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Submission to Changing English:

'Words of wisdom': Text, voice and justice in *I, Daniel Blake*

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Abstract

The film, *I, Daniel Blake*, has received critical acclaim for its portrayal of the experiences of those attempting to navigate the bureaucracy of the British welfare state system. In this article, I use the depiction of literacy in the film as a lens through which I examine both the role of literacy in compounding the challenge for those already made vulnerable by their circumstances, as well as the creative, collaborative and resourceful ways in which individuals use literacy practices to navigate everyday lives. The release of *I, Daniel Blake* comes at a time when the threat to social justice posed by austerity politics is becoming an acute reality for many in Britain, and across the globe. I argue for the continued importance, therefore, of the critical examination of the relationship between literacy, inequalities and justice.

Key words

literacy; social justice; film

The film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) tells the story of a 59 year old widower and his attempts to navigate the cruelly futile bureaucracy of the British welfare state following a heart attack which leaves him unable to work. Set in Newcastle upon Tyne, in the North East of England, the film depicts the impact of changes to the welfare system implemented by the Conservative-led coalition government that came to power in 2010. However, director Ken Loach has said of his film: 'it's for those people who are struggling against the cruelty of bureaucracy, whatever country' (2016a). As the story of Daniel Blake increasingly becomes a reality for many affected by austerity politics across the United Kingdom and further afield, in this article, I use the film's depiction of texts and the practices around them as a lens through which to examine the relationship between literacy and social justice. Literacy and social justice are concepts which have long been connected in social policy discourse, where 'low' literacy is often, and simplistically, seen as a cause of poverty. However, through an exploration of the ways in which text is central both to the welfare system represented in Loach's film, and to the ways in which its characters negotiate it, I aim to problematise the role of literacy in the interrelated challenges to social justice posed by contemporary policy.

A particular challenge is what counts as the 'right' subjectivity, and the literacies associated with it, in the lives envisioned by social policy. Related to this is the role of narrow models of literacy in the enactment of policies associated with the politics of austerity. Both are depicted in *I, Daniel Blake*. The film also presents the creative, collaborative and resourceful ways in which individuals use literacy practices to navigate the systems associated with such policies. In doing so, the film gives voice to lived realities both for the characters on screen and for many who have seen the film and felt its resonance with their own experiences.

I, Daniel Blake depicts circumstances similar to those of individuals and families with whom I have worked as an ethnographic researcher of everyday arts, language and literacy practice. For some of these families, recent welfare policy has had a considerable impact on their everyday lives. This includes the policy known in popular discourse as 'the bedroom tax', which led to a reduction in housing benefit for claimants deemed to be 'under occupying' their social housing homes. Many of those affected by this policy were forced to move to smaller accommodation and many more have had to deal with its punitive effects because of a lack of available housing for them to move into (Haddad 2012). I have explored elsewhere the role of literacy in people's navigation of such contexts (Jones 2014). Although the experiences depicted in *I, Daniel Blake* are artistic representations, my intention is to use them as a focused example to illustrate the potential of using literacy as a lens through which we may understand the impact of austerity policy on the lives of those made vulnerable by economic challenge. A focus on literacy in the film also enables a critical examination of the relationships assumed in policy between literacy, inequalities and justice. Before setting out to do this, I begin with an outline of the film and the context in which it was made.

'The real Daniel Blakes': the film and its context

Ken Loach is known for the critical social realism of his films. Over a 50 year career, these have included *Cathy Come Home* (1966), a television play about homelessness, and *Riff-Raff* (1991), a film depicting the precariousness of workers' rights in the late Thatcher era. This political agenda continues with *I, Daniel Blake*, which was awarded

the *Palm d'Or* at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2016. It was released in the United Kingdom and to other international audiences at the end of that year, with continued critical acclaim, including the BAFTA for Outstanding British Film. Researching for the film, screenwriter Paul Laverty spoke to people across the UK about their experiences of life on low incomes, stories which involved insecure housing, zero-hours employment contracts and a punitive welfare system. The end credits of the film also acknowledge the many employees of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) who shared their own experiences of working within the welfare system, often anonymously. The film itself synthesises these stories into the simple narrative of one man and his thwarted attempts to access the benefits to which he is entitled whilst unable to work. At the press conference following the award of *Palm d'Or*, Ken Loach (2016b) recalled the words of Brecht: '"And I always thought: the simplest of words will suffice. When I say what things are like, it will break the hearts of all"'. Loach added about the story of Daniel Blake: 'it not only breaks your heart: it should make you angry'.

The release of *I, Daniel Blake* comes at a time when '[g]rowing income or wealth inequality is recognised as the greatest social threat of our times' (Dorling 2015, 1), six years into a welfare policy regime premised on the politics of austerity. Commentators such as Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) and Therborn (2013) have emphasised the many factors that coexist with economic inequality to compound the marginalisation of communities, families and individuals. These include physical and mental health, education, and access to cultural resources. In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition which came into power in the United Kingdom brought with it an amplification of an already growing and pernicious discourse of deficit and undeservedness with regards to those in need of financial support from the state. With what Slater (2014, 961) has described as the 'strategic deployment of ignorance', the government exploited a general lack of awareness of the structural and institutional failures which lead to poverty, whilst wilfully disregarding any evidence of these failures. It channelled a paternalistic discourse of poverty as the result of behavioural deficit into the justification of a raft of welfare reform aimed at what the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, was to call 'the unfairness of the something- for-nothing-culture' of the British welfare system (Hansard 2013). As Clark and Newman (2012, 309) have outlined, 'the contemporary politics of austerity combines an economic logic with a particular moral appeal (to shared sacrifice and suffering, to fairness and freedom, to a sense of collective obligation)'. This is seen in the predominance of media-friendly epithets describing those in receipt of benefits as 'skivers' rather than 'strivers', 'shirkers' not 'workers' (Garthwaite 2011). It reflects a discourse long echoed across neoliberal contexts where entitlement is a myth and dependence is vilified (as is discussed by, for example, Taylor 1996; Sennett 2004).

Government cuts brought about in the name of fairness have led to the greatest impact on the British welfare state in half a century; that is, in the time since *Cathy Come Home*. However, Loach argues that 'politically, the world that [*I, Daniel Blake*] shows is even more cruel than the world Cathy was in' (2016c, 144). One outcome of this is shown in a key scene where the main characters join a long queue outside a food bank. In 2015/16, the Trussell Trust, which has a network of over 400 food banks across the UK, reported to have provided 1,109,309 three-day emergency food packages to people in crisis. This represents a 2% increase on the previous year, and an eight-fold increase from 2011-12 (Trussell Trust 2016; Garthwaite 2016).

Many members of the general public, as well as many critics, have seized upon the way in which the film has given voice to the lived experiences of 'the real Daniel Blakes' (Guardian 2016) who have borne the brunt of a punitive and inflexible system of benefit sanctions and fitness-to-work assessments. The hash tag *#wearedanielblake* has featured regularly in social media posts about the film and the story it tells.

The film

The film opens with voices against a black screen. An anonymous 'Health Care Professional' is undertaking an assessment of the eponymous main character for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). We hear his increasing exasperation at being asked questions which he feels he has already answered on a 52-page form. Daniel's frustration continues as he is declared fit for work, despite being advised by his doctor that he is not yet well enough. At the local Job Centre, he is told that the benefit system is 'digital by default', meaning that the resources he needs to be able to appeal this decision, and to claim financial support in the interim, are online. Describing himself as 'pencil by default', Daniel seeks help at the city library with the online forms. He struggles to complete them, but is eventually helped by his neighbour, China. Daniel's only option is to claim Job Seekers' Allowance (JSA) until he hears about the date for his appeal, meaning he is obliged to spend 35 hours a week actively seeking employment that he knows he cannot take. After the Job Coach deems his job-seeking efforts 'not good enough', he is referred for a sanction and left with no income.

A warm friendship develops in the film between Daniel and Katie, another claimant thwarted by the system, and he helps her to settle into her new home, to which she has been moved from London, after living in a homeless shelter with her two children for two years. Daniel's anger and despair rise as he witnesses Katie's increasing desperation, including a visit to a food bank and an attempt to shoplift toiletries and sanitary towels from her local supermarket. At his next visit to the Job Centre, Daniel decries the system as a 'monumental farce'. Advised that he could 'lose everything' by holding out for his appeal date, he replies: 'when you lose your self-respect, you're done for'.

Outside the Job Centre, Daniel spray paints on the wall: 'I, Daniel Blake, demand my appeal date before I starve and change the shite music on the phone'. A passer-by celebrates Daniel's work, deriding Iain Duncan Smith, the Work and Pensions Secretary who oversaw the welfare reform depicted in the film, as the architect of the misery shared by Daniel and others like him. Referring to Daniel's spray-painted message, the passer-by addresses the gathering crowd: 'Words of wisdom! This man is a hero!' Cautioned by the police for criminal damage, Daniel continues to fall into despair before finally attending his appeal, where he is assured by a solicitor that his case will be successful. Before he enters, however, Daniel is taken ill and dies of a heart attack in the gents' toilets. At his funeral, Katie reads the handwritten note Daniel had hoped to read out at his appeal.

This note is one of many key texts which are central to the narrative of *I, Daniel Blake.* Official texts accrue throughout the film as pillars of 'the monumental farce' of a system which thwarts the access of the most vulnerable people to vital resources. Texts such as Daniel's handwritten note and graffiti are also depicted as being central to characters' creative and collaborative responses to their circumstances.

‘Words of wisdom’? Literacy and social justice

Neoliberal discourses of marketisation and social mobility have placed literacy at the forefront of policy discourse. A key aspect of the society envisaged within this policy context is the knowledge economy. This sees literacy bound up with other aspects of life, such as education, citizenship, poverty and community regeneration (Hamilton 2012; 2014) as part of a wider suite of policy premised on an economistic model of human development. Literacy carries high stakes in measures of the success of nations and their citizens, such as PISA or PIACC. In a drive to measure literacy for the purposes of such comparisons, it has become reduced in many educational contexts to the skills that are the most measurable and most valuable to the systems within which the tests operate. This ignores the difficulty of being able to represent numerically the wide range of ways in which literacy learning is actually applied in the everyday lives of individuals in diverse contexts (Bartlett 2008; Maddox 2007; Besnier 1993). Narrow models of literacy have become ossified within an equally reductive view of what it means to be socially engaged, further excluding those who are already marginalised and creating further barriers to literacy learning (Lister 2004; Duckworth 2014; Hamilton 2014). In adult education policy, for example, functional skills have been linked to employability, rather than being responsive to learner needs (Hamilton and Tett 2012; Duckworth 2014; Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2015). This reflects the tenacity of a discourse which, as Street (1984, 2) described three decades ago, ‘assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced and associates it with ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’, individual liberty and social mobility’, ideals which also underpin the discourse of the benefit system depicted in *I, Daniel Blake.* Described by Street (1984) as an ‘autonomous’ model, a view of literacy as an ideologically neutral, individual cognitive skillset continues to dominate public policy and practice and the impact of this on social justice is seen in the film. However, also depicted is a lack of recognition of the realities of people’s daily engagement with text. This is shown to lead to structures of support which compound the challenge for those in need of access to text-based resources (Taylor 1996; Eubanks 2012). A focus on literacy allows us to see the ways in which its relationship with social justice is rooted in ‘the power to name and define’ (Street 2011, 580) what is valued in people’s interaction with text.

Four decades of literacy research have, however, seen significant paradigm shifts in the understanding of how people make use of text in their everyday lives. This research has focused on literacy as ‘an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition’ (Street 2011, 581). The emphasis in this area has been on literacy as a relational concept; rather than being an ideologically neutral skillset that someone ‘has’ (or does not have), it becomes something which people ‘do’: ‘either alone or with other people, but always in a social context – always in a place and at a time’ (Barton and Hamilton 1998, 23). Literacy *practices* are therefore understood to include ‘culturally recognisable patterns of behaviour’ which are associated with texts, as well as the wider contexts which extend beyond the texts themselves (Tusting, Ivanič and Wilson 2000, 213).

The digital and visual practices associated with increasingly significant and accessible technologies have also changed the way in which we interact with and create texts, opening up interpretation of literacy practices beyond consideration of ‘readily apparent material settings’ (Sheehy and Leander 2004, 3), such as the classroom. These practices allow us to see literacy a resource within an ongoing process of the active

negotiation and creation of meaning-making spaces, many of which are often liminal and immaterial. The complex mediation of both immediate contexts and more distant or remote social interactions, with 'much broader space and time boundaries', is a feature of what Reder and Davila (2005, 180) describe as the 'polycontextual' nature of any literacy practice. The contexts of literacy practice and the artefacts with which we make and share meaning are also charged with affective resonance (Pahl 2016).

In much the same way as deficit discourses frame benefit claimants as passive recipients lacking in resource, a narrow, 'autonomous' model of literacy fails to recognise the range of ways in which people understand and value the role of text in their everyday lives. This includes the active, critical and resource*ful* negotiation of a range of contexts, involving individual and collective creation and navigation of material and immaterial spaces. It is increasingly vital that the links between literacy and social justice are explored in a way which brings together the broad understanding of literacy that has been developed over recent decades with an articulation of social justice which theoretically frames its complex dimensions. Therefore, I move on now to mobilise the work of Nancy Fraser to examine how *I, Daniel Blake* illustrates how particular forms of literacy practice are implicated in the increased challenge faced by those already made vulnerable by austerity policy. Fraser's three dimensions of justice also provide a useful framework for exploring other uses of text shown in the film, illustrating how understanding of the richness and complexity of everyday literacy practice is central to social justice.

Fraser's three-dimensional framework for justice

Based on what Fraser describes as significant 'folk paradigms' (Fraser 2003a) of fairness, the first of three dimensions outlined is that of socioeconomic injustice. This includes

> exploitation (having the fruits of one's labour appropriated for the benefit of others); economic marginalisation (being confined to undesirable and poorly paid work or being denied access to income-generating labour altogether), and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living). (Fraser 1997, 13)

This paradigm of justice draws on egalitarian principles where justice involves *redistribution* of resources, goods or capabilities.

The second dimension is cultural, or symbolic, injustice. This includes

> cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/ or hostile to one's own'); nonrecognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture'; and disrespect 'being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/ or in everyday life interactions. (14)

The need for *recognition* has been a key focus for those working across many different communities in challenging injustices based on factors such as gender, sexuality, race or social class. Fraser, however, argues that:

> [f]ar from occupying two airtight spheres, economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimbricated so as to reinforce one another dialectically. Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalised in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination. (15)

Both maldistribution and misrecognition can contribute to what Fraser views as the central issue in relation to justice: 'parity of participation'. This is vital, she argues, given that 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of a society to interact with one another as peers'. For this to be possible requires appropriate distribution of material resources so as 'to ensure participants independence and "voice"'. Also required are 'patterns of cultural value that express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem' (ibid.) Fraser emphasises that she sees both conditions as necessary for parity of participation; 'neither alone is sufficient' (Fraser 2003b, 36).

Drawing upon this understanding of literacy as a social and relational concept, as outlined above, I now move to focus on the representation of literacy practices in the film, illustrating the potential of literacy as a lens through which the interrelated nature of the dimensions of justice presented by Fraser may be understood.

'This is an agreement between you and The State': literacy and redistribution

Characters in the film experience the exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation which Fraser (1997) describes as factors which constitute socioeconomic injustice. Daniel turns to the welfare system for support when he is told by his doctor that he cannot return to work until his health improves after a heart attack. Made homeless by a ruthless landlord for her concerns about the condition of her rented accommodation and its impact on her young son's health, Katie is forced to accept rented housing in Newcastle, hundreds of miles away from her family in London. When we first encounter China, Daniel's neighbour, he is rushing off in response to a text he's received to go to work on a zero-hours contract. On another occasion, he describes getting up before dawn to be paid £3.76 for 45 minutes' work.

We are introduced to the complexity of the bureaucratic system in the film's opening scene, where Daniel's frustration is darkly comic as he is asked: 'Do you have a significant difficulty communicating with strangers?' Communication of the system proves so impenetrable it serves to marginalise further those who, like Daniel, find it hardest to access. The film-makers foreground in particular the use of language as a feature of the impenetrability of the system. Claimants such as Daniel and Katie are told by Job Centre staff that their case will be referred to an anonymous Decision Maker: 'I'm not making the decision. I'm referring you to the Decision Maker. He will decide.' Through such linguistic obfuscation, and the arcane structures to which it refers, meaning is a resource which is withheld from those most desperate for clarity about what is going to happen to them and their families.

Physical access to information is just as elusive. Daniel wants to know how he can challenge the assessment that he is fit to work and is told that the forms he needs are online as the system is 'digital by default'. He responds: 'I can build you a house, but I've never touched a computer'. Asking whether support is available, he is told that there is 'a special number if you have been diagnosed dyslexic [...] You will find it online, Sir'.

Daniel's first encounters with computers illustrate the ways in which digital texts and the practices associated with them have become ingrained within daily life for so many, with assumptions made which can exclude those who have had no need or desire to engage

with computers before. Seeking support from his local library to use the public computer, Daniel is asked to 'run the mouse up the screen'. In response, he physically lifts the mouse up the screen in front of him. Calling on the help of those around him, he is thwarted time and again. Not being able to move from page to page on the form, he asks a nearby student to help. He's taught how to move the cursor, which in his frustration he decides is an 'apt name for it'. Error messages repeatedly sound at him until, finally, he is timed out. A fellow library user explains to Daniel that his screen is 'frozen', to which he replies: 'Can you defrost it?' The unfamiliarity of processes once again place this man, who has never before needed state support, in a completely alien world. Without the cultural capital tied up in dominant literacy practices and needed to successfully navigate this world (Bourdieu 1991; Duckworth 2013), Daniel is left without economic capital.

As an individual claimant, Daniel has little control over the texts which define his access to resources. This is partly because these are invisible. A call centre worker advises him that he will 'make a note on screen' for the Decision Maker, signalling that some action has been taken, but without making it clear what will result and how long this will take. Daniel imagines a system where information which is needed is shared immediately, and face to face: 'can you put it in his hand?' He is once again frustrated by the response: 'this is a call centre, Sir'.

Throughout the film, Daniel is shown locked within a web of official texts which control how he can move through the system. Out job-hunting, Daniel misses his long-awaited phone call from the Decision Maker, which signals that he is allowed to progress to the next stage. The recorded message tells him what he already knows, however:

> 'This is a call from the DWP Decision Maker. You should soon receive a letter which states that you have been deemed fit for work and not entitled to Employment and Support Allowance. Further information is available online'.

A key text in the benefit system is the Claimant Commitment Form, a document described by Iain Duncan Smith as 'a fair deal people will have to sign up to in return for receiving support from the state' (DWP 2013). The circumstances in which Daniel finds himself mean that he has no choice but to sign in order to receive benefits, even though he is unable to take up any offer of work because of this health. His Job Coach describes the document as 'an agreement between you and The State'. It is a text that consigns Daniel to applying for jobs he cannot take up, through processes of which he has little experience. This includes the creation of a CV at a workshop he has been ordered to attend, where 'job seekers' are told that this is a document which should make them 'Stand out from the crowd!' They are told that their CVs 'should be typed out in a clear font in hard copy, with a digital version too for online'. The workshop manager adds: 'some employers are now demanding CV videos sent in by smartphones'. Daniel duly creates a CV, which he distributes amongst local employers. Daniel's CV, however, is handwritten in pencil.

'I'm pencil by default': literacy and recognition

Daniel's riposte, 'I'm pencil by default', reflects one of the key challenges he faces in navigating the system depicted in the film. As a craftsman, a pencil is an important tool for Daniel to be able to create and build, as is shown in the film. The pencil, as a tool for

writing and drawing, is associated with versatility and being open to change. However, this provisionality means that, like Daniel and his fellow claimants, the pencil can also go unnoticed. Something pencilled in is not confirmed, and can be rubbed out, like the generations of workers represented by Daniel in post-industrial society. Daniel's adherence to the pencil as a means of communication is symbolic of Fraser's notion of non-recognition. The system he attempts to navigate ultimately leaves him 'rendered invisible' (1997, 14).

One way in which this happens is when he is asked for 'proof' of his actions in looking for work. He is punished for not providing this visible evidence through means he's assumed to have (a camera phone) and through the generation of further paperwork in the form of receipts. His folded up handwritten CV, which secures him at least one job offer, is 'not good enough'. Without officially sanctioned texts to prove his actions, these actions are deemed non-existent.

Despite being culturally marginalised by the very systems he needs to access in order to avoid becoming economically marginalised, we quickly see that Daniel is resourceful, creative and willing to work. As he says to Katie, 'I can fix owt, me, pet. Apart from computers'. Early on in the film, we see Daniel whittling wood which he salvages from his former place of work. The scenes in which Daniel works to help Katie and her family show him using his practical and creative skills and sharing his knowledge. Learning is not locked within officially controlled systems, but comes when people work to help each other and respond to the context in which they live. It is physical and tactile, contingent on need and immediate circumstances, such as the heating system based on candles and terracotta plant pots which Daniel shows the children how to make.

Books are presented as part of the everyday lives of characters. Katie's daughter, Daisy, is shown with her head in a book in one of the first scenes, and Katie's dream to return to her Open University studies – 'my books' – is supported by Daniel building her a bookshelf. Stories are presented as an important means of making sense of the world and our experience of it. The children enjoy the stories Daniel tells them, and as he reminisces about his late wife, Molly, who used to ask him 'Where shall we sail to tonight, Dan?', he recalls the power of stories to calm her and offer her hope.

The imagery of the sea is used throughout the film, not least as a symbol of escape, as suggested by Molly's question to her husband. As he whittles late into the night, he listens to the shipping forecast on the radio. We later learn that this was a favourite of Molly's, who particularly enjoyed the theme music, 'Sailing By'. The characters' engagement with a range of text, from print to oral, aural and digital, reflects the way in which everyday literacy practice is both multimodal and 'polycontextual' (Reder and Davila 2005). The African meranti wood from which Daniel whittles a mobile of hanging fish which brings the warmth of friendship to Daisy's bedroom, and makes the bookcase which will allow Katie means to escape her circumstances through her 'books', is symbolic of the ways in which everyday meaning making draws both on specific local practice as well as wider global contexts. Daniel manages to engage Dylan, the troubled young son of Katie, by asking him 'what kills most people: coconuts or sharks?' The wooden fish, which feature throughout the film, can be interpreted as a symbol of how characters are 'at sea', drowning in the welfare system, their lives small and expendable. However, the fish also reflect the vastness of a world which is outside the characters' direct experience, but which they can freely access and feel a part of through stories, talk, music and creative practice.

This world is accessed across time and space through engagement with different forms of text and literacy practice. Daniel’s neighbour, China, has been forced to use his initiative to supplement a meagre income from a zero-hours contract by ordering counterfeit trainers through a contact in China to sell on the black market in his local area. Daniel is left incredulous at the Skype conversation he witnesses between his neighbour and this Chinese contact, Stanley, where they not only discuss the business deal, but also the relative merits of Premier League football players, at which point Stanley breaks into a song adopted by the fans of Stoke City FC. Daniel’s disbelief at the fact that this conversation is taking place at two different ends of the globe emphasises how the world is moving on around him. The Skype conversation also demonstrates the ways in which digital technology is a key resource for the navigation of creative responses to economic challenge. It is China who is finally able to complete the Job Seekers’ Allowance form online for Daniel, after days of his thwarted attempts in more official institutions.

New technologies may be moving on, meaning people like Daniel can be left behind; however, the film also shows the importance of recording what is in the past, as part of reflection upon and sharing with others who we are now. Daisy is as confused as Daniel was by Skype when she encounters a music cassette in his flat. He shows her how this is played, and we learn how memories of his wife are sedimented into this artefact (Rowsell and Pahl 2007), a recording of ‘Sailing Away’, and the haptic experience of physically inserting it into the machine and switching it on. This suggests the importance of recognising the ways particular practices around text hold significance in the experiences of individuals and their families and in their engagement with the world around them. Systems which do not recognise this experience leave such individuals invisible and unheard.

‘If no-one listens to him, why should he listen to them?’ Literacy and Representation

We have seen already how the system navigated by Daniel and other characters in the film leads to maldistribution and misrecognition, which compromise individuals’ ability to interact with other members of society as peers. In his attempts to get to know Dylan, Daniel finds the boy unresponsive, bouncing a ball repeatedly against a wall. His sister explains that this is how Dylan has learnt to cope with his circumstances: ‘if no-one listens to him, why should he listen to them?’ We have seen too how official texts, and the practices in which they are situated, are central to the silencing of Daniel’s voice. However, as the film progresses, written text becomes the most powerful means by which he can make himself heard.

Voice is a central theme of the film, from the opening exchange between the voices of the ESA assessor and Daniel, which emphasises how questions are bound by a narrow and predetermined agenda and how little the official process takes into account the specific details of his experience. This is the first of many examples of the ‘language game’ of bureaucracy, where ‘knowledge of the rules is unequally divided over social groups - not everyone is equally good at this game’ (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996, 37). The many phone calls and hours on hold listening to synthetic Vivaldi music are a key feature of Daniel’s struggle through an intransigent system, and reveal the process to be one-sided, with the caller and their needs not listened to. The exchanges across Job

Centre desks also emphasise how little voice a claimant has within the system. Katie's explanation of her late arrival because of a problem with her bus is not listened to. Neither is Daniel's attempt at explaining that his doctor does not believe he is fit for work. Those claiming benefits are framed through the 'fundamental asymmetry' of the system as suppliers of information; unlike the civil servants with whom they are dealing, they are not entitled to demand information themselves (45). Despite him being unable to work, the Job Coach presents Daniel with the Claimant Commitment Form, telling him: 'It's your choice, Mr Blake'. Choice, of course, is a myth within a system based on conditionality, despite its discourse of 'clients' and 'service users'.

When he realises that he, in fact, has no other choice, Daniel resorts not to pencil but to permanent spray-painted graffiti to make his voice heard, adding that he 'will be here every day' until he is given what he has asked for. Through one handwritten text he makes public the individual struggle which takes place within a hidden maze of official texts. Daniel's written public statement could also be seen as an ironic reference to another, associated with Duncan Smith from his short-lived tenure as leader of the Conservative Party: 'Do not underestimate the determination of a quiet man'. This statement is part of the ideological persona inhabited by Duncan Smith in his moral crusade for punitive welfare reform (Slater 2014), part of which has been the consistent portrayal of welfare claimants' circumstances as the result of their own moral failure. Daniel's graffiti is also made public through the way it is photographed by passers-by, presumably to be shared on social media in much the same way as it has been taken up outside the film. The title frame and poster of the film both feature this handwritten message. With its nouns in apposition, Daniel's statement is a defiant act, exercising twice over the 'power to name and define' (Street 2011, 580). He is reclaiming 'face' (Goffman 1959) after being systematically constructed as nameless. The tone of this declaration assumes the voice of a formal commitment, such as that demanded on the forms Daniel has no choice but to sign. It turns the tables on the conditionality to which he has been wrongly subjected: it is his own demand for action. The humorous subversion of formality, with the wry and vernacular comment about the music on the phone, is not lost on passers by, reflecting a common experience of frustration at the system. It also reflects the way in which Daniel has approached his experience throughout: with gentle humour that exposes the system as dangerously laughable.

When Daniel finally gets the appeal hearing he has been struggling for, he brings a note, handwritten in pencil, which he describes as 'something I wanted to get off my chest'. This only becomes heard at his funeral, read by Katie:

> I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user. I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar nor a thief. I am not a National Insurance number, nor a blip on a screen […] I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen. Nothing more, nothing less.

The note encapsulates the injustice experienced by Daniel in the film. It signals his frustration at being systematically denied access to the economic resources to which he is entitled, despite the discourse of the market which defines his role in the process. Despite its emphasis on the individual, neoliberal discourse also renders invisible Daniel's particular experience and circumstance, ascribing his situation to moral failure, rather than one of entitlement. Above all, Daniel's handwritten note, and its defiant challenge of the labels of policy and popular discourse, also signals the importance to him of giving voice to this experience, and of having his voice listened to.

Nothing more, nothing less: literacy and social justice beyond the screen

The film presents a human story of struggle against 'the conscious cruelty' (Loach, 2016b) of austerity politics felt by many across the globe. The universality of the story is suggested by the number of literary allusions evoked in discussion of it. Loach himself has described the system navigated by Daniel as 'Orwellian' (Loach 2016c, 139) and the 'ridiculous, backward' bureaucratic system reminded the films' Director of Photography of the dystopian science fiction film, *Brazil* (1985, dir. Gilliam) (Ryan, 2016, 161). Daniel's struggle with the system has been described as Sisyphean (Kermode 2016), and the lives of characters compared to those of Dickens, Kafka and Heller's *Catch 22*.

Prominent politicians have challenged the veracity of the film, however. Iain Duncan Smith accused the film-makers of having 'taken the very worst of anything that can ever happen to anybody, lump it all together, and say, this is life, absolutely as it is lived by people' (BBC 2016). His successor at DWP, Damian Green, refuted demands for action from the government based on the experiences portrayed in the film, dismissing it in a Houses of Commons speech as 'a work of fiction […] not a documentary'. In response, the film's producer, Rebecca O'Brien, pointed out: 'we could have been far more scathing, but we were worried that we wouldn't have been believed' (Dudok de Wit 2016). In contrast, popular reception for the film includes vociferous social media discussion, walls of notes written by audience members outside their cinema screens, and events such as Daniel Blake Day, where 'pay what you can' screenings were organised across the UK. The comments of politicians, and their discrepancy with the response of the wider audience, is an illustration of the lack of recognition which means social justice continues to be denied to those bearing the brunt of austerity politics, whose experiences are depicted in the film. The tensions between these responses also reflect the contrast depicted within the film itself between an official discourse of poverty, which makes blind, moralistic assumptions about other people's lives, and the way in which people work together, in the face of often grave challenge, through creative, collaborative means, to negotiate, share and communicate experiences. This is a tension which is made evident when the film is viewed through the lens of literacy.

Literacy as a lens on social justice highlights how the impact of policies based upon reduced versions of lived realities is compounded when such policies rely upon reduced versions of literacy, ignoring its role in everyday lives. A narrow view of everyday lives focuses on how people can contribute to society, and frames those with non-dominant experiences and skillsets as deficient and abject (Tyler 2013). In post-industrial society, this leaves people like Daniel Blake marginalised, both practically and in a human sense, without adequate resources, recognition, or parity of participation. A narrow view of literacy compounds the challenges faced by people in this situation. A wider view of literacy, however, shows Daniel and his friends and neighbours as active, agentive navigators of their circumstances, not always defined or confined by them, and able to use their resources to shape them as Daniel shapes his African meranti wood. Recognition of literacy as a multidimensional practice in everyday lives should therefore be central to understanding the complexity of the impact of policies on social justice.

The film itself can be read as a text which directly relates to the three dimensions of justice outlined by Fraser and discussed in this article. It challenges marginalisation by exposing - in a hugely successful popular medium - the experiences of those facing the consequences of economic challenge. The representation of people marginalised by austerity politics in mainstream film has thus far been uncommon (Prospero, 2016), yet,

as is seen in the case of *I, Daniel Blake*, it offers powerful recognition of their experiences. Response to the film, such as that discussed above, suggests that many appreciate feeling that their voices are heard.

Away from the screen, however, there is much left to be done to challenge the real life circumstances it represents. Although already strongly associated with discourses of social mobility and justice, literacy education and research can and should continue to challenge reductive models of both what it means to be literate, and the role of literacy in social justice. A close focus on literacy in everyday practice, as presented here, can highlight the impact of austerity policies on everyday experience. It can also illuminate the ways in which a narrow framing of literacy is implicated in the continued threat to social justice posed by policy contexts. Ultimately, a focus on everyday literacies makes space for voices, such as those of Daniel Blake, to be heard and valued – by default.

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