

# COMPENSATORY CULTURES: POST-2008 CLIMATE MECHANISMS FOR CRISIS TIMES

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**Abstract:** This paper charts emerging scholarship on what I conceptualise as ‘compensatory cultures’; cultures that are, in essence, compensatory responses to crisis, but are presented and received as desirable, even preferable ways of organising life. Since the 2008 crash, precarity has become a new normal and a dominant structure-of-feeling in the global north. I argue that compensatory cultures alleviate precarity’s affective impacts, enabling ‘business as usual’, yet do so in ways that perpetuate that precarity and the conditions that reproduce it. I survey literature on compensatory urbanisms, compensatory labour and compensatory consumption; demonstrating the compensatory as a pervasive mechanism operating across various cultural settings in the post-recession, austerity context. The work explored reveals compensatory cultures as central in remaking places, structuring social relations and producing meaning in crisis times.

**Keywords:** precarity, austerity, mumpreneurs

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## INTRODUCTION

There is broad consensus that we are living in precarious times. The effects of the 2008 financial crash are still felt globally and have been entrenched and exacerbated by austerity measures. Inequality is rising, labour insecurity is worsening and welfare is continually retracted. The housing crisis is also intensifying, especially in major cities of the Global North like San Francisco and London. Economic insecurity has been coupled with political turbulence, including the capricious presidency of Donald Trump in America and the chaos ensuing from the UK’s vote to leave the European Union. The spectre of the, now inevitable, effects of climate change adds to this picture of volatility and decline. In this context, scholars have explored precarity as a new normal and a dominant structure-of-feeling in the Global North.<sup>1</sup> Precarity has long been an acknowledged feature of labour economies but is now identified as a definitive characteristic of almost all aspects of life under austerity and recession.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, myself and colleagues have argued that precarity is culturally, as well as socially and economically, entrenched.<sup>3</sup> An important aspect of precarity’s reproduction, and this paper’s focus, is the emergence of what I term ‘compensatory cultures’; cultures that mediate and make sense of

1. Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, Durham, Ashgate, 2014.

2. Hannah Lewis, Peter Dwyer, Stuart Hodkinson, ‘Hyper-precarious lives: Migrants, work and forced labour in the Global North’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 39, 5, 2014, pp580-600.

3. Ella Harris and Mel Nowicki, ‘Cultural geographies of precarity’, *Cultural Geographies*, 25, 3, 2018, pp387-391.

precarity yet do so in ways that normalise and exacerbate it. Scholars are now exploring these cultures; examining how people make sense of their diminishing opportunities after 2008 through ways of living and working that compensate for those no longer feasible. Importantly, this work recognises how compensatory ways of living and working are not always straightforwardly experienced as deteriorations but can be invested with enthusiasm and optimism. In crisis times people have always engaged compensatory mechanisms. Homeless families use ad-hoc decorative strategies to make compensatory homes in hotel rooms,<sup>4</sup> volunteers run libraries closed by funding cuts<sup>5</sup> and food banks serve as potentially ‘placatory’ devices, a sticking plaster over the withdrawal of welfare support.<sup>6</sup> However, distinctive to the work explored here is its focus on cultures that are not (or at least not only) presented as compensatory but become desirable, even preferable, ways of organising life. I bring together this emerging work to demonstrate a growing scholarly interest in cultures that compensate for, glamorise and ultimately perpetuate precarious conditions under recession and austerity.

## DEFINING COMPENSATORY CULTURES

My use of the term ‘compensatory’ is inspired by Fran Tonkiss’s description of how makeshift creative places in the ‘post-crisis city’ offer ‘a kind of compensatory or diversionary urbanism in the face of political retreat and economic recession’.<sup>7</sup> Tonkiss uses the term ‘compensatory’ in passing to describe temporary urbanisms as a better-than-nothing scenario at times of crisis. Here, I develop and extend the term to show how, beyond temporary urbanisms, many post-crisis cultures can be understood as ‘compensatory’ and to draw out their functions and impacts. Important in Tonkiss’ description is the alignment of compensatory with diversionary. Rather than being recognised as deteriorations, these are cultures that offer a *diversion* that to some extent muffles precarity’s effects. True to both meanings of the word diversion, these cultures must therefore be, at least to some degree, appealing and enjoyable.

Culture has been conceived as ‘the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted’ and the means by which meaning is produced, negotiated and resisted by dominant and subcultural groups.<sup>8</sup> Speaking to this, I consider compensatory cultures as arena where meanings are being produced and negotiated in the post-crisis landscape, specifically exploring how they restore dominant neoliberal values after the crash. Culture can be an expression of ‘power and consent’; can be ‘enrolled into the establishment of a particular kind of common sense’ (p65). If crises like that of 2008 are ‘moments of potential change’ in which society can ‘move on to another version of the same thing’ or ‘to a somewhat transformed version’ then I consider compensatory cultures as modes of restoring and perpetuating neoliberal values while transforming the cultures that embody

4. Mel Nowicki, Katherine Brickell, Ella Harris, ‘The hotelisation of the housing crisis: Experiences of family homelessness in Dublin hotels’, *The Geographical Journal*, 185, 3, 2019. (Hereafter *Hotelisation*).

5. Kirsten Forkert, *Austerity as Public Mood: Social Anxieties and Social Struggles*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

6. Paul Cloke, Jon May, Andrew Williams ‘The geographies of food banks in the meantime’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 41, 6, 2017, pp703-726.

7. Fran Tonkiss ‘Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city’, *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 17, 3, 2013, pp312-324, p1, 6. (Hereafter *Austerity Urbanism*).

8. Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson, ‘New directions in cultural geography’, *Area*, 19, 2, 1987, pp95-110, p65.

9. Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, 'Interpreting the crisis', *Soundings*, 44, 2010, pp57-71, p.57.

10. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, Birmingham, Routledge, 1991.

11. Ella Harris, Mel Nowicki and Katherine Brickell, 'On-edge in the impasse: Inhabiting the housing crisis as structure-of-feeling', *Geoforum*, 101, 2019, pp156-164.

12. Karl Marx, 'Introduction to critique of Hegel's philosophy of right', Online, Marxists.org, 1970.

them.<sup>9</sup> Equally, compensatory cultures resonate with recognitions of culture as the means by which social relations and identities are structured and understood.<sup>10</sup> As the paper will consider, compensatory cultures can reproduce social inequalities at a time when precarity is increasingly felt across social groups, and be an arena in which social identities impacted by crisis and austerity are remade.

Tracing the compensatory as a mechanism operating across diverse cultural settings, the paper explores three clusters of examples. I start with compensatory urbanisms, including pop-up culture and compensatory forms of housing like property guardianship and micro-living. Secondly, I explore compensatory labour cultures, including blue-collar work within hipster culture and the rise of 'mumpreneurs' as well as the emergence of fitness cultures and branding motifs that compensate for stunted vocational opportunities. Thirdly, I examine compensatory consumption. I consider the consumption cultures of millennials and examine how 'austerity chic' makes thrift appealing while encouraging continued consumption. Considering these arenas together demonstrates the compensatory as a now pervasive mechanism that operates in diverse cultural settings to remake places and modes of inhabiting them at a time of turbulence.

The concept of compensatory cultures enables an articulation of what is common across the examples explored in this paper. I argue that the compensatory cultures considered all generate modes of encountering precarity that make it palatable. This is not necessarily a totalising (re) imagination. As I and colleagues have explored elsewhere, experiences of precarity can persist despite and, in the midst of, the projection of positive imaginaries.<sup>11</sup> However, I show how compensatory cultures can allow subjects to continue with precarious ways of life and even make them appealing. As well as surveying existing examples of cultures that can be deemed compensatory, I also call for more nuanced investigations of the relational politics of such cultures. While most emerging scholarship on compensatory cultures focuses on how the middle-classes make sense of declining quality of life, it is important to consider how compensatory cultures function for other demographics and mediate encounters between different groups.

Scholarship on compensatory cultures is prefigured by a long lineage of thought on the role of culture in disseminating and maintaining dominant political ideologies in the face of unpalatable working and living conditions. This includes Marx's well-known proclamation of religion as an 'opium of the people'; a diversion from conditions that would otherwise be untenable. In the mid-twentieth-century cultural theorists explored how culture propagates and naturalises dominant ideologies while perpetuating dehumanising labour economies. This anticipates the mechanisms of contemporary compensatory cultures in many ways. For example, as we will see, some compensatory cultures do, as Marx argues of religion, primarily function by distracting people from harsh conditions with a kind of 'illusionary happiness'.<sup>12</sup> Like

Barthes' cultural 'myths' in the 1950s, compensatory cultures also naturalise concepts that are historically constructed and instrumental in a particular socio-economic climate.<sup>13</sup>

However, elements of contemporary compensatory cultures are also distinctive to the contemporary context. Compensatory cultures function, predominantly, not through distraction from dire conditions, as Marx argues of religion, but by rebranding those conditions themselves. Adorno and Horkheimer note that twentieth-century culture still promotes and advertises 'unattainable' goods, even in war time, 'merely to keep industrial power in view'.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, compensatory cultures promote the ways of living that *do* seem attainable in crisis times. For example, while Barthes describes how 'fancy decorations' within ornamental cooking distract from the unaffordability of expensive meals, compensatory food cultures, as we'll see, glamorise cheaper cooking methods rather than distracting from them (*Mythologies*, p79). While distraction, and displacements of enthusiasm, are an element of compensatory cultures the dominant compensatory mechanism is resignification; an overlaying of positive imaginaries onto reduced circumstances.

Relatedly, compensatory cultures operate by perpetuating faith in the vanishing comforts of everyday life, rather than by encouraging investment in fantasies. If cultures previously promised an 'illusory' spectacle of a better life then, in compensatory cultures, the promised world is no longer Hollywood style fantasies but the old every-day (*Dialectic*, p139). Post-crash cultures reassure us that nothing has fundamentally changed, despite stark evidence to the contrary. Connectedly, if twentieth-century cultures kept people working in systems that repressed them but, generally speaking, functioned on their own terms, and for particular elite groups, compensatory cultures belong to an era of 'zombie capitalism'. They keep people attached to what are arguably dead-systems-walking by naturalising the failure of those systems; for example by maintaining the primacy of aspirational consumerism while reimagining ideal consumption as involving thrift and frugality.

To understand the stakes of compensatory cultures it is useful to place the concept in proximity to Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism'; an orientation to the world that exists when 'the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially'.<sup>15</sup> While not all instances of cruel optimism involve compensatory mechanisms, most compensatory mechanisms contain an orientation of cruel optimism. This is because the investment of optimism in them can preclude or dampen motivations to change the negative conditions they compensate for.

Compensatory cultures also need to be considered in relation to recent work on public moods.<sup>16</sup> They shed light on the complexity of how different moods interact, showing how anxiety, precarity or uncertainty arising from crisis conditions can be disguised or alleviated by hope and enthusiasm, moods that co-exist with and can be attached to those same conditions. If precarity is now

13. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. London, Jonathan Cape, 1972. (Hereafter *Mythologies*).

14. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York, Herder and Herder, 1944. p162. (Hereafter *Dialectic*).

15. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, p1.

16. Sarah Ahmed, 'Not in the mood' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture, Theory, Politics*, 82, 2014, pp13-28.

a dominant structure of feeling then compensatory cultures demonstrate how that public mood can be transmuted by affects and imaginaries that distract from precarity and/or rebrand precarious conditions as positive.

Understanding the prevalence and impacts of these compensatory cultures, by tracing the multiple arenas they operate across, is crucial to understanding the contemporary condition. It sheds light on how and why life continues, seemingly blindly, in the face of crisis. Many have noted with bemusement the desire, in the post-2008 context, to carry on with business as usual.<sup>17</sup> It seems we would rather ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ or, more vacuously, ‘Keep Calm and Eat a Cupcake’ than acknowledge the radical failure of the neoliberal capitalist system.<sup>18</sup> The compliance of publics is often explained by reference to how anger and fear can find a home in government led narratives that blame crisis and austerity on welfare claimants and immigrants, thus distracting from systemic failures. However, it is clear that precarity is accepted and perpetuated, not just by instrumentalising negative emotions, but also through investments of hope in practices or imaginaries that compensate for, and thereby mute the affective dimensions of, crisis conditions. Understanding compensatory cultures is therefore essential to understanding the conditions that perpetuate precarity. In particular, the paper teases out four key functions of compensatory cultures in relation to precarity’s reproduction, examining how precarity is entrenched by compensatory cultures, how compensatory cultures mediate changing identities and positionalities under crisis, how compensatory cultures prop up and resuscitate neoliberal capitalism and the orientation of cruel optimism within compensatory cultures.

17. Will Davies ‘Exit from nightmare: will davies on economic science fictions’, London, Novara Media, 2018.

18. Tom Whyman ‘Beware of cupcake fascism’ *The Guardian*, 2014.

## COMPENSATORY URBANISMS

Much scholarship on cities since the 2008 crash has focused on compensatory place-making. As Peck explores, cities are changing as ‘austerity urbanisms’ defined by lack, closure and uncertainty emerge.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Hitchen and Shaw have examined the ‘shrinking world’ generated by austerity; a shrinkage manifest both in deteriorations of mental health, as horizons and aspirations contract, and in the ‘disappearing of social infrastructure’, including ‘public libraries, swimming pools, community centres, public parks, street lights, road maintenance, and adult social care’.<sup>20</sup> Alongside this, other work focuses on ‘compensatory urbanisms’ that have emerged amidst this landscape, responding to the post recessionary landscape of fractures and gaps to offer ad-hoc alternatives.

One kind of place-making developed in the aftermath of the crash is pop-up culture. Pop-up has received attention for both responding to and entrenching urban precarity.<sup>21</sup> Pop-up is a trend for temporary and mobile place-making that emerged from the prevalence of vacant sites in large cities during the recession. Sites were left vacant as businesses shut down

19. Jamie Peck, ‘Austerity urbanism, American cities under extreme economy’, *City*, 16, 6, 2012, pp626-655.

20. Esther Hitchen and Ian Shaw, ‘Shrinking worlds: austerity and depression’ *Antipode Online*, 2019.

21. Claire Colomb, ‘Pushing the Urban Frontier: Temporary Uses of Space, City Marketing, and the Creative City’, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 34, 2, 2012, pp131-152.

and developments ground to a halt. In London 10 per cent of commercial property was allegedly vacant in 2009.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, funding cuts left charities and creative groups without capital. Pop-up became a solution to these combined circumstances. It was promoted as a way to occupy sites while also providing free or cheap space to creative groups, charities and small businesses. In 2009, the introduction of the ‘Meanwhile Use Lease Contract’ gave owners of vacant properties in the UK exemption from business rates if they loaned their premises temporarily to non-profit groups.

Pop-up is an archetypal ‘compensatory urbanism’. It developed because usual, preferred organisations of space had failed and yet quickly became actively desirable, both for consumers and stakeholders. Its origins in recession are now often forgotten as pop-up is positioned as a fashionable kind of place-making that can transform urban sites and add dynamism to high streets. Big brands like Nike and Selfridges now routinely run pop-up stores and pop-up shipping container malls, filled with a mix of established brands and small businesses, abound in London and other creative cities like Berlin, New York and Melbourne. Container malls were initially designed to be cheap and fast to construct on land that needed immediate regeneration and/or was only temporarily available, as, for example, with the container mall ‘Re-Start’ erected in Christchurch after the commercial centre was destroyed by an earthquake in 2011.<sup>23</sup> Now, though, container malls have acquired a ‘cult status’.<sup>24</sup> Boyel has examined the transformation of container aesthetics, arguing that, once associated with ‘prisons for the poor’ – used as detention centres, jails, and vessels for refugees – containers have been re-signified as settings for aspirational work and leisure, as in container malls and container hotels, cafes and restaurants.<sup>25</sup>

Pop-up reimagines the spatial and temporal markers of precarity as positive; overlaying imaginaries of flexibility, surprise, immersion and interstitiality onto a landscape of uncertainty, insecurity, disorientation and fractures.<sup>26</sup> This re-imagining of the ‘shrinking’ spaces of austerity normalises the precarity of contemporary cities by enabling it to be encountered as intentional and congenial. Pop-up’s vision of uncertainty as creative and dynamic also inspires an investment of enthusiasm, on behalf of those who ‘pop-up’, in situations that only entrench their own precarity. As Ferreri and Graziano outline, pop-up tenants invest enthusiasm in pop-up places, which they see as exciting venues to work in, despite simultaneously being aware that their efforts primarily benefit landlords by increasing footfall and re-attracting long-term commercial investment,<sup>27</sup> ironically undermining their own claims to space. Tardiveau and Mallo likewise identify temporary use as a ‘locus of displacement’ where the energies of current users and the agendas of owners and future users are in conflict.<sup>28</sup> However, rather than this leading creative groups to avoid temporary spaces, pop-up has become aspirational within the creative and cultural industries. As both Ferreri and Graziano, and Mould have argued, pop-up has been embraced by creative communities as

22. Savills World Research, *Review and Outlook*, London, Savills World Research, 2014.

23. Craig Martin, *Shipping Container*, New York, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

24. Han Slawik, J. Bergmann, M. Buchmeier, Patrick Sheehan, *Container Atlas: A Practical Guide to Container Architecture*, Berlin, Gestalten, 2010.

25. Shane Boyel, ‘Container aesthetics: The infrastructural politics of shunt’s The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face’, *Theatre Journal*, 68, 1, 2016, pp57-77.

26. Ella Harris, *Crisis Times, Pop-up Logics: The Precarious City Rebranded*, London, Zed Books, 2020.

27. Mara Ferreri and Valeria Graziano, ‘Passion without objects: Young graduates and the politics of temporary art spaces’, *Recherches Sociologiques et anthropologiques*, 2, 2014, pp83-102. (Hereafter *Passion without Objects*).

28. Armelle Tardiveau and Daniel Mallo, ‘Unpacking and challenging habitus: An approach to temporary urbanism as a socially engaged practice’, *Journal of Urban Design*, 19, 4, pp456-472.

29. Oli Mould, 'Tactical urbanism: the new vernacular of the creative city' *Geography Compass*, 8, 8, 2014, pp529-539.

30. Mara Ferreri, Gloria Dawson and Alex Vasudevan, 'Living precariously: property guardianship and the flexible city' *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers*, 42, 2, 2017, pp246-259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12162>.

31. Lauren Ro, 'Affordable living modules are coming to London's vacant buildings', [www.curbed.com](http://www.curbed.com), 2017.

temporariness has become almost synonymous with creativity.<sup>29</sup> In this way, pop-up normalises the idea that some claims to space should be provisional and temporary and, furthermore, mobilises the efforts of those groups towards regenerations that entail their own displacement.

Compensatory urbanisms also include compensatory housing. Amid a worsening housing crisis, emerging work on compensatory housing charts how, rather than finding solutions to the housing crisis, insecure housing is being reimagined. Alongside forms of housing that are clearly inadequate responses to crisis, such as the 'beds in sheds' phenomenon (the conversion of garden sheds into precarious rental accommodation) or Hong Kong's sinister 'coffin cubicles' (fifteen square foot boxes rented in subdivided flats), there are compensatory housing cultures that similarly involve reductions in size, quality and security of tenure but are overlaid with positive imaginaries, making them actively appeal to potential occupants.

Property guardianship is one form of home-making that employs resignification as a compensatory mechanism. Property guardianship, as most thoroughly explored by Ferreri, Dawson and Vasudevan,<sup>30</sup> is both a form of housing tenure and a low-cost security service. Businesses have introduced: schemes that provide low-cost security of vacant buildings and protect them from squatting and vandalism. At the same time, the schemes enable individuals to find temporary accommodation in properties otherwise considered unsuitable for rent (p246).

As Ferreri et al. describe, property guardianship has been promoted as an 'adventurous' and 'flexible' lifestyle. It appeals to young people by mobilising the aesthetic cultures of squatting, even while its role is explicitly to prevent squatters entering properties. They examine the precarity of property guardianship, which often involves living in badly maintained places lacking basic amenities such as heating or water, and provides tenants with short-term contracts that can give merely days to vacate. Property guardianship has become a comparatively viable way for young people to live in central urban locations, given the prohibitive price of rent and implausibility of home ownership. It is clearly a compensatory solution to the housing crisis and yet has been reimagined as desirable to the extent that young people will 'self-precariatise', electing to live in this insecure form of housing. Ferrari and Dawson cite offers from property guardianship companies of a way to live in 'unusual' places and meet interesting people as well as the imaginaries that property guardians themselves bolster of property guardianships as 'stimulating', 'quirky' and 'liberating'(p432).

Property guardianship thereby rebrands insecure living arrangements, paradoxically presenting precarious housing as a solution to housing precarity. This irony is neatly encapsulated by a development called 'SHED' by one Property guardianship company; a wooden shed that can be placed into particularly decrepit buildings to make liveable bedrooms for tenants. SHED has been credited as a way to 'address the affordable housing crisis'.<sup>31</sup> Its

promotion as a housing crisis solution is astonishing given the moral panic around the 'beds in sheds' phenomenon as a pinnacle of housing precarity in the UK. Here, as characteristic of compensatory cultures, the problem and solution become one and the same; beds in sheds are identified as part of a crisis in housing, and yet SHED, which literally provides a bed in a shed, is pitched as the solution.

While property guardianship glamorises erratic temporalities of housing access, other forms of compensatory housing glamorise the shrinkage of living space under the housing crisis<sup>32</sup>. In 2015, the New Ideas for Housing competition run by New London Architecture collated proposals for 'intimate infrastructures' as a response to the housing crisis, encouraging living-spaces to 'GET SMALLER!'.<sup>33</sup> Termed 'micro-living', there has been a wave of investment into living-spaces that don't conform to minimum space standards including self-contained properties and co-living-spaces, aimed at single adults.<sup>34</sup> In January 2019 the Adam Smith Institute called for minimum space standards in London to be scrapped to enable micro-living to become a significant part of London's housing economy. Companies like 'Pocket Living' or 'Bicbloc' are already offering flats as small as eighteen square metres for those struggling to get on the housing ladder and there has been a surge in rented, dormitory style, co-living-spaces aimed at young professionals, like 'Tribe Co-Living' or 'The Collective'. Micro-living is also taking off in European cities; there is currently a waiting list to rent 'cabins', some just three square metres, with access to communal spaces in developments by the company Haibu in Barcelona and Paris.

Many micro-living developments also integrate co-working spaces. If 'flexible, temporary and volatile jobs...encourage unstable living conditions' then co-working and living-spaces are seen to counter this by finding security in collectivity. Co-living buildings have a range of shared socialising and working spaces (anticipating freelance work situations and desires of residents to 'network') as well as small private units; cultivating a space that 'enables varying relations based in living and labour'.<sup>35</sup> If, traditionally, anti-capitalist versions of co-living have offered respite from capitalist labour cultures then co-living, as a commodified, corporate co-option of this lineage, instead normalises and enables the precarity of neoliberal work, including its conflation of labour and domestic space-times. The Collective, for example, provides work spaces that can be used 'day or night' by those with 'unpredictable schedules' as well as social sites where 'profession development' and networking opportunities can arise between residents.<sup>36</sup> Here, what are clearly conditions of crisis, a housing market so unaffordable that minimum space-standards are being sacrificed and an epidemic of labour precarity so entrenched that housing has had to adapt to make labour viable, are reimagined as progressive forms of housing that speak to young people's desired lifestyles. As the website for 'Town Flats', a planned development by U&i PLC, claims, micro-living 'fits in with the way in which people's lives

32. Ella Harris and Mel Nowicki, 'GET SMALLER? New geographies of micro-living', *Area* (Forthcoming)

33. New London Architecture, *New Ideas for Housing*, London, 2015

34. British Property Federation, *Micro Living Defined*, [www.bpf.org.uk](http://www.bpf.org.uk)

35. Neeraj Bhatia and Antje Steimmüller, *Spatial Models for the Domestic Commons*, Berlin, ifau, 2018, p124.

36. [www.thecollective.com](http://www.thecollective.com).

37. [www.uandiplc.com](http://www.uandiplc.com).

38. Krista Evans, 'Integrating tiny and small homes into the urban landscape: History, land use barriers and potential solutions' *Journal of Geography and Regional Planning* 11, 3, 2018, pp34-45.

39. Jasmine Ford and Lilia Gomez-Lanier, 'Are tiny homes here to stay? A review of literature on the tiny homes movement', *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 45, 4, 2017, pp394-405, p400. (Hereafter *Tiny House Movement*).

40. April Anson, "'The world is my backyard": Romanticisation, Thoreauvian rhetoric and constructive confrontation in the Tiny House Movement', *Research in Urban Sociology*, 14, 2014, pp289-313.

are evolving...[including] people's increasing desire to have fewer things and take up less space'.<sup>37</sup> Framing micro-living as an evolution, and omitting engagement with its negative implications, such as its impact on the ability of residents to have families, repositions this compensatory form of housing as innovative and prescient.

While micro-living has, as yet, received little scholarly attention it is a crucial topic of enquiry given its widespread promotion as a solution to housing crises. There is currently more published work on the similar 'tiny homes' movement.<sup>38</sup> Tiny homes, like micro-living, are small living-spaces. They 'occupy a grey area between trailer/mobile home/recreational vehicle and a house' and are often on wheels to sidestep the regulations applied to permanent residences.<sup>39</sup> Tiny homes are also narrativised as a response to desires for minimalism and decluttering while acknowledged as a response to issues of affordability and pressure on space in urban centres. Tiny homes are positioned as solutions for those concerned with environmental sustainability and connected to a tradition of simple, rural living.<sup>40</sup> Yet, ironically, tiny homes have 'become a part of popular culture, feeding into the consumerism trends they were supposed to deviate from' (*Tiny House Movement*, p402).

Ford and Gomez-Lanier highlight the rise of TV shows about tiny house building or buying, which position 'the tiny house movement as the new trend in consumerism' and a luxury product (p402). Again, a compensatory housing culture is reframed as a glamorous product and aspirational lifestyle.

While property guardianship and micro-living glamorise compensatory housing for (mostly) middle-class millennials, myself and colleagues have explored how compensatory housing for more marginalised groups can also be glamorised. Focusing on Lewisham Council's development PLACE/Ladywell, a block of modular, mobile social housing, we have examined how pop-up has been deployed as a format for housing homeless families. We argued that, at a time when permanent social housing is being retracted, the pop-up label, which celebrates ephemerality, is used to promote temporary social housing in ways that distract from the systemic dismantling of housing welfare while normalising the idea that social housing should be temporary. However, our research found that pop-up social housing has placatory functions not for residents themselves (who remain highly anxious about their housing situation) but for stakeholders who can feel like they are addressing rising levels of homelessness yet do so in ways that don't contest the neoliberal housing model.

Across the examples of compensatory urbanisms outlined it is clear that compensatory cultures further entrench the precarity they arise from. Pop-up normalises temporary and provisional apportioning of urban space to demographics whose activities are less financially profitable. Likewise, the ways property guardianship and micro-living repackage diminished quality, security and size of accommodation as desirable serves to shift expectations of the kinds of housing people should accept.

Work on compensatory labour cultures considers how diminished vocational aspirations have been navigated through emerging work cultures that overlay positive imaginaries onto changes in work types and patterns. Relatedly, Hakim's work on the fashionability of muscularity has demonstrated how other cultures, here gym culture, can distract from dwindling career prospects so that searches for value are displaced down alternative paths. In this section, I outline explorations of two reimagined work cultures – the rebranding of blue-collar work within the craft economy and the glamorisation of freelance labour done by stay-at-home mums, before exploring Hakim's work on the diversionary function of gym cultures. There is increasing interest in how aesthetics and imaginaries within craft economies and hipster culture make blue-collar labour palatable for middle-class people disenfranchised by the recession. As Ocejo explores, young, educated middle-class people are increasingly taking what would previously have been 'bad' jobs.<sup>41</sup> These are jobs like bar and café work and small scale manufacturing, that are unstable, precarious and require workers to 'get their hands dirty, stand on their feet all day, do heavy lifting, sweat and deal with various splashes, spills and stains' as well as to 'engage in emotional labour'(p17). Morgan and Nelligan have argued that the stretching of the term 'creative' as a branding that can be applied to almost any occupation, including 'home decorating, hair dressing and gardening' as well as cooking, persuades people denied fulfilment in other kinds of work to enthusiastically take on such roles.<sup>42</sup>

Luckman examines how a recalibration of taste on behalf of consumers accompanies and drives this uptake of 'bad' jobs by the middle-classes. She writes that 'the mechanical tools of the industrial age are ready to be re-signified as bespoke when used on a small-scale, artisanal level producing quality items for a growing 'discerning' middle-class audience'.<sup>43</sup> The resignification of the products of blue-collar labour as craft products also repositions that labour itself so that despite such jobs being low paid and physically and emotionally strenuous they are deemed valuable. As Ojeco frames it, jobs like barbering, cocktail making and light manufacturing, when figured through imaginaries of craft and artisanality are seen as 'among the new elite'(Masters of Craft, p5). Crucially, this allows workers to pursue such careers 'without experiencing them as downward social mobility' (p5). Rather than recognising these roles as compensatory forms of labour at a time of reduced vocational opportunities, they experience them as jobs that give pleasure.

In pre-crash cities, the promotion of 'creativity' – driven by the creative city discourses of Landry and Florida – led workers to embrace menial and administrative roles within creative industries on the conviction that 'being there' – in the milieu of creative production – would enable a breakthrough (*Creativity Hoax*, p105).<sup>44</sup> However, while in these circumstances

41. Richard Ocejo, *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2017. (Hereafter *Masters of Craft*).

42. George Morgan and Pariece Nelligan, *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work and the Gig Economy*, London and New York, Anthem Press, 2018, p106. (Hereafter *Creativity Hoax*).

43. Susan Luckman, *Craft and the Creative Economy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.xiii-xiv. (Hereafter *Craft and the Creative Economy*).

44. Charles Landry, *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, Abingdon and New York, Earthscan, 2008; Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class*, New York, London, Routledge, 2004. (Hereafter *Cities*).

workers stomach unfulfilling roles because of the promise of future career opportunities, the compensatory culture of craft economy work does not hold a particular promise for the future but instead reimagines the current reality of precarious and menial 'bad jobs' as desirable.

For Morgan and Nelligan, creative work appeals to those 'long denied any semblance of vocational fulfilment' because such roles seem to offer relief from the meaninglessness of Taylorism or to enable participation in artistic, subcultural or resistive practices excluded within other labour models. Dissatisfaction with 'bullshit' jobs – jobs which even those who do them can see little value or purpose in – is heightened in the ongoing aftermath of the 2008 crash.<sup>45</sup> This is in part because of a loss of conviction in the integrity of the capitalist system. It is also because of a loss of faith, on a personal level, in 'conventional lines of social mobility', a realisation that career paths positioned as offering financial and/or cultural progress no longer guarantee that at all (p109). In this context, the myth of creativity is infused into varying vocations, allowing them to offer an ostensible antidote to the vapidity and self-interest of neoliberal labour cultures.

As well as a revaluing of the products of blue-collar labour, Ocejo and Luckman both explore how the work process itself is infused with meaning, in imagined opposition to 'bullshit' jobs and the greed of big business. They show that imaginaries of environmentalism are attached to craft production, which, operating on a small scale, can be seen as less wasteful than mass production. Creative work, as Gill has explored, is also imagined as more inclusive of diversity, despite the reality of huge inequalities within the creative industries, where women, LGBT, and non-white people are under-represented.<sup>46</sup> Equally, meaningfulness is, Ocejo argues, attached to the shared nature of the spaces where this kind of work takes place; communities of small businesses occupying markets, shipping container malls or co-working buildings who gather around a desire for a community in opposition to the soulless, impersonal version of capitalism symbolised by office work. For Morgan and Nelligan, this kind of work at least allows people to feel that they haven't bought into the 'spiel' of employers or 'conscripted' their souls 'to rationalise a long period of tertiary study and incurring debt' (*Creativity Hoax*, p109).

The meanings of creativity in compensatory labour cultures depart somewhat from the 'creative cities' discourses prevalent at the turn of the twenty-first century, before the crash. For Richard Florida, the 'creative class' was defined loosely as anyone engaged in 'creative problem-solving', valorising many forms of corporate work, including 'financial services...and business management' as well as artistic vocations deemed to drive economic growth (*Cities*, p8). In the post-crash climate, creativity is instead increasingly connected to imaginaries of simpler times before the advent of corporate economies, including to histories of small scale manufacturing.

The craft economy work performed in Chelsea Market in New York, as

45. David Graeber, 'On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs: A work rant', [www.strike.coop](http://www.strike.coop), 2013

46. Rosalind Gill, 'Unspeakable inequalities: post-feminism, entrepreneurial subjectivity, and the repudiation of sexism among cultural workers' *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 21, 4, 2014, pp509-528. (Hereafter *Unspeakable Inequalities*).

portrayed by Ocejó, associates itself with historical forms of urban production and commerce where people are invited to ‘experience the industrial past through a lens of modern urban consumerism (*Masters of Craft*, p2)’. The shop designs are reminiscent of a time when small scale industry took place in Global North cities like New York or London, before the global shift undid this industrial economy and brought with it the complexities of contemporary capitalism. Luckman also argues that the desire for jobs that involve making, cooking, knitting, growing, repairing and small scale craft betray a longing for retreat into the domestic and the DIY which she, quoting Crawford, suggests is about the need for the world to feel intelligible, for people ‘to recover a field of vision that is basically human in scale, and extricate themselves from dependence on the obscure forces of a global economy (*Craft and the Creative Economy*, p41). For Luckman, the growing prominence of the hipster aesthetic and craft sensibility can be explained as, in part, a reaction to the financial crash; ‘successfully making something offers the sense of unequivocal achievement missing in the lives of many white-collar professionals’ and, at the same time, speaks to the burden newly ‘placed on the individual to create their own employment options as part of the wider project of fashioning the conditions of their own life’ (p44). We can therefore see hipster aesthetics and the ethos of the craft economy as a way of narrativising experiences of crisis and making compensatory forms of labour appealing. This is not to say that meaning and value cannot be contained within these work cultures, but that it is important to locate this shift as a compensatory practice – and to explore the meanings attached to the craft economy as, in part, ways of making sense of diminishing options and loss of faith in the promises of corporate culture.

Another labour culture identified as compensatory is ‘mumpreneurship’. The figure of the mumpreneur is a specific characterisation of women with children who do freelance work from home. These women are celebrated as entrepreneurial business-women who tend to work in areas related to domesticity or childcare; making luxury domestic goods, food, toiletries or providing products and services for babies and children.<sup>47</sup> As scholars including Jo Littler, Shani Orgad and Roberta Garret have argued, mumpreneurship has intensified since the recession firstly as mumpreneurs are ‘often public sector workers that have either been pushed or opted to take redundancy in the wake of coalition cuts to public services’ and secondly in that ‘many of the services they provide, particularly in the area of franchised playgroups...or basic advice on children’s health and safety are moving into the space vacated by dwindling public services (Garrett, n.d.)’. Within these circumstances, mumpreneurship allegedly allows women to provide their own childcare while pursuing desirable careers. Mumpreneurship is also part of a wider shift towards self-employment driven by recession, including ‘forced’ and ‘sham’ self-employment, by which people are pushed into self-employed status because of unemployment and sub-contracting.<sup>48</sup>

47. Roberta Garrett, ‘Austerity Culture and the Myth of the Mumpreneur’ [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

48. Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, p185.

49. Sarah Marie Hall, 'Everyday ethics of consumption in the austere city' *Geography Compass*, 9, 3, 2015, pp140-151, p146.

50. Friedan in Shani Orgad, *Heading Home: Motherhood, Work and the Failed Promise of Equality*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, p142.

51. Roberta Garrett, 'Austerity Culture and the Myth of the Mumpreneur' [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

In this context, the characterisation of mumpreneurial work as aspirational, including self-characterisation via social media, can be seen as a glamorisation of compensatory forms of work and service provision that have disproportionately impacted on women. The figure of the mumpreneur reclassifies adjustments to diminishing economic circumstances as business-minded innovation. The 'step back into the home [for women] in times of austerity' is presented as desirable, while clearly evidence of the retrogressive impacts of austerity on gender equality.<sup>49</sup> For Orgad, mumpreneurship is comparable to strategies that 1960s housewives found to cope with the oppression and dissatisfaction of being confined to the home, strategies like dying one's hair blonde' or 'having another baby'; diversions in an otherwise unliveable situation.<sup>50</sup> Investment in the ideals of mumpreneurship by women themselves lead them, she argues, to accept their marginalisation in the post-crash economy (p153). Mumpreneurship compensates for the relegation of women back to the home, naturalising 'the home as the locus of unequal labour' by rebranding it as an 'almost magical space; an ideal location for middle-class, creative labour' (p158). It also compensates for the fact that in the wake of the recession it is women, not men, who have been forced (back) into caregiving roles. Promoting mumpreneurship avoids the question of why 'caregiving continues to be...the primary responsibility of women' by assuring them that they can still pursue careers (p159). Here, again, we see the ironic branding of a problem as its own solution; mumpreneurship compensates for women being relegated to the home and childcare roles by promoting women spending more time in the home and on childcare related pursuits.

Furthermore, rather than invest hope in a future return to the work place, mumpreneurs are encouraged to be enthusiastic about staying at home, while self-precaritising in order to continue to contribute economically. If compensatory cultures have formerly provided unfulfilled workers with the promise of a better future, be that by working towards greater security or by winning the lotteries of fame and fortune compensatory cultures don't make such promises about the future, instead encouraging self-governing investment in the precarity of the present. This reflects the wider imperative in contemporary precarious labour cultures for the subject to be self-governing, creating a "'DIY biography" in conditions of radical uncertainty, which include the impossibility of imagining one's own future' (*Unspeakable Inequalities*, p516).

Those who cannot or will not invest optimism in present precarities are often shamed. The characterisation of mumpreneurs differentiates between a 'thrifty, no-nonsense' middle-class woman willing to 'do her bit' to get through austerity and the other 'figure of abject femininity which has also loomed large in the rhetoric of austerity: the scrounging 'chav' mum'. In contrast to the allegedly greedy 'chav' mum, mumpreneurs are 'responsible, self-sufficient individuals whose response to economic or personal catastrophe (e.g redundancy, caring for a disabled child) is to find ingenious ways to provide

for their families rather than relying on state handouts'.<sup>51</sup> The mumpreneur is, then, also a normative ideal that shames women who are not financially self-reliant while mediating the changing vocational opportunities and gender roles of middle-class women.

Banet-Weiser has similarly explored how rising un- and underemployment has been recast as an opportunity for individuals. She explores how, in America, post-recessional advertising cultures have turned crisis itself into a brand, reframing it as 'a destined quality of Americanness' within which individuals have new scope for self-discovery and innovation. Banet-Weiser makes these arguments in relation to two advertising campaigns, the 'Go Forth' campaign by Levis and an advert by the car company Chrysler. In relation to the Levis' campaign she explores how visual tropes of post-industrial wastelands alongside images evocative of virgin natural territories position crisis as an opportunity for people, especially men, to create their own prosperity, to 'Go Forth' within a landscape of crisis induced destitution that is reframed as a new American frontier. In her discussion of the Chrysler advert she examines its paradoxical use of the crisis conditions faced by Detroit (caused by the failures of the car manufacturing industry) to market Chrysler cars. The advert features Eminem and his hit track 'Lose Yourself', a motivational song that captures the precarity of life in poverty while insisting on the ability of the individual to take their 'one shot' opportunity to create a prosperous future. Banet-Weiser explores how a 'selective history' is deployed to make invisible the role of Chrysler in Detroit's crisis, as well as its own financial bailout, while not only putting the onus on individuals to make their own economic opportunities in the face of widespread unemployment, but glamorising the prospect by framing it as a heroic come-back.<sup>52</sup>

Banet-Weiser's analysis of the branding of the crisis in advertising cultures illuminates a trope that functions across compensatory cultures, of what she terms an 'a-historical abstraction'. She highlights the assertion in the Levis advert that 'things got broken here' as an abstraction that discourages the apportioning of blame and in doing so allows capitalism to use its own failure as a marketing mechanism. Reminiscent of Mark Fisher's claims that it is now impossible to imagine a world beyond capitalism,<sup>53</sup> Banet-Weiser's discussion highlights how crisis itself is re-signified as an entrepreneurial opportunity. In the UK context, Jensen has similarly traced a 'magical transformation of austerity [ensuing from recession], from an ideological assault on the welfare state into a positive opportunity for good citizens to embrace a leaner and more sustainable form of living' as well as the alleged opportunities of self-employment, such as mumpreneurship.<sup>54</sup>

As stated in the introduction, while most compensatory cultures primarily operate by re-imagining placatory solutions or adverse conditions as actively desirable, distraction from negative circumstances through investment in alternatives is also a feature. This includes Hakim's work on 'Fit' as the 'new Rich'. Hakim examines how middle-class white men have turned to the

52. Sarah Banet-Weiser, 'Branding the crisis' in M. Castells, J. Caraca and G. Gardoso (eds) *Aftermath: The Cultures of the Economic Crisis*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp107-131

53. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?*, Alresford, Zero Books, 2009

54. Tracey Jensen, *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-blame*, Bristol and Chicago, Policy Press, 2018, p.125. (Hereafter *Parenting the Crisis*).

pursuit of fitness and muscularity at a time when vocational opportunities are dwindling. A fixation on fitness, and on self-representation via 'healthies' (fitness related selfies) on social media, has arisen since 2008 and offers an 'insight into some of the complex and contradictory feelings that arise among young people living in the austerity moment' as well as into why neoliberalism has remained hegemonic despite the crash.<sup>55</sup> Hakim writes that:

55. Jamie Hakim, 'Fit is the new rich': male embodiment in the age of austerity', *Soundings*, 61, 2016, pp84-94, p89. (Hereafter *Fit*).

Historically, white, male, middle-class, straight men have been able to use their minds and not their bodies in order to become valuable in Western Culture.<sup>56</sup>

56. Jamie Hakim, 'Austerity has caused young men to turn into 'spornosexuals'', [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk) (2016).

Yet, since the crash, 'traditional breadwinning capacities are being eroded' meaning markers of value employed by straight white middle-class men, like buying a house or a car or being able to financially support a family, have become unattainable for many (*Fit*, p84). For Hakim, this is the reason white middle-class men are investing copious time and energy into gym programs and diets designed to maximise muscularity, a value creation practice more routinely associated with black men.<sup>57</sup> Hakim argues that while muscularity is promoted as aspirational, it serves as a compensatory culture, making up for the unattainability of jobs and financial security. He suggests that this phenomenon can be read as 'cruel optimism' in that it offers an object for men to attach hope to, yet is one that does nothing to fix the problems which drive them to it initially.<sup>58</sup>

57. Lisa Mckenzie, *Getting by: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*, Bristol, Chicago, Policy Press, 2015

58. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

As Hakim discusses, fitness cultures make up for dwindling vocational and financial prospects but also mediate the impact this has on masculinities. Men who previously relied on economic success for self-worth, and held economic prowess as a tenant of masculinity, use fitness cultures to make up for the damage done to male self-image by recession.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, accounts of mumpreneurs make clear how such characterisations mediate the retraction of equal opportunities for women under austerity. We have also seen how compensatory cultures can mediate changing class positionalities, as in how the craft economy helps middle-class workers to negotiate changing job prospects. This early scholarship sketches an important terrain, mapping out how, and in what kinds of places, the impacts of recession and austerity on identity and positionality are negotiated. As this work develops, however, more focus is needed on the relationality of these cultures, to the encounters and conflicts that are staged as class positions and gender roles are remade in the aftermath of the crash.

59. Diane Negra, 'Adjusting men and abiding mummies: gendering the recession in Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 45, 2013, pp23-34.

## COMPENSATORY CONSUMPTION

Compensatory mechanisms have also been identified in recent consumption cultures. This work largely focuses on 'austerity chic' as an aesthetic mobilised within fashion, homeware and culinary cultures, but has also included

commentary on the consumption practices of millennials. Millennials have been berated in the media for their consumption habits. In 2017 Tim Gurner, an Australian businessman, suggested that Millennials are failing to get on the property ladder because of their taste for extravagances like ‘smashed avocado’. A ‘global debate’ ensued as to whether the financial problems of millennials are indeed caused by recklessly buying avocados, flat whites and granola or by the housing crisis, recession and austerity measures.<sup>60</sup> Many argued that the Millennials’ conspicuous consumption trends ‘compensate for their feeling of powerlessness’, allowing them to at least enjoy some of the privileges promised to them in the relatively favourable economic climate of their youth and making up for their experiences of precarity in work and housing cultures.<sup>61</sup> While, as recession era consumers, Millennials are encouraged to be frugal, exceptions are made for ‘items that serve a consolatory or fanciful function in uncertain times’; a ‘splurge piece’ that promises ‘escape from harsh realities’ and is, ironically, a way to ‘compensate for having a depressed bank account’.<sup>62</sup>

Equally, however, Millennials’ consumption trends express a kind of nihilistic short-term-ism. Given promised securities are now largely unattainable, many young adults have stopped aspiring to traditional markers of adulthood. Green argues that people unable to get on the property ladder have been infantilised by the crisis. Because they are spending longer living at home with parents, or in inadequate housing settings, they are having to delay ‘entering long-term relationships and starting families’.<sup>63</sup> In this context compensatory consumption patterns have arisen that make up for, but also reinforce, the stunted life worlds of millennials, including a rise in childless adults enjoying consumption cultures designed for children, such as the Disney industry. Childless adults are increasingly visiting Disney Land<sup>64</sup> and engaging in fashion and makeup cultures based around ‘the princesshood phenomenon’.<sup>65</sup> This kind of compensatory culture again brands the problem as the solution, making up for the infantilising impacts of recession on millennials by offering them infantilised leisure cultures.

While scholarship on millennial consumption cultures is in its early stages, there is a more established body of work on ‘austerity chic’. Bramall defines three core meanings of austerity chic including; objects and clothes that hark back to historical austerity regimes in the 1940s and 50s, demonstrations of thrift including upcycling or making items from scratch and a *performance* of thrift as a means to future cultural capital, i.e. by ‘being seen to be roughing it’ ‘by “snubbing a Starbucks latte in favour of a bacon sandwich and a nice cup of tea’ at a taxi shelter’.<sup>66</sup> While Bramall asserts that austerity chic can inform progressive subject positions, she also emphasises its functions as a compensatory imaginary that glamorises precarity.

Following Bramall’s first definition, many have argued that allusions to historical austerity create complicity with austerity today while using imaginaries of thrift to – ironically - encourage continued consumption. As

60. Joseph Sternberg, *The Theft of a Decade: How the Baby Boomers Stole the Millennial’s Economic Future*, New York, Hachette Book Group, 2019

61. Clement Bellet and Eve Sihra, ‘What research tells us about the avocado toast controversy’ [www.eprints.lse.ac.uk](http://www.eprints.lse.ac.uk), 2017, p1.

62. Elizabeth Nathanson, ‘Dressed for economic distress: Blogging and the ‘new’ pleasures of fashion’, in *D. Negra and Y. Tasker, Gendering the Recession*, New York, Duke University Press, 2014, pp136-16, p141. (Hereafter *Dressed for Economic Distress*).

63. Andy Green, *The Crisis for Young People: Generational Inequalities in Education, Work, Housing and Welfare*, London, Palgrave, pivot, 2017.

64. Amelia Tait, ‘From influencers to couples, childless millennials are obsessed with going to Disneyland’ *New Statesman*, 2019.

65. Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

66. Rebecca Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2013, p22-23. (Hereafter *Austerity*).

67. Sarah Marie Hall and Helen Holmes, 'Making do and Getting by? Beyond a romantic politics of austerity and crisis', [www.discoverysociety.org](http://www.discoverysociety.org), 2017. (Hereafter *Making Do*).

68. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, 'The London 2012 Olympic games opening ceremony: History answers back', *Journal of Popular Television*, 1, 1, 2013, 113-120, 114.

69. Sarah Marie Hall and Mark Jayne 'Make, mend and befriend: geographies of austerity, crafting and friendship in contemporary cultures of dressmaking in the UK', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 23, 2, 2016, 216-234.

Hall and Holmes explore, the revival of slogans including 'keep calm and carry on' and 'make do and mend' has been widespread and used to foster enthusiasm for 'consumer cultures and patterns associated with the austerity of the 1930s to 1950s, including crafting, cooking, and cultivation'.<sup>67</sup> 'These activities', they argue, represent a successful historic response to economic crisis and austerity during and following the first and second world wars'. As Bramall notes, TV celebrity Kirstie Allsopp has become 'a champion of the philosophy of 'make do and mend', identifying it as a kind of 'coping mechanism' people should turn to' (*Austerity*, p20). As suggested by the term 'coping mechanism', mending and crafting cultures intensified at a time when disposable incomes were squeezed. These cultures are glamorised via a romanticised vision of historical war-time austerity; an imaginary of pulling through hard times with stoic resourcefulness. Likewise, Biressi and Nunn in their discussion of the opening ceremony to the 2012 Olympics games explore how the mega-event was mobilised to foster compliance with austerity, making use of the economic parallels between the last 'austerity games' held in Britain in 1948 and the 2012 Olympics. They argue that the opening ceremony evoked war-time solidarity and 'invited the airing of personal recollections of shoe-string sports and 'making do' in order to 'frame current austerity measures as painful but necessary'.<sup>68</sup>

Bramall also explores how historical austerity aesthetics are connected to environmental concerns. She highlights products like ration cards produced by the 'Ministry of Trying to do something about it', which used war-time aesthetics to promote ration books helping users to reduce their environmental footprint. Their promotional website states 'It's time to sit down, have a nice cup of tea, and ask yourself "What can we do right now, today, this instant?"', mobilising traditional British culture (tea drinking), as well as the war-time practice of rationing, towards environmental agendas. However, while environmental consciousness is clearly important, such programs arguably use it to strengthen the case for austerity culture. Accepting environmental concerns as the main impetus behind products like the 'Ration me up' book ignores the economic context within which these war-time imaginaries are being excavated. Furthermore, the ethical inflection given to austerity through alignment with environmentalism serves to shame, as Jensen writes, 'classed "others", who, become constructed as insufficiently austere; who do not reuse, recycle, upcycle, who are wasteful' (*Parenting the Crisis*, p129).

Yet while fostering complicity with austerity, austerity chic also encourages people to keep consuming. War-time austerity aesthetics have popularised products like kitsch enamel ware, old fashioned clothing or dress making patterns.<sup>69</sup> Directives to consume are also, ironically, channelled through instructions on how to be thrifty. In discussing 'austerity foodscapes' Potter and Westall describe how home-growing, thrift and re-use are promoted within contemporary food cultures but argue that this version of thrift actually

encourages consumption, as it is often premised on re-using ingredients or leftovers from more lavish meals assumed to have been cooked previously.<sup>70</sup>

Potter and Westall also elucidate how the temporal imaginaries of food cultures bolster capitalism while purporting to offer respite from it. They argue that two different ‘compensatory motifs’ are discernible. Firstly a motif of ‘time-saving acceleration’ seen in the promotion of quick recipes, like Jamie’s fifteen minute meals, designed to reduce the ‘temporal burden’ of cooking. Secondly, there is a motif of ‘calming deceleration’, the idea that time can be slowed down and savoured ‘via culinary pleasure and escape’ to find windows for domestic harmony and self-care (p169). However, both these compensatory mechanisms are contradictory. They are pitched as compensating for the ‘temporal deficit’ produced by life under neoliberal capitalism, the demands of which mean we are in ‘perpetual time arrears’ (p167) and yet these acts of ‘temporal compensation’ primarily serve rather than alleviate the effects of capitalism, encouraging ‘acts of purchasing that not only contribute to surplus-value in production, but ‘free up’ more surplus labour-time for its creation (p169). Here, we have a clear picture of what compensatory mechanisms share with ‘cruel optimism’ – the attachment of hope to practices that seek to escape situations they only perpetuate. Equally, and as seen in the section above, the obvious gendering of austerity chic – in its promotion of re-enactments of women’s war-time practices of mending and crafting - entails cruel optimism. Such gendered cultures offer a site of enthusiasm and means of getting by for women, who have been disproportionately impacted by austerity cuts while simultaneously glamorising the retrogressive gender roles instigated by those cuts.<sup>71</sup>

As Bramall argues, austerity chic also entails a performance of ‘slumming it’ that encourages certain kinds of consumption, like shopping at cheaper supermarkets or encouraging compensatory purchases, like DIY hair dying kits rather than appointments in hair salons.<sup>72</sup> For Nathanson, recession era fashion blogs perpetuate the ‘fantasy of [clothes] shopping’ while reframing fashion consumption as a frugal activity. Blogs make fashion seem ‘less frivolous and more useful’ because they are written by ‘real’ ‘every-day girls’ and framed around resourcefulness and ‘cost consciousness’ (*Dressed for Economic Distress*, pp137, 148). Nathanson explores how the figure of the ‘recessionista’ was used ‘by the fashion industry to identify and target an audience it regarded as rightfully fearful about spending in such an economically unstable climate’ and encourage their continued consumption by defining this figure as ‘a careful shopper who does not abandon consumer culture altogether in the light of the global recession’ (p139). Importantly then, while compensatory consumption cultures promote frugality, they position the truly responsible recession-era citizen as one who finds cunning ways to keep spending by making personal sacrifices and alterations.

A compensatory consumption culture related to austerity chic is consumption encouraged via a glamorisation of marginalised cultures.

70. Lucy Potter and Claire Westall, ‘Neoliberal Britain’s austerity foodscape: home economics, veg patch capitalism and culinary temporality’ *New Formations*, 2013, pp155-178. (Hereafter *Austerity Foodscape*).

71. Maria Karamessini and Jill Rubery, *Women and Austerity: The Economic Crisis and the Future for Gender Equality*, New York, Routledge, 2014.

72. Jill Papworth, ‘Austerity chic is looking good for less’, *The Guardian*, 2010.

73. Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato, 'Distinction, disdain, and gentrification: hipsters, food people, and the ethnic other in Brooklyn, New York' in K. Fitzpatrick and D. Willis (eds) *A Place-Based Perspective of Food in Society*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp121-139.

74. Mathew Sprague, 'The chopped cheese: traversing upscale foodways and the struggle for community control', Bard Digital Commons, 2018.

75. Danielle Seid, 'The anti-hipster' feminism of Asian auntie cooking web series, *Feminist Media Studies*, 18, 4, 2018, pp779-782.

Scholars, mostly American, have explored the appropriation of classed and racialised food cultures by the white middle-classes.<sup>73</sup> They explore how hipsters generate 'culinary capital' to demonstrate belonging in gentrifying urban areas like Brooklyn or Harlem, by cultivating taste and knowledge for cuisines popular with disenfranchised ethnic minority groups in those areas and/or traditionally inexpensive local products like the now famous 'chopped cheese' sandwich.<sup>74</sup> The supposed 'discovery' of such food cultures by white middle-class people has been termed 'Columbusing', a neologism highlighting the unequal power dynamics and cultural appropriation at work in the promotion of 'authentic' ethnic cuisines to the white middle-classes.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, compensatory consumption, while serving to make sense of declining incomes and opportunities for the middle-classes, can widen and reinforce inequality, as well as shaming those experiencing more severe poverty. Potter and Westall argue of austerity food cultures that the requirement to purchase items that become 'leftovers', and the unrealistic demands on time for cooking, mean that this foodscape's function is not to offer relief from food poverty but to shame those struggling by demonstrating a mode of resourcefulness they are failing to attain (*Austerity Foodscape*). Compensatory cultures are about keeping up appearances and although they can be acknowledged as second best solutions, evidence of real hardship, such as skip-diving for food is not part of their imaginaries, which exclude those experiencing crisis most acutely (*Parenting the Crisis*, p128). Hall and Holmes have likewise highlighted the insensitivity of celebrations of austere practices. They write that enjoyment of austerity 'is at best insensitive, and at worst insulting, for the experiences of those at the sharpest end of the cuts to become bundled up with either a niggling sense of nostalgia, or to be lumped together with those who are 'just' feeling the pinch. Austerity chic glosses over the most serious hardships experienced as a result of austerity cuts, replacing this reality with imaginaries of pleasurable but cost saving activities infused with 'the kitsch notion of a 'wartime effort' (*Making Do*). Crucially, as we have seen, compensatory consumption cultures also encourage spending, at the same time as asserting the importance of thrift and austerity, thereby supporting and maintaining neoliberal capitalism despite being direct evidence of its failures.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have traced a growing interest in how cultures emerging since the 2008 recession are compensating for the resultant precarity, while entrenching and normalising that precarity. Across the work surveyed it is clear that such cultures generate attachments, enthusiasms and diversions that enable life to continue in precarious times. If precarity is today's dominant structure-of-feeling then compensatory cultures dampen and transmute its affects. They cultivate positive feelings that re-signify the conditions of

precarity to make them palatable or even desirable.

Exploring emergent work on compensatory cultures has unearthed their key functions. Firstly, we have seen how compensatory cultures normalise and entrench precarity. Rather than promising a better future, the compensatory mechanism glamorises the precarity of today, rebranding problems as solutions. Secondly, it is clear that compensatory cultures mediate changing identities and positionalities, serving, for example as a salve for damaged masculinities. Thirdly, compensatory cultures can be understood as mechanisms through which neoliberal capitalism is sustained in the aftermath of the crash. Compensatory cultures distract from capitalism's failure, encourage continued consumption despite shrinking disposable incomes and shift the onus onto individuals for creating economic opportunities. Lastly, an orientation of cruel optimism is evident in compensatory cultures, which sustain life in times of crisis yet also preclude actions that might meaningfully address the causes and results of that crisis, naturalising the failures of neoliberal systems while paradoxically sustaining faith in them.

As seen with pop-up culture, the compensatory origins of cultures can be rapidly forgotten as they become routine ways of reproducing contemporary life. Attention to the development, functions and implications of these cultures is therefore pertinent. It is crucial to trace their connections to and instrumentalities within crisis conditions before they are fully naturalised. Important avenues for future research include further engagement with the gender dynamics of compensatory cultures. Apparent across this paper is how compensatory cultures appeal to and transform gender identities. The impact of recession on gender roles has been highlighted in the edited collection *Gendering the Recession* which draws out the contrasting demands made on men and women by recession and austerity. In this vein, more work is necessary to elucidate the different ways compensatory cultures enlist men and women, and how this reflects changing constructions of gender since 2008.<sup>76</sup> While most work to date has focused on compensatory cultures in relation to cisgender men and women it is important that future work engages with all gender identities so as not to reinforce exclusionary binaries and definitions, especially given that stigmatisation and persecution is already worsening under austerity. Scholars and practitioners working on transgender identities have explored practices that transgender men, women and non-binary people employ to perform gender identities at a time when austerity cuts have made it increasingly difficult to access the resources needed to transition and/or to maintain gender identities.<sup>77</sup> However, there is little work on whether, and if so how, *glamorised* compensatory cultures mediate impacts of recession and austerity for non-cisgender people.

Further attention is also needed to relationships between class and compensatory cultures. We have seen how compensatory cultures can reproduce social inequalities and compound the already unequal impacts of austerity and neoliberal capitalism. Most existing work focuses on

76. D. Negra and Y. Tasker (eds) *Gendering the Recession*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014.

77. Martin Mitchell, Kelsey Beninger, Nilufer Rahim and Sue Arthur, 'Implications of austerity for LGBT people and services', *NatCen*, 2013.

how compensatory cultures help the middle-classes negotiate changing circumstances. It is important to consider how compensatory cultures operate beyond middle-class settings in the post-2008 context. Explorations of compensatory mechanisms in working-class settings have largely been in the context of *counter* cultures which, while diversionary responses to precarity, are also resistive of the dominant cultures through which precarity is produced as, for example, in the forms of identity and public space making achieved through music cultures like hip-hop or punk rock.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, a key feature of compensatory cultures is that they create attachments of cruel optimism, perpetuating the precarity they arise from rather than primarily offering resistance to its productive forces. More investigation is therefore needed of how compensatory cultures in working-class settings can also generate complicity with dominant ideologies and agendas.

Equally, more attention is needed to how compensatory cultures mediate interactions between social classes at a time when economic opportunities and fortunes are changing across class spectrums and when people from different class backgrounds come into contact in new ways and spaces. For example, 'class tourism' is an important compensatory culture within which class positionalities are being remade in post-crisis cities. Class tourism is a trend for marketing middle-class sites of consumption in formerly working-class spaces by highlighting the 'unusual' nature of those sites. This can be seen in examples such as the Job Centre pub in Deptford, London; a job centred 'themed' pub named after the service it replaced, shut by funding cuts. Class tourism is a compensatory consumption culture in that it is aimed at middle-class people who have themselves been displaced to more deprived neighbourhoods of cities. The 'tourism' part of class tourism implies a foray into 'slumming it' for people who can later return to comfort and security, but this interpretation is complicated by a climate in which the middle-classes have also experienced reductions in quality of life. In this context such consumption cultures emerge as compensatory, enabling the middle-classes to acclimatise to (as well as colonise) areas formerly undesirable to them. Arguably, class tourism reinforces class divisions by allowing the middle-classes to identify themselves as present in spaces of deprivation ironically and/or ludicly.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, as indicated by work on Columbusing within hipster food cultures, compensatory cultures intersect with changing racial dynamics of post-2008 societies, a topic which also demands further attention. There has been work on how recession-era TV cultures delink racial politics from systemic reasons for worsening racial inequality, including the 'national and global economic crisis'<sup>80</sup> and the European debt crisis.<sup>81</sup> While the functions of these TV cultures differ somewhat to compensatory cultures, they indicate a naturalisation of intensified racial inequality in the post-crash era that should be explored in relation to compensatory mechanisms too. Further explorations are also required of the environmental narratives employed within many compensatory cultures and to how these narratives relate to

78. Shabazz Sanders, 'Masculinity and the mic: confronting the uneven geography of hip-hop', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 21, 3, 2014, pp370-386; Jeffery Debies-Carl, *Punk Rock and the Politics of Place: Building a Better Tomorrow*, New York, Routledge, 2014.

79. Jane Elliot, 'The Job Centre bar's attempt to do gentrification ironically is an insult', *The Guardian*, 2014.

80. Isabel Molina-Guzman, 'Latina wisdom in postrecession media', in D. Negra and Y. Tasker (eds), *Gendering the Recession*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014, pp59-80, p61.

81. Aniko Imre, 'How long can the party last? Gendering the European crisis on reality TV', in D. Negra and Y. Tasker (eds) *Gendering the Recession*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2014, pp246-272, p247.

growing recognition of the precarity caused by climate change.

By developing compensatory cultures as a concept, drawing together existing scholarship on such cultures, and identifying key commonalities of their features and functions, this paper has laid ground work for important future scholarship. Exploring compensatory cultures is crucial to understanding how social and cultural life is evolving in the aftermath of the 2008 crash. If culture is where meanings and values are negotiated, resisted and reproduced, then compensatory cultures give a crucial insight into how and why neoliberal capitalist values are being sustained despite the shocks to the system produced by the crash. Further explored, they can also help us to understand how social relations and divisions (including across class, race and gender as briefly explored in this paper) are being remade in the post-crisis climate.

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