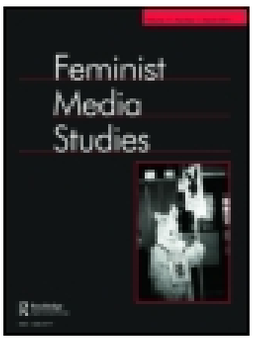

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# "The moment you realise someone wants your body:" neoliberalism, mindfulness and female embodiment in *Fleabag*

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# "The moment you realise someone wants your body:" neoliberalism, mindfulness and female embodiment in *Fleabag*

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**ABSTRACT**

Phoebe Waller Bridge's *Fleabag* aired on the BBC in 2016 and 2019 to huge critical acclaim and popular interest. Following the fragmented and chaotic life of Fleabag, a London-based young woman, the series charts the anxieties pervading contemporary society, particularly those pertaining to female sexuality, embodimentand subjectivity. This article focuses on the difficulties of female embodiment under neoliberalism, arguing that the "excess" traditionally attributed to female embodiment is weaponised by neoliberal privileging of individualism, self-managementmanagement, and self-control. Tropes of female "excess" are peppered throughout the series, from the resurgence of a naked female torso statue, to the dead and the "failing" maternal body, to the yoga and mindfulness particularly marketed at women. Fleabag is juxtaposed with her sister Claire, who is presented as an ideal neoliberal subject due to her disavowal of female embodiment; by contrast, Fleabag's "excess" means that her body becomes a site onto which anxiety arising from neoliberal society is projected. Ultimately, however, this article finds that Fleabag's openness and repudiation of neoliberal values allows her to become a connective body, bringing other women into more authentic embodiment, foregrounding the gendered violence of neoliberalism and retaining focus on absent and effaced female bodies such as her mother and Boo.

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Hailed as "a near perfect work of art" (Serena Davies 2019) and "the most electrifying, devastating TV in years" (Hannah Jane Parkinson 2019), Phoebe Waller Bridge's two series comedy-drama *Fleabag* aired to great critical acclaim between 2016 and 2019. Alongside its critical success, the show was hugely popular with audiences. In depicting the pressures of contemporary life from a specifically female perspective, *Fleabag* tapped into (or added to the creation of) a zeitgeist. The show largely centres on the eponymous and slightly chaotic protagonist Fleabag and her more collected and conventional sister, Claire. Throughout, both characters are confronted with the expectations piled onto women in contemporary neoliberal society, and both struggle to cope with the (often crushing) demands levelled against the female mind and body. In *Fleabag*, Waller Bridge outlines the ways in which neoliberalism invades the minutiae of everyday life, reconfiguring the female psychic life and female embodiment as opportunities for individual

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enterprise and optimisation. Claire and Fleabag are played off against each other, presented as a successful neoliberal subject and a failed one, respectively. However, this paper argues that Fleabag's perceived failure to attain status by adherence to neoliberal norms ultimately exposes the shortcomings of neoliberal value systems, suggesting that Fleabag's "messiness" subverts neoliberalism's privileging of self-reliance over interdependence and individualism over connectivity.

Most easily categorised as advanced capitalism, neoliberalism is often defined as an economic model advocating free markets with minimal regulatory frameworks. However, neoliberalism's influence is not limited to a set of economic policies. As Catherine Rottenberg describes, it also has huge significance as a culture with implications for the bodies and minds of citizens: "[neoliberalism] is a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subjects, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents" (Catherine Rottenberg, Rosalind Gill and Sarah Banet-Weiser 2020, 8). As a discourse, neoliberalism strategically ignores systemic disadvantage. It declares that centuries of structural inequity such as gender-based oppression is irrelevant in the face of the market, which is presented as the great equaliser. Promoting "individual solutions to myriad social problems" (Aihwa Ong 2006, 2), neoliberalism exhorts subjects "to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice—no matter how constrained their lives may actually be" (Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2011, 5–6).

This neoliberal rationality presents several problems for feminism. Introducing *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Angela McRobbie addresses the gender dynamic of neoliberal logic. Noting that neoliberal individualism offers women "particular kinds of freedom, empowerment and choice," McRobbie highlights how this "freedom" is only ever "'in exchange for' or 'as a substitute for' feminist politics and transformation" (Angela McRobbie 2011, 4). Similarly, Rosalind Gill describes a "gendered neoliberalism," characterised by:

> relentless individualism, that exculpates the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and blames women for their disadvantaged positions, that renders the intense surveillance of women's bodies normal or even desirable, that calls forth endless work on the self, that centres notions of empowerment and choice whilst enrolling women in ever more intense regimes of 'the perfect' (Rottenberg, Gill and Banet-Weiser 2020, 16).

As various critics such as McRobbie, Gill, Rottenberg, Christina Scharff and Ana Elias have examined at length, this neoliberal culture inculcates women with the need to "self-manage." On a bodily level, this involves an injunction on women to undergo "body projects" of intensive self-regulation, self-transformation and, ultimately, the disavowal of any aspects of embodiment which are non-compliant with neoliberal values of containment and optimisation (Gill and Scharff 2011, 7). Sustained attempts by feminist scholars to foreground bodily contingency and bodily vulnerability as facts of human existence and, thus, to debunk the male/female, mind/body binary have been undermined by neoliberal discourse.

In ignoring structural disadvantage and in glorifying the ontological and bodily individualism only available to men under patriarchy (Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal 2018, 3), this culture and discourse of neoliberalism begets, as Wendy Brown puts it, a "gender

subordination [that] is both intensified and fundamentally altered" (Wendy Brown 2015, 105). Women who fail to meet neoliberal standards of self-regulation are presented as excessive, leaky, disruptive and dangerous, and thus in need of patriarchal management (Gail Weiss 2018, 19). In popular culture, the stereotype of the "crazy" woman exemplifies that idea that women expressing their feelings, anxieties or grievances is "over-sharing" and "messy." Similarly, the cultural anathema of the "excessive" female body is manifestly evident in the taboo placed on menses, in the historical antipathy towards female sexual appetite, and in the social stigma associated with fat women. This cultural phobia regarding female "excess" and the corresponding insistence that women mitigate it through "self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline," is a central theme of *Fleabag*, which artistically furthers Gill and Scharff's investigation of whether "neoliberalism *is always gendered*," and whether women are "its ideal subjects" (2011, 7).

Certainly, as a perfectionist workaholic, Claire adheres to the emphasis placed on "professional and economic success" by free market capitalism (Rottenberg, Gill and Banet-Weiser 2020, 4). Moreover, if a woman's physical appearance is "her brand and her gateway to freedom in a neoliberal market economy," Claire diligently performs the "aesthetic entrepreneurship" demanded of women under neoliberalism (Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2017, 25, 39). Stringently monitoring her appearance and denying any bodily functions which might be deemed unruly, Claire epitomises the constant self-improvement, self-optimisation, and self-management demanded of the neoliberal subject. By contrast, Fleabag is not gainfully employed, is emotionally volatile and revels in messy embodiment. Her pursuit of sex, masturbation and general untrammelled excess expressly contravenes both neoliberalism's "hypervigilance about control" (Sinéad Molony 2014, 183) and its privileging of "ontological individualism" (Jeremy Gilbert 2014, 69).

This article is split into three sections, the first of which outlines *Fleabag*'s critique of neoliberal attitudes to mental health and the mind. The show parodies popular pursuits such as meditation, "mindfulness" and yoga, insinuating that such practices are not vehicles of self-care (as they are commonly represented in contemporary culture). Rather, "mindfulness" in *Fleabag* is a means of moulding women into pliable neoliberal self-optimising subjects, and of reiterating gendered division of labour by normalising female emotional internalisation while affording space and credence to male anger. The second section then explores how the series dramatizes the bodily impact of neoliberalism on women. For Fleabag, female embodiment is a matrix of expectation, sensation and social taboo. Sent to yearly breast check-ups by a father traumatised by, but unable to speak of, his wife's death from breast cancer, and lectured that "women have pain on a cycle for years and years and years," Fleabag's body is both a personal battle ground and a social problem site (Phoebe Waller-Bridge 2016). Throughout the series, female embodiment is measured as per a spectrum of acceptability derived from neoliberal values. Fleabag's "messy" sexuality, menstruation and bodily excretion is utterly unacceptable and marks her as a body onto which other characters can project their fears of "excess." By contrast, Claire's atomised and highly regulated embodiment strives to meet neoliberalism's standards. However, the implication throughout is that the only fully acceptable female body is the sanitised female corpse, as represented by Fleabag and Claire's dead mother and Fleabag's dead friend Boo. Against this backdrop, the final section posits that *Fleabag* dismantles the neoliberal binary of the contained, optimised

female body and the excessive, open female body. Far from "transforming" herself into an optimised neoliberal subject, Fleabag's continued emotional and bodily "messiness" becomes a vehicle of connection and, thus, poses a substantial challenge to neoliberal individualism and female bodily effacement.

## *Fleabag* and mindfulness

In a 2018 article, Ronald Purser notes the growing prevalence of corporate mindfulness training programmes which seek to alleviate stress in workers. Describing how large corporations pay lip-service to the idea of mental health through hiring "mindfulness" specialists, he argues that the corporate emphasis on "self-care" is an obfuscation of the "political, economic and social causes" of stress and anxiety in the workforce (Ronald Purser 2018, 105). For Purser, the "mindfulness" industry encourages the internalisation of anxiety produced by the inequality, precarity and ruthlessness of late capitalism. Through corporate "mindfulness," mental health issues are separated from the conditions in which they were created and instead essentialised as individual defects in the sufferer. From here, the individual is encouraged to look inward, locating and improving flaws in the self rather than railing against external systems of power, exploitation and domination. In effect, this serves to depoliticise stress by "pathologizing and psychologizing it" as a problem inherent to specific lives (Purser 2018, 106). Purser summarises this corporate self-justification as follows: "it is not the nature of the capitalist system that is inherently problematic; rather, it is the failure of individuals to be mindful and resilient in a precarious and uncertain economy" (Ronald Purser 2019).

In *Fleabag*, Claire works in the City, typifying what Rottenberg describes as the "hyper-individualising neoliberal" bent which configures women as both "entrepreneurial subjects" and "individual enterprises" (Rottenberg, Gill and Banet-Weiser 2020, 8). As per Purser's reading, Claire responds problems caused by her high stress corporate lifestyle by essentialising such issues as her own and pursuing neoliberal solutions. For instance, as her marriage with Martin breaks down, Claire insists: "I don't think you can pay your problems away, I think you have to face who you are and suffer the consequences. It's the only road to happiness" (Waller-Bridge 2016). This soundbite is replete with neoliberal dogma and contradictions. The conflation of "problems" in the first clause with "who you are" in the second demonstrates the essentialisation of failure under neoliberal individualism and the occlusion of external or structural factors. This essentialisation of "suffer-[ing]" is particularly charged for women, who are traditionally expected to internalise societal problems and atone for them. Moreover, the idea of "happiness" to which Claire alludes is not happiness but rather *success* derived from self-reliance and individualism—attending therapy would involve surrendering complete self-control and would therefore bely this goal. Claire continues that "I take all the negative emotions and I just bottle them and bury them and they never come out," linking this act of internalisation to neoliberal success: "in the last six months, I've excelled" (Waller-Bridge 2016).

By contrast, Fleabag is seen as inherently flawed—her failings and public disarray is juxtaposed with successfully individuated neoliberal subjects like Claire. Embarrassed by Fleabag's occasional outbursts, her family members attempt to silence her whilst presenting this suppression as love or concern. For instance, her father performs "fatherly care," gifting Fleabag a counselling session. However, he hands her the voucher while

expressing surprise that she seems "okay" and isn't being "naughty" or disruptive (Waller-Bridge 2016), thus indicating that counselling comprises an attempt to force psychic interiority onto Fleabag, and to pre-emptively mitigate displays of feminine "excess." Indeed, mental difficulties are taboo. When Fleabag opens her gift publicly, he exclaims, "That was meant to be a bedroom present … something that you open in your bedroom, *alone*" (Waller-Bridge 2016). This exchange highlights neoliberal narratives of self-optimisation at work in "transfer[ring] the risk and responsibility for well-being onto the individual" (Purser 2018, 106). That is, mental health problems are designated as something which should remain publicly unacknowledged and, instead, privately improved through confrontation with the inner, problematic self.

The expectation that women should deal with mental health issues "*alone*" is juxtaposed with the public forum afforded to male anger in Season One, Episode Four, in which Claire and Fleabag receive a weekend retreat from their father. In the context of essentialised personal failure, an aggressive market economy and dwindling public services, fads such as mindfulness profess to offer shelter from relentless capitalism. However, with mindfulness's stated intention being inward, self-centred focus, it has been proposed that the "psychological turn in neoliberalism" (Rottenberg, Gill and Banet-Weiser 2020, 6) merely serves to "make us contented, mindful capitalists" (Purser 2019). This conjecture is parsed in a gendered context at Claire and Fleabag's retreat, where they are greeted: "Welcome to the breath of silence female-only retreat. Women don't speak." This salutation speaks to what Elias, Gill and Scharff identify as the "quasi-feminis[m]" of some neoliberal discourse, wherein "self-care" is marketed at women so as to make "subjectivity and interiority" "requirements for (self)transformation" (2017, 5–6). Encouraging women to cope with the demands of modern society by *internalising* them and submitting *themselves* to improvement, the inward turn of mindfulness promotes the view that the self is "a project whose interiors and exteriors can be monitored," thus touching on traditional concepts of female bodily and psychic "excess" (Chris Shilling 1993, 5).

However, *Fleabag* at once ironizes the idea of female hysteria and foregrounds the neoliberal principles underlying contemporary understandings of mindfulness. This episode juxtaposes the solutions to contemporary anxieties peddled to women and men, suggesting that inward focus is merely a rebranding of traditional domesticity whereby women and their problems are kept out of sight. As Fleabag, Claire and the other women sit in a room and are instructed to retreat inwards and examine their "psychic life" (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017, 5), a man confusedly stands up and mumbles that he is meant to be at another retreat, whose vocal participants are heard shouting "Fucking slut!" in the background (Waller-Bridge 2016). Undeterred, the facilitator of "women don't speak" continues: "This weekend is about being mindful. It is about leaving your thoughts in your head and trapping your thoughts in your mind. Think of it as a mind prison" (Waller-Bridge 2016). Conjuring up parallels with the enforced domesticity of women throughout history, *Fleabag* parodies neoliberal "empowerment" by aligning it with traditional gender roles, including the mindful "menial tasks" which transpire to consist primarily of housework. Claire's incredulity as she scrubs the floor—"I don't even do this in my own house"—positions her in the outside, public and, therefore, male sphere as opposed to the interior domesticity of the home. Fleabag's response—"Oh it's very simple. We've paid them to let us clean their house in silence"—problematises female participation in the

public sphere (Waller-Bridge 2016). That is, Fleabag suggests that the "freedoms" and "gains" offered to women under neoliberalism are contingent on female cooperation with ideologies favourable to market domination—in short, that women enter the public world of work on male terms, in silence, and perform dirty work so that male domination can continue.

Hence, Claire's laughter quickly turns to tears, a disruption earning her and Fleabag chastisement from the retreat facilitator. The allegation that Fleabag's "flagrant disregard for the one rule we have" is distracting "the other students" is allegorical (Waller-Bridge 2016). Chiming with the argument that neoliberalism "replaces collective, activist politics with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule" (Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon 2009, 8), the facilitator fears the spread of dissent and the chartering of collective anger among the other women on the silent retreat. As such, the neoliberal dilemma for women is foregrounded, but the solutions offered to women are parodied. Mindfulness is presented as nothing more than neoliberal con-artistry by which means oppression is rebranded as a luxury good, all the while enforcing the "repudiation of [the] pain, injury, insecurity and anger" which would incite meaningful improvement in women's conditions (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2013, 25).

This (enforced) female silence is satirised further for being carried out against a background in which men actively, aggressively and vocally assault women: "Slut, bitch!" As Fleabag sneaks around the retreat grounds, she discovers a room of men screaming expletives at female mannequins. Tellingly, the dummies are dressed in business attire, speaking to male resentment at female intrusion into the public sphere. Indeed, the leader of the retreat introduces one dummy as "Patricia [who] has won a promotion at work, beating over six other male candidates" as an example target of male anger (Waller-Bridge 2016). As male rage is vented and legitimised—not deemed "excessive" but simply a justified outpouring of a downtrodden masculinity—female anger is silenced as women are told to work on themselves through interiority. On the other hand, the male retreat (whose sole premise is shouting abuse at female mannequins) is all that is needed to make "better men," and outbursts of misogynist rage illicit applause as men sit around a fire, screaming "slut" at a dummy. Meanwhile, the women sit in silence, instructed to "Open up your senses, close your mouth and live now" (Waller-Bridge 2016)—a slogan foregrounding the ways in which women are simultaneously instructed to essentialise structural flaws as their own by retreating inward ("close your mouth") *and* remain porous to external male rage ("open up your senses"), all the while proscribing female involvement in meaningful societal development or change by limiting female experience to the immediate present ("live now").

## *Fleabag* and embodiment

This image of angry, disenfranchised men screaming at female mannequins alludes to the wider commandeering of femininity by neoliberalism, whereby anxieties arising from neoliberal precarity are projected onto the female body. At once scapegoating female advancement as the reason for male instability and essentialising the precarity arising from global capitalism, neoliberalism:

> interpolates women as autonomous, freely choosing, perpetually self-regulating,transformative, and adaptive actors who are entirely self-reliant, responsibleandaccountable for their own life, and whose value is largely measured by their capacity toself-care and self-improve (Laura Favaro 2017, 288–9).

The pressures to undertake self-transformation, and to *embody* success, result in the extension of market principles to the female body: corporate tenets of optimisation come to comprise a new form of neoliberal discipline which takes "predefined norms as its starting point" and moulds bodies according to these (optimised) preferences (Julia Jansen and Maren Wehrle 2018, 43). *Fleabag* is underscored by tension surrounding the ways in which the disciplinary, "normalising" practises exercised on the female body fail to account for the "body corporeal—fleshy, feeling, embodied" (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2013, 8).

This tension between neoliberal success and other expectations of female embodiment is parsed in one scene in which two young women sit in Fleabag's café and diligently perform neoliberal self-regulation and management. The women gush about their yoga lesson and order "organic" food, seeking to add value to their controlled bodies and alluding to the strain of "wellbeing" obsession, ranging from health to orthorexia, which is so prevalent in contemporary western society (Waller-Bridge 2016). Branded "healthism," this interest in nutrition, wellbeing and bodily optimisation reflects "a cultural discourse of self-care [which has] medicalised the body and shifted health responsibility to an individual level" (Chelsea Cinquegrani and David HK Brown 2018, 586). In this way, the link between food and female labour (cooking as a primary form of traditional female labour) is tightened for women under neoliberalism. However, the sense that women are at once subject to neoliberal stresses but remain, due to their embodiment, excluded from its promises is conveyed comically when the women's attempt at self-actualisation through "organic" eating is undermined as Fleabag prepares them microwaved ready meals.

The women's claims that they "don't have to care about how I look because I have a great fucking body" (Waller-Bridge 2016) speak to the casting of the female body as "the object of women's labour," "her asset, her product, her brand" (Allison Winch 2013, 21). However, this illusion is starkly undercut when one of the women bursts out that her partner wants to "try for a baby," a proposal causing the woman visible distress (Waller-Bridge 2016). That is, attempting to conceive, being pregnant, and giving birth symbolise a surrender of the type of control fostered through bodily disciplinary processes such as yoga. In a sense, yoga is akin to mindfulness in adhering to neoliberal doctrine. Contorting the body in echoes of the embodied stresses of contemporary life while striving to retain inner poise through inward attention, yoga reiterates the neoliberal values of control, flexibility and optimisation. Its version of embodiment is expressly individualistic, streamlined and inward, not uncontrolled, messy and outward like childbirth. For this woman, the embodiment of pregnancy means sacrificing the performative, controlled neoliberal success built up by decoys such as optimisation culture, self-transformation transformation, and "self-care."

Other references throughout the series to Claire's disordered eating (including allusions to anorexia and bulimia) continue this sense that neoliberal values of self-regulation

and self-control manifest in a specifically embodied way for women. Claire is in every respect a successful neoliberal figure:

> an active subject wholly responsible for her self-care, enhancing her own well-being, rationally calculating her 'assets,' 'maximising her potential' and 'achieving success'—a hyper-autonomous, deeply individuated woman who can thereby more effectively meet the demands emanating from patriarchal neoliberal capitalism (Favaro 2017, 297).

Hence, embodiment is particularly fraught for Claire, with the "excess" traditionally associated with the female body weaponised so as to forge a distinction between Claire's successful neoliberal "subjecthood" and her embodiment. If female embodiment is an essentially abject, excessive state, "managing the body is … the means by which women acquire and display their cultural capital" and stake their claim in corporate society (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2013, 4). As such, Claire takes great pains in transcending messy bodily functionality (farting, sex, pregnancy) through corporatization.

In one instance, Fleabag recalls how her mother used to refer to Claire's pre-menstrual tension (P.M.T.) as her "monthly confidence crisis" (Waller-Bridge 2016). This euphemism serves, firstly, to tether Claire's period to the market (confidence and supply chains) and, secondly, to frame female bodily processes as the only factor which could cause Claire's confidence as a successful neoliberal subject to waiver, thus underscoring the mutual exclusivity of female embodiment and the neoliberal agenda. Writing about "leaky" female boundaries, Margrit Shildrick reads menstruation as "evidence of women's inherent lack of control of the body and, by extension, the self" (1994, 25). Claire therefore works to mitigate her menstrual "leakiness" by doubling down on neoliberal values and "reinvent[ing] herself in some small way" (Waller-Bridge 2016). Her bodily "shortcomings"—with menses representing the antithesis of closed neoliberal individualism—are mitigated by "transforming" the self. This self-reinvention tellingly involves Claire arriving in a skin-tight morph suit with her hair held tight to her head by a hairband. In creating a streamlined, closed circuit of a body, Claire counters the excess of natural cycles with sleekness. Fleabag, however, debunks this couching of bodily reality in sanitised market terms—the scene ends with Fleabag facing down the camera and reasserting Claire's embodiment directly to the viewer: "but it's PMT" (Waller-Bridge 2016).

For scholars such as Naomi Wolf, Sheila Jeffreys and Susan Bordo, increased focus on female bodily management—through dieting, grooming, surgery, and so on—occurred in tandem with rising female participation in public spheres and the workplace. Thus, female anxiety regarding bodily extrusion speaks to an underlying female insecurity centred on occupying traditionally *male* spaces, with "the steadily shrinking space permitted to the female body" reflecting "discomfort with greater female power and presence" (Susan Bordo 2003, xxi). The sleek, thin, successful woman signals—through her bodily comportment, size and dress—"allegiance" to professional, male values, along with "her lack of intention to subvert that arena with alternative 'female values'" (Bordo 2003, 208). This anxiety is particularly evident, as seen with the yoga practitioners in Fleabag's café, in female engagement with the maternal body. The obsession with thinness and slimness in the neoliberal 1990s and 2000s symbolises a rejection of the voluptuous, generous and *maternal* female figure of the post-war era, signifying a rejection of the traditionally feminine values of domesticity and homemaking in order to justify female

participation in the workforce of modernity. As women enter boardrooms and politics, their bodies must be repackaged as non-excessive, non-porousporous, and impenetrable. Stripping away maternal resonances, the corpus is made to resemble a man's: free from breasts, hips and buttocks, all of which would serve as a reminder of the intrusion of the private, domestic sphere into the public, corporate one. As such, the slim, controlled woman of the corporate sphere *disavows* her embodiment in order to function in line with male values of self-contained individualism.

Claire's strained relationship with corporate success on the one hand and embodiment on the other is continued in the opening episode of Series Two, in which she suffers a miscarriage. Over the course of a family dinner in an upmarket restaurant, Martin reveals that he and Claire are "trying for a baby." The response to this announcement—"Oh Claire, we thought you couldn't have them" (Waller-Bridge 2016)—speaks to the impenetrable corporatization of Claire's body, which is presented as antithetical to feminine "excess" to the extent that she has essentially transcended this aspect of corporality. When, later in the episode, Claire asks Fleabag for a sanitary towel, adding that "it's not a period," Claire's "monthly confidence crisis" is immediately recalled, again linking her body to the market. Indeed, this market connection fundamentally informs Claire's reaction to her miscarriage. Initially, her fierce protectiveness—"Get your hands of my miscarriage. It's mine. It's mine" (Waller-Bridge 2016)—marks a shift in her relationship with embodiment, momentarily acknowledging and at least owning if not cherishing her "excess." However, this acknowledgement is short-lived as Claire ignores her miscarriage, submitting herself to the neoliberal logic she previously outlined and making her body a closed-circuit which cannot extrude: "I take all the negative emotions and I just bottle them and bury them and they never come out."

Previously, Fleabag presented herself as someone who can see past Claire's self-regulation and rigid borders, alleging that she can ascertain that Claire is on her period from her plaits. Indeed, Fleabag's method of traversing the distance between her and Claire is to highlight her own excess: "I'm doing a wee on this cushion" (Waller-Bridge 2016). In general, Fleabag's body absorbs instances of what, by neoliberal standards, counts as lack of control. It is only when Fleabag substitutes her own body for Claire's by pretending to the family that it was *she* who miscarried that Claire can acknowledge the fact of her miscarriage: "Oh *fuck*." From the perspective of Fleabag's family, Fleabag's bodily "excess" makes her a plausible candidate for miscarriage—as already noted, Claire's is so "disembodied" that her family were surprised she would attempt pregnancy in the first place. Moreover, Fleabag's refusal to comply with neoliberal standards of self-control makes her a scapegoat, with her body becoming a diversionary site for *all* instances of excess and failure.

That is, Martin naturalises Fleabag's body as a failure, portraying its excess as incompatible with biological optimisation: "You know it's like a goldfish out the bowl, if it didn't want to be in there it didn't want to be in there. Something wasn't right … It's the kid's choice if it wants to jump ship, right?" (Waller-Bridge 2016) Here, the biological mutability of pregnancy and miscarriage is reframed as an essential flaw in the female body. Because women's bodies necessarily evade neoliberal discourse of self-control, biological inconsistency itself is corralled into a sanitised narrative in which the female body itself is failed, lacking and, moreover, *dangerous*. This same idea of female bodily control and agency is

circled and reframed by Fleabag's stepmother. Musing that she has six friends who miscarried and that "five of them never managed to produce a child after" but the one who did "rather regretted it," she concludes that Fleabag has "probably done the right thing" (Waller-Bridge 2016). Departing slightly from the narrative in which miscarriage is an inherent flaw, the stepmother calls on the language of choice and control. If Fleabag "did the right thing," it was Fleabag's *choice* to miscarry, thus keeping her within the bounds of neoliberal success. This is juxtaposed with her friend, whose inability to have a baby is parsed via market language—in terms of management and production—and is taken as evidence of a failure to execute her choices.

## Challenging neoliberal values through excess

Unlike Claire, who sanitises her period into a "monthly confidence crisis," Fleabag is merely mildly embarrassed when apprehended while buying tampons, swapping a packet of heavy flow for light flow before laughingly admitting that her flow is never "light." Indeed, Fleabag refuses to sanitise her bodily processes, speaking openly about her menstrual cycle, addressing the audience from the toilet where she muses about sex, farting in lifts at business parties, and hooking up with men after sobbing in the toilet of their pub. Fleabag's recklessness and extravagance completely bely neoliberal discourses of normalcy and optimisation, which aim to make the subject "responsible" for her own successes and failures and, thus, "all the more cautious and manageable" (Shildrick 1994, 37). However, while she might refuse to bow to such normalising forces, Fleabag is nevertheless defined in relation to them. For both Claire and Fleabag, the "mythology/ideology of the devouring, insatiable female" looms large (Bordo 2003, 161). Claire internalises the disgust this myth generates towards the female body—she orders her behaviour and appearance accordingly, denying and sanitising those bodily processes which she cannot control, and experiencing her body as "voracious, wanton, needful of forceful control by her male will" (Bordo 2003, 163).

On the other hand, Fleabag responds to the myth of "the insatiable cunt" by playing it out, sometimes self-consciously performing and subverting it, and sometimes being slapped with its label by others (Naomi Wolf 1991, 131). As well as being widely accepted as the reason for her own social failure, Fleabag's "excess"—particularly that manifested in and by her body—is commandeered by other characters. Fleabag is configured as *the* excessive body, onto which others can divert and project their own excess, thereby allowing themselves to maintain illusions of self-control and self-discipline. This is evinced in the engagement dinner opening Series Two, in which several characters attempt to bait Fleabag into a display of public "excess" so that they can project their private fractures onto her. Martin, for instance, drinks in secret so as to hide his own excess, but goads Fleabag: "I am so intrigued to see how you're going to make this whole evening about yourself." In another episode, the family gather to commemorate their mother's death. When Claire and Fleabag's stepmother asks the latter whether her "new chap" is the man with the protruding teeth, the "blame" for this protuberance is implicitly attributed to Fleabag; this insinuation is galvanised when Fleabag counters that she is seeing someone else and her stepmother replies, "you do turn over fast" (Waller-Bridge 2016). With this phrase, the stepmother semantically links Fleabag's dead mother ("turning over in her grave") to untrammelled sexual libido and female excess, all with the intention of

diverting attention away from her own excess—namely, that she seduced the husband of her deceased friend (turning him over) immediately after the Fleabag and Claire's mother's death.

The erasure of excessive aspects of female embodiment demanded by neoliberalism is epitomised by the latent presence of dead females throughout the series. One of the most important, but absent, characters throughout is Fleabag's mother, whose body and existence are submitted to silence, erasure and taboo yet remain a governing force. In the anniversary episode, attempts to speak about their dead mother are confounded by the stepmother's interference: although Fleabag's father attempts to "saw a few words about your mother," she remains unspeakable as the stepmother potters disruptively around the outskirts of the conversation, trilling "ignore me!" (Waller-Bridge 2016). Furthermore, as they toast their mother, the latter's terse concurrence, "To Margaret," is tempered with "she was just the most generous woman" (Waller-Bridge 2016). This comment serves several purposes. Firstly, it alludes to the size of Margaret's breasts as previously mentioned by Fleabag and thus reiterates her death of breast cancer. Secondly, it reframes "generosity" as a slur by associating it with excess. Thirdly, it diverts from the fact that she, the stepmother, has purloined her deceased friend's husband.

The death of the female becomes even more centralised when the stepmother overrides the mother's death by eagerly informing Fleabag's date that Boo "killed herself." The power-play between herself and Fleabag is continued in the tussle over a sculpture of a naked female torso. When Claire surreptitiously returns the sculpture after Fleabag steals it from the stepmother's studio, the stepmother's comment—"Oh the sculpture turned up … Must've just tumbled off the side [of the shelf]" (Waller-Bridge 2016)—recalls the way in which Boo "tumbled off the side" of the road to her death. Fleabag's retort —"Well if you rid a woman of her head and limbs you can't expect her to do anything other than roll around"—riffs on her stepmother's earlier jibe about her "turn[ing] over fast," thus using her body and sexuality to absorb ambivalent references to the two dead females (her mother and Boo) who are symbolised by the statue.

In comprising the ultimate abject object (the cadaver), the mother is stored out of sight in tandem with a society which bids women hide and "manage" their bodily experiences. At several key moments in the series, Fleabag and Claire's deceased mother threatens to breach the taboo on female embodiment—in these scenes, Fleabag often uses her own body to form a link between the dead mother and the present moment. For instance, observing that "I did a fart the other day exactly like mum's" as she and Claire sit in the graveyard considering their mother's physical bodily decay, Fleabag highlights the lived reality of the abject female body as well as making their mother an assertive, rather than passive, presence in their dialogue. This symbol of abjection—female "excess"—is made marketable by Claire, who uses the extrusion as evidence of Fleabag's (natural) assets, musing that this fart must mean that she inherited their mother's bum. When Fleabag retorts that her bum "dropped ages ago," as evidenced by the fact that her farts have to "fight" to "get out," she draws attention to the process by which neoliberal ideals of managed femininity are internalised, and alludes to the increasing difficulty in expelling them (farting and ejection). On Claire's part, the idea that "I haven't farted in about three years" speaks to the idea that Claire has internalised neoliberal need for control and self-management, under which something as excessive as a fart could not be countenanced (Waller-Bridge 2016).

The linking of extrusion and abjection to the dead mother is also developed allegorically when it is revealed that Boo (accidentally) killed herself because Fleabag slept with her boyfriend. This revelation lends coherence to the female corpse as the ultimate taboo in linking female death with female sexual "excess" and, thus, begetting female taboo. That is, Fleabag cannot speak about Boo's death due to the incident being grounded in her own bodily excesses; her attempts to foreground female embodiment as central to female existence *regardless* of neoliberal demands are somewhat stymied due to this instance of Fleabag's own bodily excess. Boo's corpse is, in a sense, harnessed by a neoliberal narrative as evidence that female embodiment is necessarily excessive and destructive. This is despite the fact that Boo herself revels in Fleabag's "excesses:" she is depicted getting drunk, smoking and singing with Fleabag, festooning their failing café in guinea pig paraphernalia, defending people who raped guinea pigs with pencils by pointing out that everyone makes mistakes, and offering herself as a receptacle for Fleabag's excess—when the latter says, at her mother's funeral, "I don't know what to do with it. With all the love I have for her," Boo answers "I'll take it" (Waller-Bridge 2016). Nonetheless, Boo is held as an example of the result of female excess; her corpse is placed under a taboo which is held against the *live* female body (Fleabag's), as Fleabag must maintain the taboo on Boo's body so as to avoid confronting truths about herself. Thus, neoliberal society maintains its power by charging female embodiment with cultural indictments of excess and abjection, and by curating tension *between* female bodies—as Fleabag's own body is bound up with Boo's death, it is only with the complete degradation of the female body *as a whole* that neoliberal myths of female embodied excess can be dismantled.

The foregrounded yet contested presence of the female body in society is also symbolised by the leitmotif of the statuette which threads both series of *Fleabag*, introduced in Episode One of the first series and comprising the centrepiece of the final scene in Episode Six of the second. The statue is a site onto which multiple narratives are projected. In its exposition, the stepmother informs Fleabag that it represents women being natural "warriors," while in her "Sexhibition" she rebrands it, in its absence, as "A Woman Robbed:" a reminder of how women across the globe face bodily erasure and abuse (Waller-Bridge 2016). There is the sense that the statue is meant to be interpreted as a symbol of Fleabag herself, and the ways in which her body is passed around and projected onto. Indeed, the stepmother later affirms this link, glibly dropping that she was intrigued by Fleabag's attraction to the piece and revealing that it was based on Fleabag's mother. On the one hand, Fleabag herself is tethered to the statue as both a symbol of women's representational porousness and bodily subjugation, in the sense that the subversive potential of the statue-as-a-body is tempered by its subjection as an art piece. On the other hand, the statue also signifies Fleabag's, and by extension female, self-assertion and refusal to be effaced. That is, the attempt, by the step-mother, to reduce the mother's body to a symbol, sanitised and contained as a muse in an artist's studio, is undermined by Fleabag's parading of the same statue—given as a birthday present, a prize for women in business, and an ironic wedding gift, the maternal body (and Fleabag's) remains a force to be reckoned with.

However, there is a sense that this embodied excess is a guise overlaying a deep vulnerability. Instances of curated bodily assertion are celebrated, as per the "Sexhibition" in which multiple plaster penises are mounted on a wall and female sexuality is

represented somewhat more obliquely by a missing female torso and a bidet. As Fleabag arrives, she is laden with a tray of drinks and breezily informed by her stepmother that she is "a natural" before being sent to work distributing beverages. Amid the staged display of sexual, artistic experimentation, the assertion of "real," embodied and non-curated female "excess" is a subversive force greeted with marked hostility. That is, while the female body can be presented in tandem with mounted penises, Fleabag is told to "Stop making a spectacle of yourself and clean that up" when she smashes a glass, foregrounding the dynamics of control exercised over the "real," "spectacle" and the "represented," "clean" female body (Waller-Bridge 2016).

As Fleabag's cheery performativity begins to slip, her father's insistence that she apologise to her stepmother is met with "I'm sorry. Turns out I'm not such a natural after all." This "apology" recalls her stepmother's earlier jibe and forcibly juxtaposes the *performance* of compliant femininity with falsely naturalised female submission; in this way, Fleabag insists that smooth, collected femininity is performance and, conversely, that displays of emotion, which are anathema under neoliberalism, are natural. Her father's later concession, "I think your mother would have admired your little performance up there," furthers this ambivalence (Waller-Bridge 2016). Ostensibly, he intends this as a compliment, linking Fleabag to her mother as someone who is implicitly genuine and authentic (in being dead). On the other hand, what he refers to as a "performance" is subtitled by Fleabag's earlier admission that she is "not such a natural after all." Hence, a display of natural emotion is repackaged as a "performance," thus maintaining the social order by which a revelation of the performativity underlying female "naturalness" must itself be labelled a performance. The revelation that Fleabag is not "natural" is subversive and shocking, not to mention taboo for threatening to display neoliberalism's management of the female body, as alluded to in an artistically marketable, acceptable way earlier in "A Woman Robbed." Moreover, in this scene, Fleabag's question as to whether her father ever thinks about her mother is answered with "Do you ever think about your friend?" as an affirmation (Waller-Bridge 2016)—truth, authenticity, and the "real" is somehow anchored in the *dead* female body. The live female body, on the other hand, disrupts truth and authenticity. This is signalled when the stepmother interrupts a fledgling profound utterance from Fleabag's father, thus dispelling a moment of connection with her live body. Fleabag then goes to her café and stands on the side of the footpath where Boo died as though she is contemplating doing the same thing, having internalised the message from the episode that only the female dead body can bring around truth and broker some form of lasting connection with her father.

However, Fleabag's insistence on relationality and bodily openness undermines these closed, neoliberal individualist narratives, demonstrating the impossibility of control. Over the course of the series, Fleabag begins to resist her construction as a receptacle for neoliberal excess. When, for instance, Claire attempts to detract attention from herself by demanding of Fleabag, "You're being so quiet why aren't you saying ,anything?" Fleabag's response, "What do you want me to say?" (Waller-Bridge 2016), foregrounds her own curation by the others as the "neoliberal failure." Moreover, in the restaurant scene when Martin essentialises Fleabag's "maternal" body as a site of failure and "excess," Fleabag insists on shifting the parameters of the conversation from the individual to society. Her punching Martin sparks a chain-reaction of violence and chaos, signifying her problematisation of the body *social* rather than the embodied individual. Thereafter, Fleabag

walking through the city with a nosebleed to show for the evening foregrounds trauma despite, as Claire outlined earlier, neoliberalism's insistence that it be "bottle[d]" and internalised.

This unravelling of neoliberal "institutionalised individualism" is particularly powerful for women (Allison Phipps 2014, 13), leading to Claire's increased identification with her body. In the final episode of Series Two, Claire and Fleabag's stepmother introduces her "surrogate" friend to Fleabag as "my unstable stepdaughter who's had a miscarriage." Despite her previous disavowal of bodily excess, Claire at once undercuts the implied problematisation of Fleabag's "unstable" body and reclaims her own body, interrupting that it was her miscarriage (Waller-Bridge 2016). As such, the recognition that Fleabag is not a problem-site comes in tandem with others' re-embodiment. In Fleabag's father's assertion that "You're not the way you are because of me. You're the way you are because of her. And it's those bits you need to cling to," the mother is re-asserted into the conversation, forging a path forward for female embodiment (Waller-Bridge 2016). As Fleabag walks her father up the aisle, she has transitioned from being the body onto which people project their "failures" and "excesses" to being both a physical and mental support and a *connective* body.

In conclusion, this shift is completely distinct from the dogma of neoliberal self-transformation. Fleabag has not transformed herself. Rather, she has taught those around her to re-frame "excess" as the ability to love—as her father affirms, "I think you know how to love better than any of us. That's why you find it all so painful" (Waller-Bridge 2016). Through her own shortcomings, Fleabag stands as an example of openness against closed individualism, demonstrating that neoliberal society, in pitting embodiment and success against one another, is inviting women to "participate in [something which is] at the same time refusing them," all the while "introducing even more exacting terms and conditions" (Angela McRobbie 2015, 8). It has been argued that neoliberal culture can be normalised by a "postmodern aesthetic of parody, pastiche and irony which serves as a useful escape clause against the claims of sexism, elitism, or gender essentialism" (Debbie Ging 2013, 211). However, *Fleabag*'s sardonic depiction of a society steeped in neoliberal dogma serves, not to obscure the harms of neoliberalism, but to foreground and critique them. This paper has focused on the guarding and challenging of borders pertaining to the female psyche and body throughout the series; however, it is also worth mentioning that Waller Bridge's performance and screen writing also have implications for a discussion on the neoliberal doctrine of self-containment. One of the most unusual aspects of *Fleabag* as a T.V. drama is the frequent breaking of the fourth wall—Fleabag frequently addresses the audience directly, sharing speech and expressions with viewers that are not visible to the other characters. This tactic is perhaps carried on from the show's genesis as a one-woman theatre performance—this unusual confrontation of the audience serves a political purpose. If bodily boundaries are breached in the series' assault on neoliberal values, then the involvement of the audience sparks solidarity between Fleabag as an agent of change and the viewer, refusing to let the audience remain unpoliticized observers. If individualization and atomization facilitate neoliberalism's "unpicking [of the] seams of connection" (Angela McRobbie 2009, 26–7), Fleabag resists neoliberalism's "depoliticising" "turn to interiority" by forging connection with characters and viewers alike (Phipps 2014, 35).

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