyche in secret' and subsequently 'the survivor is deluded into believing that no trauma or loss has occurred' (2021: 49–51). Mummy has not been incarcerated in prison but entombed in Eleanor's psyche, animating the psychodynamic theory of encryption. She is thus reframed as the haunting ghost of Eleanor's past trauma that must be confronted and exorcised. The psychic crypt draws on Sigmund Freud's theory that trauma and grief can lead to an internal split, an idea that has been brought to life in film to depict mental illness, especially conditions such as schizophrenia.[7] In these psychological thrillers the protagonists' auditory and visual hallucinations are represented visually on screen and their conditions are initially not known to the audience. Once drawn into these worlds, the truth of their 'delusions' is revealed, subverting the audience's expectations and creating a narrative disruption that mirrors the protagonists' internal states. Mummy provides a similar effect, manifesting as Eleanor's mental distress and creating a narrative twist. Through this device, Eleanor is granted redemption, as her judgemental commentary throughout the novel is traced to Mummy's own prejudices which she has 'absorbed' (50) and 'internalised' (100). This internal split is not only embodied through Mummy's characterisation but also Eleanor's physical appearance as she refers to 'the freak side of my face – the damaged half' (85). During her therapy sessions she learns to separate the voices in her head and after she finally confronts the full details of her abuse and the fire, she can finally say '"Goodbye, Mummy"' (347). She has 'the last word' and counters Sharon's erratic, unstable, and 'mad' voice, as her own 'voice was firm, measured, certain. [...] And, just like that, Mummy was gone' (374). Eleanor's recovery is therefore presented as possible because she projects her mental illness into a separate figure, isolating and removing it so that she can become 'whole'.

Recent research conducted by and collaboratively with voice hearers has moved away from pathological and diagnostic terms and towards an understanding of the condition as a valuable emotional response to abuse and trauma (Corstens & Longden 2013). Marius Romme and Mervyn Morris' study found that 'trauma is related [...] to the onset of [...] voices' and that 'some voice-hearers recognised the identity of one of their voices as that of their abuser' (2013: 260, 265). Honeyman depicts this experience of voice hearing as Mummy's voice criticises and belittles Eleanor, hissing 'all alone, aren't you? No one to talk to, no one to play with. And it's all your own fault. Strange, sad little Eleanor' (35, 301). But Romme and Morris note that 'getting rid of voices is not necessary in order for people to recover from their distress [...] and so should not be the ultimate goal' (2013: 264). They clarify that 'human variations are not targets

[7] For example, *Fight Club* (1999), directed by David Fincher, *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), directed by Ron Howard, and *Shutter Island* (2010), directed by Martin Scorsese.

for elimination, but something people learn to live with' and 'that voice-hearing can be understood as an integral part of the emotional and thinking life of a whole person, not as a fragment of a wider disease process' (2013: 265, 267). In contrast, Mummy becomes the target for elimination, a wounded fragment of Eleanor's psyche that blocks her capacity for connection.

Jarringly in a novel about empathy and kindness, there are minimal considerations of Sharon's own economic circumstances, social isolation, or mental state. The few details that are raised are quickly passed over, including the fact that she was only nineteen when Eleanor was born and her claim that Eleanor's father raped her (298, 31). Instead, she is demonised as a monstrous figure and conforms to the stereotype of a 'scrounging' lone mother. Meghan Campbell's investigation of a series of legal cases reveals how lone mothers are framed as 'benefit-suckers who need to be prevented from living an extravagant lifestyle on public resources' (2021: 1210). Numerous descriptions of Sharon's irresponsible behaviour feed into this damaging stereotype, as Eleanor remembers that 'one week we'd be dipping quail's eggs in celery salt and shucking oysters, the next week we'd be starving' (324). She even tells her therapist that 'it was almost as though [Mummy] thought we were some kind of displaced royalty' (307), a description that evokes the derogatory figures of 'welfare decadence' and 'welfare queen' (Campbell 2021: 1210). These memories of Mummy indicate that her 'poverty is the result of individual laziness' and 'poor moral character', reflecting the austerity 'government's attitude [...] that lone mothers live in poverty because they are incapable of making good budgetary decisions' (Campbell 2021: 1211). Eleanor's referral to Sharon as 'Mummy' affirms her childlike innocence and provides a constant reminder of Sharon's identity as a 'bad' mother. As with David in *All The Lonely People*, Mummy provides a haunting reminder of the Victorian figure of the underserving poor, which is further enhanced when it is revealed that she has been dead for twenty years. Although David is elusive, passive, and predominately silent, and Mummy's voice is domineering, monstrous, and sinister, they serve similar functions as their characterisation as social pariahs makes way for Hubert and Eleanor's uplifting inclusion and acceptance. Unlike David whose ghostly presence haunts the festival, Mummy is successfully exorcised, but as 'bad' biological citizens, they are both excluded from redemption.

Honeyman sporadically engages with the topical issues of neurodiversity, depression, voice hearing, trauma, abuse, and alcohol addiction before dropping them to provide a hopeful ending, for the tentative promise of the good life only becomes possible when Eleanor overcomes the multivariant component parts of her difference.

Eleanor's physical and behavioural transformation is a 'process of recovery' that 'enlists a whole range of techniques of the self: practicing self-discovery, [...] being kind to oneself, [...] building self-esteem, joining a support group' (Rose & Novas 2005: 447). Despite initially questioning the normalised rituals of beauty regimes and consumer practices, Eleanor discovers that within various hair salons and clothes shops she is treated with care, receives positive reinforcement, and develops meaningful connections. These moments counter the disjointed, hurried, and impersonal interactions with her GP and social worker depicted earlier in the novel. While there are clear benefits to self-care, these techniques are offered as the solution in the absence of state support and overlook the harmful policies that exclude many people from having the time, resources, and energy to engage in these activities.

Like the precarity inherent in Eleanor's insistence that she is 'fine', the novel's cruel optimism is fragile. Berlant considers what happens when the attachments to cruel optimism 'start to fray – depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?' (2011: 2). *Eleanor Oliphant* unwittingly becomes an expression of this process, responding to the crisis of loneliness through an incoherent mash of disability stereotypes. Although the novel explores Eleanor's depression, dissociation, and cynicism, it also attempts to mend her fraying attachments to cruel optimism, producing an uplifting conclusion through her pragmatic determination to change.

Conclusion: It Gets Better?

The 'It Gets Better' slogan was coined in a YouTube video by the American journalist Dan Savage and popularised alongside the media reporting of gay youth suicides in 2010 (Puar 2017: 7). Puar writes that 'in terms of genre, [the video] parallels [...] "inspiration porn"' and 'discordantly echoes the now discredited "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" immigrant motto' (2017: 7). Puar's critique of the 'it gets better' slogan is also applicable to the contemporary British political context. In 1997, New Labour's election campaign was accompanied by the pop song *Things Can Only Get Better* by the band D:REAM, an optimistic statement that as Brigit McWade notes, 'saturated the literary style of government policy of the time' (2016: 65). The phrase has since been re-worked for former Conservative Prime minister Boris Johnson's (2019–2022) 'Build Back Better' plan, launched in March 2021, which avoided committing to policies that would make life better for the majority of the population but reassured that the Covid-19 vaccination was 'offering real hope for the future' (2021). As Puar notes, the vague promise of a better future detracts from 'the debilitating aspects of neoliberalism',

as 'the focus on the future normalises the present [...] and evacuates the politics of the now from culpability' (2017: 1, 7).[8] This dynamic is evident in *Eleanor Oliphant's* third and final section which is entitled 'Better Days', offering a vision of hope for the future which is reliant on her personal transformation rather than social change. Puar concludes that through 'participation in neoliberal consumer culture', the phrase 'it gets better', 'might turn out to mean, you get more normal' (2017: 10). Indeed, by the end of the novel Eleanor asserts 'I looked smart, practical, *normal*. Yes, I was going back to work' (361, original emphasis). For Eleanor, the promise of 'better days' is contingent on her conforming to the neoliberal demands of consumerism, self-care, work, and therapy.

At the 2021 Conservative party conference, then Health Secretary Sajid Javid (2021–2022) asserted that 'we shouldn't always go first to the state. What kind of society would that be? Health and social care, it begins at home. It should be family first, then community, then the state' (2021). This is the world that up lit envisions, for Hubert and Eleanor's uplifting stories exemplify the Conservative ideology that health and social care begins at home and in the community. Just as the marginalised community group in *All The Lonely People* take responsibility for ending loneliness in Bromley, Eleanor takes control of her life, becomes a responsible biological citizen and is rewarded for her efforts. Although both novels are lauded for their uplifting portrayals of human connection, embracing difference, and exploring the topical issue of loneliness, my analysis has revealed the underlying cultural codes which signal that with the 'right' attitude things will get better. As such, I have troubled up lit's endeavour to sustain a neoliberal vision of hope, arguing that it contributes to the perpetuation of austerity narratives that offer individual and community responsibility as the solution to a 'broken' society.

It is not my intention to dismiss all uplifting cultural depictions or undermine the feelings of hope, warmth, and kindness that fiction can foster. Through my wider exploration of what I call 'austerity fictions', I have found uplifting moments that elevate the lived experiences of marginalised protagonists and provide much needed depictions of human connection while producing politically engaged critiques of austerity.[9] However, despite its claims, up lit represents the neoliberal co-option of inclusion and community rather than collective acts of solidarity. It is an enticing and much celebrated genre, but it is also a cultural expression of cruel optimism, complicit in the dynamic disavowal of political accountability in austerity Britain.

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[8] In critiquing the neoliberal deployment of 'it gets better', it is not my intention to dismiss individual hopes and desires to get better from physical or mental illness, but to challenge political and cultural narratives that obscure structural inequalities through the co-option of diversity and inclusion agendas.

[9] See for example Jane Gull's films *My Feral Heart* (2016) and *Love Without Walls* (2023).

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