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EXPOSING NEOLIBERAL CONTRADICTIONS: SOCIAL ABJECTION OF DISABLED BODIES IN FRANCESCA MARTINEZ'S *ALL OF US*

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ABSTRACT

Francesca Martinez's *All of Us* (2022) offers a critical examination of the social abjection of disabled bodies within the context of neoliberal Britain. This article conducts a close reading of the play to analyse how austerity policies, labour market pressures, and ableist assumptions intersect to reinforce the marginalisation of disabled individuals. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of social abjection, this article argues that the play exposes the paradoxical nature of neoliberal rhetoric: While claiming to promote independence and self-reliance, the neoliberal state's restrictive disability assessment processes and benefit reductions ultimately reinforce dependence and economic precarity. Through its portrayal of disabled characters affected by systemic injustice, the play exposes how neoliberalism renders certain bodies socially and politically unintelligible. Martinez challenges these exclusions by rejecting the notion that disability is a condition to be fixed, instead portraying it as a site where systemic injustice is enacted and exclusion is normalised, contributing to broader debates on disability justice and exposing the structural dynamics of social abjection under neoliberal governance.

Keywords: British drama, Disability, Francesca Martinez, *All of Us*, Neoliberalism, Abjection.

NEOLİBERAL ÇELİŞKİLERİ AÇIĞA ÇIKARMAK: FRANCESCA MARTİNEZ'İN *ALL OF US* ESERİNDE ENGELLİ BEDENLERİN TOPLUMSAL ABJEKSİYONU

ÖZ

Francesca Martinez'in *All of Us* (2022) adlı eseri, neoliberal Britanya bağlamında engelli bedenlerin toplumsal abjeksiyonuna yönelik eleştirel bir incelemesini sunmaktadır. Bu makale, oyunu yakın okuma yöntemiyle ele alarak kemer sıkma politikalarının, işgücü piyasasındaki baskıların ve engellilere yönelik varsayımların engelli bireylerin dışlanmasını nasıl pekiştirdiğini incelemektedir. Judith Butler'ın toplumsal abject kavramından yararlanan bu makale, oyunun neoliberal söylemin çelişkili doğasını açığa çıkardığını savunmaktadır: Devlet, neoliberal politikalarla bağımsızlığı ve özyeterliliği teşvik ettiğini öne sürerken, uygulamaya koyduğu kısıtlayıcı değerlendirme süreçleri ve yardım kesintileriyle engellilerin bağımlılığını ve ekonomik güvencesizliğini derinleştirmektedir. Oyun, sistemik adaletsizlikten etkilenen engelli karakterlerin temsili aracılığıyla, neoliberalizmin belirli bedenleri toplumsal ve politik olarak nasıl dışlanabilir hale getirdiğini gözler önüne sermektedir. Martinez, engelliliği düzeltilmesi gereken bir durum olarak değil, sistemik adaletsizliğin uygulandığı ve dışlanmanın normalleştirildiği bir alan olarak tasvir ederek bu dışlayıcı yaklaşımlara meydan okumaktadır. Böylelikle, Martinez, engelli adaleti tartışmalarına katkıda bulunmakta ve neoliberal yönetim altında toplumsal abjeksiyonun yapısal dinamiklerini görünür kılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Britanya tiyatrosu, Engellilik, Francesca Martinez, *All of Us*, Neoliberalizm, Abjeksiyon.

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Introduction

The marginalisation of disabled individuals under neoliberal governance presents one of the most urgent yet underexplored contradictions of contemporary British society. While neoliberal ideology champions self-sufficiency, autonomy, and equal opportunity, its policies often systematically exclude and devalue bodies that do not conform to normative standards of productivity and independence. This paradox has profound implications, not only for the lived experiences of disabled individuals but also for the conceptualisation of citizenship, human worth, and social responsibility. In recent years, British drama has increasingly become a critical site where these tensions are exposed and interrogated. It is within this socio-political context that Francesca Martinez's *All of Us* (2022) intervenes, offering a critique of the neoliberal state's complicity in the social abjection of disabled bodies.

Francesca Martinez (1978–) is a British playwright and disability rights activist whose work is deeply intertwined with her advocacy for disability visibility in British drama. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of two, Martinez has drawn extensively on her personal experiences to challenge societal perceptions of disability.[2] Throughout her teenage years, she encountered significant difficulties, including bullying at school, which led her to internalise a sense of abnormality. Reflecting on these experiences in an interview with *The New Statesman*, she noted:

> It was a huge shock to realise that everything I felt was unimportant, like how I walked or talked or moved or wrote, or how I dressed, were the very things I was being judged on. And over a period of about a year or two, my confidence completely eroded away... (Martinez in Chakelian, 2014, p. 12).

She also highlighted the difficulties of living with a medical label, cerebral palsy, saying, "It's quite hard having a medical label slapped on you very early on. A lot of baggage comes with that—I've grappled with that all my life" (Martinez, 2014, p. 1). However, rather than allowing these experiences to define her, Martinez has channelled them into a powerful critique of ableist assumptions surrounding normalcy. In her play *All of Us*, the main character, Jess—based on the playwright's own lived experiences—reflects these struggles, with Martinez's personal experiences shaping the characterisation and development of her literary figures.

Martinez's commitment to disability rights is prominently reflected in both her activism and her artistic works, especially in response to the UK's benefit cuts in the 21st century. In 2012, she launched the War on Welfare campaign, a grassroots movement that gathered over one hundred thousand signatures, calling for an end to government cuts to disability benefits and demanding an independent assessment of the impact of welfare changes. This activism laid the groundwork for *All of Us*, which premiered in 2022 at the Royal National Theatre under the direction of Ian Rickson. Both the campaign and the play directly confront the socio-economic struggles faced by disabled individuals as a result of these benefit cuts, positioning the play as a contemporary reaction to this issue. Its engagement with these socio-political developments

[2] Cerebral palsy is a motor disability caused by a non-progressive brain lesion occurring in early childhood (Miller 3). The symptoms of CP can range from muscle stiffness to involuntary movements and coordination difficulties (Miller 40).

has been a key factor in its critical success. Having received considerable critical acclaim, *All of Us* was featured in *The Guardian*'s "Best Theatre of 2022" and the *British Theatre Guide's* "Top Picks of 2022," marking its significance within contemporary British theatre. The play's impact was further recognised when Martinez was shortlisted for the George Devine Award that same year ("Shortlist 2022"). Critics have largely praised *All of Us* for its incisive portrayal of the lived experiences of disabled people in Britain, highlighting its contribution to public discourse on systemic inequality and accessibility.

All of Us examines the profound impact of neoliberal policies on disabled individuals and society at large, offering a compelling critique of systemic injustice. The play opens with Jess, a woman in her late thirties and a therapist, during a session with one of her patients, highlighting her professional competence. However, Jess's vulnerabilities are soon revealed as she relies on her overworked carer, Nadia, and friend Lottie for her self-care due to her cerebral palsy. The arrival of Yvonne, an assessor from the Independent Assessment Services, reveals the flawed system that fails to recognise Jess's genuine need for support. In contrast to Jess's peaceful personality, the play also introduces Poppy, Jess's bold and lively next-door neighbour in a wheelchair, and Aidan, Jess's distressed patient with a drinking problem. The narrative unfolds through these characters, each representing different facets of societal neglect experienced by disabled individuals. Jess loses her ability to work due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, while Poppy's quality of life deteriorates because of cuts to night-time care benefits. The Member of Parliament in charge of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Hargreaves, revealed as Aidan's father, symbolises the disconnect between policy-makers and the lived realities of disabled people. Tensions reach a climax when disabled activists storm the MP's office, demanding justice and recognition of their rights. In a sentimental moment, Aidan confronts his father, presenting him with a mended childhood painting—an act laden with personal and symbolic significance. The play concludes with a confrontation between Jess and Hargreaves, as she compels him to acknowledge the devastating impact of the neoliberal system, not only on disabled individuals but on society as a whole.

This article investigates how *All of Us* critiques the systemic abjection of disabled individuals within neoliberal Britain. It argues that the play reveals the paradoxes of neoliberal rhetoric, particularly the contradictions between the ideals of independence and the realities of socio-economic marginalisation. By drawing on Judith Butler's theory of social abjection, the analysis demonstrates how Martinez exposes the exclusionary structures that deny disabled bodies full political and social recognition.

The Theory of Social Abjection

Before proceeding with the analysis of the text, it is essential to first establish the theoretical foundation of abjection and its relation to neoliberalism, as they serve as the framework upon which this examination is built. While the concept of abjection encompasses multiple dimensions, this article will specifically focus on its social manifestations, which are central to understanding the marginalisation of disabled individuals. Julia Kristeva contends that the abject constitutes a fundamental threat to life, identity, and the stability of societal order, rendering those deemed abject as excluded from normative structures (*Powers,* 1982, p. 4). Judith Butler expands on this idea, shifting the focus from the psychological rejection of the

"other" to the ways in which abjection functions as a socially and politically constructed mechanism of exclusion (1993, p. 3). In her view, the abject becomes a repository for everything that a society deems unacceptable, embodying the fears and taboos that must be suppressed to sustain the illusion of order and purity (Hughes, 2009, p. 406). The processes of abjection—manifested through disgust, hate speech, physical violence, and dehumanising laws (Tyler, 2009, p. 87)—marginalise individuals who deviate from societal norms, stripping them of their humanity and reinforcing exclusion through social interactions and legal structures.

Social abjection is deeply intertwined with neoliberal ideology, which positions disabled individuals outside the parameters of what is considered valuable within a society structured around economic productivity and self-sufficiency. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and market-driven growth, privileges those who are economically independent, productive, and self-reliant, while marginalising those who require support. Consequently, disabled individuals, who often rely on social support systems, are constructed as burdens rather than as individuals with inherent worth. This reflects a broader ideological commitment to bodily integrity and self-sufficiency, wherein disabled bodies serve as reminders of human vulnerability and interdependence—qualities that neoliberalism actively devalues. Butler's analysis of abjection highlights how this process functions as a discursive mechanism that renders certain bodies politically unintelligible (1993, p. 3). As a result, these delegitimated bodies "fail to count as 'bodies'" (1993, p. 15), excluded not only from social recognition but also from political agency. Their needs and voices are either overlooked or dismissed, reinforcing their marginalisation within both societal and institutional structures.

This exclusion operates on multiple levels, from physical spaces to discursive practices that construct disabled bodies as inherently 'other.' Tobin Siebers argues that society's dominant response to disability is not to challenge ableist norms but rather to focus on 'fixing' disabled bodies, reinforcing the medical model that positions disability as a deviation needing correction (2010, p. 25). The medical model epitomises abjection by treating disability as an individual defect that threatens perceived bodily integrity. In this framework, disability is not recognised as part of human diversity but as an anomaly requiring remedy, reinforcing the ableist notion that only certain bodies are normal, valuable, or fully human. This logic is not limited to medical discourse but permeates neoliberal policies, which prioritise cost-efficiency over social inclusion, further marginalising disabled individuals.

The paradox of abjection becomes apparent when considering the dual experience of invisibility and hypervisibility among disabled individuals. On the one hand, they are rendered invisible and denied recognition and agency, yet on the other, they are hyper-visible, subjected to ableist scrutiny and constant evaluation against normative standards. Neoliberalism intensifies this paradox by simultaneously depicting disabled individuals as economic liabilities and burdens to the state while making them hyper-visible in discussions on welfare dependency and state expenditure. This rhetoric not only reinforces social abjection but also justifies policies that seek to minimise state support, shifting responsibility onto individuals rather than addressing the structural causes of exclusion.

As discussed above, societal values shape and enforce norms and boundaries, dictating what is considered acceptable and what must be abjected. Hughes examines how these processes expose the fragility and constructed nature of the so-called "civilised body" (2009, p. 406). The binary logic of modernity, where "normal" and "pathological" are not merely descriptive categories but ideological constructs, reinforces the dominance of the "normal" while continuously devaluing and marginalising those deemed abnormal. This ongoing process ensures that disabled individuals remain outside the boundaries of intelligibility, their worth perpetually questioned and undermined.

Ultimately, neoliberalism not only shapes these processes but actively intensifies them. The disabled body is not merely excluded but is systematically devalued within a framework that equates personhood with economic productivity. Within this logic, those who do not contribute to the market are cast into the realm of the abject, reinforcing their exclusion on both social and political levels. Thus, disability is not only constructed as a deviation but as a fundamental failure to meet societal expectations of productivity and independence. This economic devaluation perpetuates a cycle in which disabled individuals are simultaneously denied full participation in society and blamed for their exclusion. In this way, neoliberalism, in its pursuit of market efficiency and economic growth, disregards the complexities of human interdependence and the diverse ways in which individuals contribute to society.

Exposing Neoliberal Contradictions and Social Abjection in *All of Us*

At the core of the play's critique are these impacts of neoliberal policies, which manifest through the reduction of benefits, the limitation of care hours, and the imposition of additional taxes on disabled individuals in the play. These measures are emblematic of the government's neoliberal agenda, as embodied by the character Oliver Hargreaves. Introduced in Act Two, Hargreaves is depicted as a Member of Parliament (MP) and the minister for the Department for Work and Pensions, responsible for pensions and benefits for disabled people. He represents the driving force behind policies that have showcased the hardships faced by disabled individuals, leading to situations such as Jess losing her car and office, and Poppy being forced to forgo heating to save money for her aspirations.

The play makes it clear that Hargreaves' political alignment is with neoliberalism. This is evident in Act Two, Scene Seven, in which Hargreaves asserts, "one of my guiding beliefs is that politicians should empower people by breaking this chronic dependence culture and by encouraging responsibility" (2022, p. 100). This remark is highly significant as it illuminates Hargreaves's stance as a direct reflection of the neoliberal principle of "no rights without responsibility" (Owen and Harris, 2012, p. 30), which stands in stark contrast to a rights-based approach that views the rights of disabled individuals as inherent and unconditional. Historically, disability support was reshaped to align with values of human dignity and independent living (Power et al., 2012, p. 3), with states being obligated to remove barriers that hinder full societal participation by people with disabilities (Power et al., 2012, p. 22). This approach emphasises that rights should not be contingent upon economic contribution, recognising the intrinsic value of every individual regardless of their ability to participate in the labour market. However, neoliberalism challenges these welfare principles by advocating for

the re-commercialisation of labour, asserting that market participation is essential for social inclusion (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). This ideology significantly reshapes societal roles and the state's responsibilities, often reducing social rights to commodities to be earned rather than inherent entitlements (Van Toorn, 2018, p. 26). The shift towards market-driven policies and reduced state intervention undermines the social safety net, particularly for those who rely on it most, such as disabled individuals. Consequently, this approach impacts how disabled individuals access state services, creating more challenges and reduced support (Harvey, 2005, p. 146). In this sense, while neoliberalism prioritises economic efficiency and market participation, disability rights advocates argue for a more inclusive approach that recognises the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals, regardless of their economic productivity.

Contributing to this advocacy, *All of Us* illustrates how neoliberalism systematically abjectifies disabled individuals through governmental austerity measures, bureaucratic exclusion, competitive labour market demands, and public adherence to neoliberal values. These mechanisms not only frame disabled individuals as economically burdensome and socially deviant but also deepen their marginalisation by restricting access to resources, rights, and opportunities. The following section will examine these dynamics in greater detail.

It should be noted that, as a policymaker, Hargreaves's actions constitute abjection on a social scale. His decisions, rooted in societal norms, disregard the needs and voices of disabled individuals. In Act Two, Scene One, the setting is a community centre where local constituents, both disabled and non-disabled, including Jess, Lottie, Poppy, and Rita, have gathered for a meeting. As they wait, Hargreaves enters the hall, accompanied by a smartly dressed female adviser, Anita. They embody the image of presentable, nondisabled administrators in an ableist society. They make their way to the stage, where Hargreaves exchanges a few words with Anita before taking the microphone. Addressing the audience, Hargreaves begins by apologising for his late arrival and acknowledges the confusion and distress regarding recent changes to benefits. In response to the concerns about the benefit cuts, Hargreaves defends himself and the government's policies by stating that "welfare reform presents many complex issues, and [they] are trying to address them. But the system [they] are replacing was outdated and unwieldy. And, unfortunately, in the current global climate, difficult decisions have to be made" (2022, p. 66). Hargreaves here refers to the retrenchment of the welfare benefits that encompasses cutting funds and rights in social services by lowering the amount of financial support and decreasing the quality of services benefited by disabled citizens. Anita's statement that "[b]enefit fraud adds up to millions of pounds every year" (2022, p. 68) also suggests that Hargreaves's primary concern is financial, specifically the desire to reduce government spending. Following these statements, several attendees raise their hands to speak, including Poppy, who is eager to voice her concerns as a disabled citizen. However, Hargreaves deliberately ignores her, despite her persistently "waving her hand around" (63). Instead, he chooses to give the floor to Raymond, a citizen known to support Hargreaves and his stance on the retrenchment of welfare benefits, thereby reinforcing the notion that benefit recipients are financial burdens. When Hargreaves grants him the floor, Raymond criticises his neighbour, claiming the young man remains at home and unjustly receives benefits despite being capable of work. Raymond expresses that "it's why [Hargreaves] got [his] vote" (2022, p. 62). However, other disabled citizens in the room do not agree with Raymond. For instance, Henry, a disabled participant, interrupts

Raymond's speech and identifies the neighbour as Mark Talbot, defending him by revealing Mark's ongoing battle with cancer and chemotherapy. In doing so, Henry challenges Raymond's assumptions, highlighting both his lack of medical expertise and his insensitivity. This scene shows that Hargreaves, by implementing policies that reflect his neoliberal agenda, reinforces the societal norms that abjectify disabled individuals, further entrenching their marginalisation. The deliberate selection of speakers who support his policies reflects Hargreaves's lack of genuine interest in addressing the problems faced by disabled people; instead, he seems focused on projecting an image of a well-functioning system and counteracting any criticism. Rather than facilitating an open dialogue, the meeting serves as a platform for reinforcing the supposed success of his policies while marginalising dissenting voices like Poppy's.

Although Hargreaves and his allies try to frame the benefit cuts as a necessary response to fraud prevention, the practice reflects a broader agenda to reduce public expenditure, frequently at the expense of those in need. This emphasis on fraud prevention is used to justify harsh reassessment processes and reductions in benefits, despite the evidence suggesting that such fraud is minimal. This incident highlights the disconnect between the rhetoric of fiscal responsibility and the reality of its implementation, where the burden disproportionately falls on populations that need social support. It also illustrates how, under neoliberal governance, disabled people are not treated as full citizens; instead, they are abjected, excluded from the system and denied the rights and recognition afforded to others. The following dialogue between Henry and Hargreaves clearly shows that the real reason behind the government's benefit cuts is the abjection of the disabled citizens rather than the lack of economic resources:

> HARGREAVES. Covid has exposed some real inequalities that we are keen to address. But I would ask you all to bear with us while the country gets back on its feet, and just be patient.
>
> HENRY. Our patience is running out. I don't believe your words. You know exactly how many people are suffering because of your cuts, but still, you keep cut, cut, cutting like a fuckin' hairdresser on crack. Don't keep using Covid as an excuse! It was exactly the same before Covid, before Brexit. People, planet? Trash 'em both! This system isn't 'failing' or 'under pressure'. It's working exactly how it's designed to work. Cos your goal is to create a society where there is no compassion, no support network, no social responsibility. Basically, America! You don't want people having any expectations of help if they get sick or injured. Cos if you don't help people like us, you don't have to help anyone! (2022, p. 73)

This exchange marks a pivotal moment in the play, shifting the conversation from surface-level justifications to a deeper critique of neoliberal ideology. Henry's outburst, along with statements by other characters, reveals that the benefit cuts are related to the abjection of disabled citizens by the neoliberal government rather than the necessity for austerity policies. As Henry further argues, "[a]usterity's never grown an economy. In hard times, you need to invest, not cut. But you know this. It's basic economics. Austerity's cost the UK over a hundred billion quid. This is about ideology, not economics" (2022, p. 70). In other words, the policies

about the benefit cuts reveal the punitive actions of the policymakers towards the citizens supposed to be supported by the government. In Bob's words, the disabled people "have to prove [themselves] over and over again. As if [they are] criminals" (2022, p. 72) and then his rhetorical question to Hargreaves, "[H]ow can we be a civilised society when those with real and complex needs are being punished for having them?" (2022, p. 72), emphasises the social abjection experienced by people with disabilities as a punishment. Following Bob, Henry further exposes how neoliberal governance prioritises corporate welfare over social welfare. Rejecting to believe in the government's claim that "benefit fraud adds up to millions of pounds every year," (2022, p. 68) Henry states that they "spend billions every year in fossil fuel subsidies' corporate tax breaks" (66) and "[they] are paying billions to private companies to do assessments that used to be done by doctors on the NHS!" (2022, p. 68) to which Lottie asks: "[H]ow is that saving money?" (2022, p. 68). This comparison between public deprivation and corporate privilege not only discredits the government's rationale but also reinforces the argument that the marginalisation of disabled individuals is ideologically motivated. Thus, this process of social abjection is not merely a personal failing of Hargreaves but a systemic issue because Hargreaves's refusal to recognise disabled individuals as full citizens stems from the perception that they disrupt the stability and unity of a society (1993, p. 15) that, according to neoliberal ideals, should be independent and self-reliant. Disabled individuals, who may require support and accommodations, are viewed as a burden rather than as individuals deserving of rights and recognition. This perspective dehumanises disabled individuals, reducing them to objects of pity or charity rather than recognising them as active agents with the right to participate fully in society.

When Poppy finally takes the floor, she passionately raises her voice, detailing the severe impact that benefit cuts and the reduction in her carer's hours have had on her life. She explains how these policies have made her life increasingly difficult, to the point where her existence feels burdensome. Poppy, who is confined to an electric wheelchair, shares how the cuts have not only reduced her access to essential care but have also severely limited her ability to live independently and pursue her dreams, such as taking singing lessons. The reduction in her carer's hours has led to situations where she is left in bed for extended periods, unable to attend to basic needs (2022, pp. 64-65). While such policies are framed as promoting independence, their effects reinforce dependence and hardship, exemplifying what Mitchell and Snyder identify as tokenism within neoliberal frameworks—policies that claim inclusivity yet operate within "limiting rubrics of neoliberal diversity" (*Biopolitics*, 2015, p. 219), leaving systemic inequality intact.

The playwright points out the irony and contradictions in the arguments of the neoliberal politicians regarding the disability benefit cuts through a striking exchange between Jess and Hargreaves. When Jess informs him that she has "just lost [her] Motability car and that means [she] can't get to work anymore," Hargreaves responds by claiming that the reforms are intended "to help people to be more independent" (2022, p. 67) and they "very much believe that most people, with the right support, can be part of the workforce. Disabled or not" (2022, p. 73). This rhetoric of independence, however, obscures the reality of social abjection underpinning these policies. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of social abjection, the unwritten and socially contingent rules that render certain lives less intelligible (1993, p. 3),

these policies produce dependence and vulnerability while rhetorically framing disabled individuals as participants in a meritocratic workforce. As Butler notes, abjection operates through "regulatory mechanisms of exclusion and foreclosure" that are invisible yet deeply embedded in societal structures (1993, p. 190). These mechanisms, exempt from scrutiny or rearticulation, perpetuate the marginalisation of disabled individuals, ensuring that they remain outside cultural intelligibility.

Lottie and Poppy reveal the abjection within Hargreaves's policies, pointing out the flaws in his reasoning, as Jess's loss of her car has made her "more dependent, not less" (2022, p. 67). Hence, Hargreaves' insistence that reassessments are necessary to "tailor support when changes occur" (2022, p. 68) is met with frustration from the disabled characters, who argue that these policies only increase their dependency and economic vulnerability. This critique of reassessment as a harmful rather than helpful practice is reinforced in a previous scene, where Martinez underscores its absurdity and injustice through a dialogue between Lottie and Jess. Lottie expresses her disbelief, stating

> LOTTIE. This really is crazy. You being reassessed. I mean, it's not like you're going to be ...
> JESS. De-wobblied?
> LOTTIE. What a total waste of time! Are they really going to keep reassessing you?
> JESS. Yep. (2022, p. 15)

Lottie and Jess's exchange highlights the systemic inefficiencies and insensitivity in the state's approach to disability. Despite some disabilities being permanent, like Jess's, disabled individuals face yearly reassessments, reflecting neoliberal policies that prioritise bureaucracy over genuine support. These reassessments, while claiming inclusivity in a tokenistic way, perpetuate marginalisation and waste people's time and resources, subjecting disabled people to continuous scrutiny and invalidation. Although the process of reassessment is a part of the government's austerity plan aimed at reducing the benefits for disabled citizens as much as possible, Jess appears somewhat naive about its implications. She downplays the significance by stating, "It's not a big deal, okay? I'm wobbly. They have eyes. That should be enough" (2022, p. 15). This statement reflects her initial belief in the rationality and fairness of the system, despite its evident inefficiencies. Here, Martinez not only criticises the government but also warns the disabled citizens who put their faith in the system in a naive way. To further showcase the system's failures, Martinez presents another instance of bureaucratic inefficiency and dehumanisation through the character of Yvonne, a representative of the Independent Assessment Services (IAS) responsible for conducting Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments. During her assessment of Jess, Yvonne exhibits visible discomfort and a dehumanising attitude, engaging in mechanical interactions that reduce Jess to a list of symptoms and functional limitations rather than recognising her as a whole person. This attitude, which mirrors the state's abjectifying approach towards disabled individuals, is evident in Yvonne's clinical questioning about Jess's ability to perform daily activities, revealing a profound lack of empathy and understanding:

YVONNE rushes through the next questions.
YVONNE. So, you ... you need assistance dressing and undressing if there are buttons or zips?
JESS. Yes, basically, I...
YVONNE. Okay, that's the daily living component completed. Next is the mobility component. We'll start with… Can you stand and then walk more than fifty metres but no more than two hundred metres, either aided or unaided?
JESS. No.
YVONNE. Can you stand and then walk unaided more than twenty metres but no more than fifty metres?
JESS. No.
YVONNE. Can you stand and then walk using an aid or appliance more than twenty metres but no more than fifty metres? (*Waits.*) Jessica?
JESS. Yeah, I can walk short distances if I take someone's arm.
YVONNE. Great. (2022, pp. 20-21)

Despite her admission that "[she] can walk short distances if [she] take[s] someone's arm," Jess clarifies the importance of her Motability car, stating, "I just want to add I can't use public transport on my own, so my Motability car's a big help. It allows me to commute to work, and have a life" (2022, p. 21). Her explanation reflects her reliance on the car to maintain both her independence and quality of life. However, Yvonne's behaviour during the assessment reveals the bureaucratic and impersonal nature of the process, where the primary aim appears to be reducing potential benefits rather than providing meaningful support. Ultimately, despite Jess's clear explanations of her limitations and the crucial role of her Motability car in maintaining her independence, Yvonne's feedback leads to the decision to revoke Jess's car. This outcome highlights the systemic failure of the neoliberal approach to disability assessments, which frequently neglect the complexities of those evaluated. The interaction between Jess and Yvonne serves as a critique of this flawed system, exposing the disconnect between policy implementation and the lived realities of those it is meant to serve.

Furthermore, the neoliberal state's enforcement of social abjection is not only evident through figures like Hargreaves and Yvonne but also through the contradictions embedded in government policies. While benefit cuts are justified as a means of encouraging disabled individuals to enter the workforce, the structural barriers preventing their employment remain unaddressed. This paradox leaves disabled individuals with no viable alternative, forcing them into a state of economic and social precarity. In addition to updating the reassessment processes mentioned above, the government also reclassifies disability in line with its austerity policies. Grover and Soldatic state that recent social security policies in the UK have reclassified the 'disability category' to limit the number of people who can legitimately claim an existence outside of paid work, enforcing stricter eligibility criteria and pushing more disabled individuals into the labour market (2013, p. 217). In this context, the irony in neoliberal society's seeing the disabled citizens both as a burden and preventing their active contribution to the labour market is studied by Owen and Harris in their article "'No Rights without Responsibilities': Disability Rights and Neoliberal Reform under New Labour" (2012) in which they argue that "[i]n an economy that already has a limited number of job openings, placing labour market

expectations on people with disabilities may be unrealistic" (p. 36). Although the government must establish equal opportunities prior to enforcing labour market obligations, the options available for individuals with disabilities to participate in the labour market are severely limited (2012, p. 30). Many disabled participants in their study stated that "they had very limited choice in the types of work available and who would hire them" (2012, p. 25).

In the play, the irony is reflected by Bob, whose son with "profound learning and physical disabilities [therefore not being able to] speak, eat, walk or hear [has] been placed in a 'fit for work' group" recently (2022, p. 72). In line with the real-life opinions of people with disabilities, Bob comments on this situation: "Quite what job he is capable of doing remains a mystery" (2022, p. 72). Likewise, Poppy says that the government "keep[s] finding [her] fit for work and cutting [her] ESA [Employment and Support Allowance]" (2022, p. 64). She complains that she wants to work, but the same system forcing her to work also prevents her from working: "Thing is, I have chronic pain in my joints so most jobs are out. Irony is, I want to bloody work. I don't want to sit at home all day watching Bargain bleedin' Hunt. But, hey ho, they got to do their thing" (2022, p. 32). Soldatic and Morgan emphasise that these policies not only misrecognise the structural disadvantages faced by disabled people but also actively work to classify them as undeserving of welfare benefits, which creates a public perception that disabled individuals are a fiscal burden (2017, pp. 4-5). Hence, the scene points out the irony and failure of these policies, revealing that the supposed intentions to prevent fraud and promote independence are not realised in practice. Instead, the policies further increase the difficulties disabled individuals face in achieving economic self-sufficiency, highlighting the disconnection between policy rhetoric and real-world impact.

This tension between the state's pressure to incorporate disabled individuals into the workforce and the simultaneous structural barriers preventing their participation can be more clearly illuminated through Mitchell and Snyder's concept of *nonproductive bodies*, which refers to individuals whose physical or cognitive abilities do not align with the demands of productivity and efficiency in a market-driven society. Applying this concept to Jess and Poppy allows for a deeper understanding of how their disabilities, within the framework of neoliberal policies, render them excluded from economic and social participation. These policies do not merely fail to support them; they actively work to label them as nonproductive, thereby pushing them further to the margins of society. For instance, following Yvonne's re-evaluation of Jess, her mobility car is taken from her, rendering her commute to work financially unsustainable. Without the car, Jess is forced to rely on expensive taxis, and as a result, she must ultimately give up her job. This loss not only isolates Jess within her home but also leads to her social and economic exclusion. Crucially, it is not Jess's disability that prevents her from contributing to society or remaining in the workforce. Rather, it is the result of Yvonne's re-assessment, which deprives her of the necessary support. Similarly, in the case of Poppy, the system's failure to provide her with a suitable job, coupled with the withdrawal of her benefits, bars her from re-entering society or the workforce. Neoliberal policies, in this instance, actively prevent her from becoming part of a functioning system. Through the experiences of both Jess and Poppy, the playwright reveals that it is not the disabilities themselves that reduce these individuals to *nonproductive bodies*; rather, it is the neoliberal policies that misunderstand, marginalise, and

exclude disabled individuals, treating them as burdens rather than facilitating their inclusion. This critique points out the systemic failures inherent in neoliberal governance, which prioritises economic efficiency at the expense of social justice and inclusivity.

The theme of social abjection can also be seen through Raymond, who is mentioned above as a citizen criticising disability benefits, believing that these benefits are unfair and that they turn disabled people into parasites, despite having a disabled relative himself. He acts as a spokesperson for ableist policies, stating:

> My dad was a copper. Got shot in the knee. Could barely walk. Did he moan? Did he go on benefits? No. He worked till he dropped dead. Now, it's just me and Mum. She's got Parkinson's. I work seven nights a week to look after her. I've got a heart condition. And you know what? We've never asked for a handout. Not like you and your friends. Bleeding the country dry... Gone all quiet now, haven't we? (2022, p. 91)

Raymond further states, "You know what gets me about people like you? You think the world owes you something. It doesn't" (2022, p. 91). Before leaving, he harshly adds, "Your lot can't help anybody. Just take, take, take. Scrounger!" (2022, p. 92). These remarks are significant as they indicate that Raymond's views align with those of neoliberal politicians like Hargreaves, who oppose dependence systems, arguing that they undermine the economy.

Raymond's stance illustrates his belief that individual hardships do not justify relying on state assistance, as he directs his anger towards Jess and other disabled individuals whom he views as burdens on the system. He abjectifies the disabled, perceiving them through a lens of neoliberal ideology that values individuals solely based on their economic contributions. Raymond's remarks starkly contrast with the principles of a welfare state, where every citizen has rights and entitlements by virtue of their citizenship. His generalisation of all disabled people as "people like you" further reveals his inability to see beyond neoliberal indoctrination. Ironically, despite his criticism, Raymond himself is a victim of these same policies, struggling with his own health issues and caring for his disabled mother without seeking aid. His internalisation of neoliberal values blinds him to the broader implications of such policies, creating a cycle of resentment and self-denial.

Conclusion

Thus, in *All of Us*, Francesca Martinez foregrounds the negative consequences of neoliberal policies upon disabled individuals by situating their experiences within a broader framework of social abjection. As demonstrated throughout this article, austerity-driven benefits cuts, restrictive bureaucratic practices, and public prejudices actively marginalise characters such as Jess, Poppy, and others who are rendered nonproductive according to neoliberal standards. By examining the ways in which disabled bodies are forced to undergo repeated reassessment, stigmatisation, and social isolation, Martinez draws critical attention to the paradoxical claims of independence that underpin neoliberal discourse. Rather than promoting autonomy, these policies reveal the state's failure to address structural barriers and its refusal to recognise the inherent interdependence of human life. Through characterisation and dialogue, the play refutes the notion that disability must be overcome or corrected, illustrating instead how deeply entrenched systemic injustices perpetuate exclusion. Read

through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of abjection, the play's critique becomes even more apparent, as it exposes the ways in which normative frameworks not only designate disabled bodies as deviant but also sustain their marginalisation through legal, social, and cultural mechanisms. In locating responsibility not in individual failings but in neoliberal structures that continuously devalue disabled lives, *All of Us* intervenes in contemporary debates on disability justice and social policy. Ultimately, the play demonstrates that the abjection of disabled individuals is neither accidental nor inevitable, but is the product of a socio-political system that privileges those who conform to its narrow metrics of productivity.

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