

# **Claustropolitanism, Capitalism and Covid: Un/Popular Culture at the End of the World**

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**Abstract:** Claustropolitanism as a new theory for foreclosed times. A theory for the end of the world, it resonates in research probing the Global Financial Crisis, but has reached a moment of profound utility through Covid and the resultant social, economic, health and political catastrophes. Capitalism, Covid and claustropolitanism align to offer a pointed provocation and recalibration of hierarchies of value, importance, relevance, and social change. The result of this reconfiguration is the emergence of un/popular culture. This article, applying the insights of deviant leisure and digitization, probes the changing role of the humanities and social sciences, with the promising opportunity to ‘Make the end of the world great again.’

**Keywords:** Claustropolitanism, Covid-19, Capitalism, Zombie Concepts, Foreclosure, Cosmopolitan Sociology, Unpopular Culture

Lockdown. Shutdown. Quarantine. Social Distancing. Fights over toilet paper in supermarkets. Corona Lisa. #Trumpisalaughingstock. Italians singing on balconies. Australians, frocked in fancy dress, take their weekly garbage bin to the street curb for collection.

## **1. Introduction**

Covid-19 is a virus that now has a vaccine. Through international travel and the resultant toxic globalization, millions of people throughout the world became infected. Many became very sick, with symptoms including loss of smell, fever, shortness of breath and fatigue, leading to pneumonia and multi-organ failure. The death rate – and death rate graphs – were attended by horrific images of body bags and freezer trucks parked in front of hospitals. Death remains seething in its reality and finality. Those who died of Covid-19 were alone, in isolation, and disconnected from their families and friends for their final moments. It was a brutalizing twist in the zombie tale / tail that even a white walker could not foresee. Covid demonstrates what happens when the skin of civilization is peeled from the body politic. The supposedly benevolent globalization, of mobile capital, goods, services, and ideas, has left a ghastly tip.

Covid was a novel virus, and highly contagious. With no vaccine, the only control mechanisms were social isolation and the separation of bodies to slow transmission. Once slowed, it was possible to manage

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the new cases through the tracing of movements, and consequential home or hospital care. Without social distancing, the infection and death rates spiked from January to April 2020, with irregular and uneven international patterns in the following months through a second wave. Lockdowns, with only essential services remaining open, resulted in economy-wide unemployment, huge public subsidies, and the emergence of new (post)work and leisure cultures. While scholars from the humanities and social sciences can summon utopic or dystopic futures from the contagion, what is clear is that these disruptions will remain – with cycles of social distancing and lockdowns – until a vaccine is developed and disseminated. Through this social, cultural, economic, and medical upheaval, a tough question undergirds our intellectual future: What has happened – structurally – to work, leisure, community, and capitalism?

This article summons new theories for these dark times. It is post disciplinary in methodology, ontology, and epistemology. Claustropolitanism offers scholars in the humanities and social sciences a theory for the end of the world. ‘Evidence’ becomes as fleeting as a tweet. ‘Rigour’ is disentangled from empiricism. The fetishization of qualitative and quantitative methods is challenged through a ruthless focus on a tough theory, offering difficult and inconvenient ideas without apologies. The future of our universities, so reliant on the fees of international students, is now uncertain. Research plans and agendas lack vision beyond the next ‘industry partnership.’ The first part of this article offers a view of claustropolitan intellectual culture, created at the scholarly margins, to grasp a clinging life on the edge. The second section enters an evocative and provocative paradigm that is agitating the social sciences and humanities: deviant leisure. The final section – ‘Making the end of the world great again’ – demonstrates how the lockdown has created digitized deviant leisure in the domestic environment. The home has become a hub of alternative views, community sharing and staunch critique, building an un/popular culture.

## **2. Claustropolitanism**

Anti-disciplinary and post-disciplinary critiques were present before Covid. Trump Studies. Brexit Studies. Extreme Anthropology. Post-digital Studies. Unpopular Cultural Studies. These phrases, and the scholars who wielded them like a knife through butter, offered methods to understand wars without end. September 11, decades after the event, continues to provide permission for xenophobia, brutalizing racism, and arbitrary exclusion. The Global Financial Crisis, that brought the world to its knees but ensured that public funding would ‘bail-out’ corporations, meant that taxpayers dollars were channelled to banks and mortgage brokers. Casino capitalism was subsidized, while public health, public education and public libraries paid the stake. The banks recovered quickly. The bonuses returned. The stock market soared. The lack of critique, the normalization of greed, exploitation and excess, meant that even though neoliberalism had performed - with ruthless disdain - the scale of its failure, it continued to live as a zombie concept, dead but continuing to infect individuals and institutions.

That last sentence used the phrase ‘zombie concept’ with intent and provocation. Any summoning of claustropolitanism must challenge the dominant, mainstream theories validated by cosmopolitan sociology. The line is drawn between these two paradigms. Benevolent, multicultural cosmopolitanism is being struck, sliced, and attacked by the honest if paranoid aggression of claustropolitanism. Closed in, foreclosed, angry and honest, this paradigmatic shift is timely and necessary. Yet the ‘zombie concept’ remains a way to track and understand this shift. Originally appearing in the year 2000 in an interview conducted between Ulrich Beck and Jonathan Rutherford, “zombie categories” were present rather than

“zombie concepts.” Rutherford described this term as a combination of “sociology and horror” (2000, p. 37). In an interview with Beck, it was Rutherford offered a precise description.

There is a paradox. Changes are occurring faster in people’s consciousness than in their behaviour and social conditions. This mixture of new consciousness and old conditions has created what he [Beck] describes as Zombies categories – social forms such as class, family or neighbourhood, which are dead, yet alive (2000, p. 37).

Instead of this intellectual clarity, Beck listed examples of zombie categories: “family, class, neighbourhood” (2000, p. 37). When attempting to fill these examples with content, ambiguity emerged.

JR: Zombies are the living dead. Do you mean that these institutions are simply husks that people have abandoned?

UB: I think people are more aware of the new realities than the institutions are. But at the same time, if you look at the findings of empirical research, family is still extremely valued in a very classical sense. Sure, there are huge problems in family life, but each person thinks that he or she will solve all those problems that their parents didn’t get right (2000, p. 38).

The optimism of Beck’s cosmopolitan sociological project is revealed here. Zombie concepts were an accidental description, overcoming what he described as “methodological nationalism” (2002a, p. 18). For Beck, the nation creates a “monologic imagination” that excludes otherness, while the “cosmopolitan perspective” includes “the otherness of the other” (2002a, p. 18). This optimistic imperative to incorporate and enfold differences into citizenship was unprepared for the shards of anger, rage, xenophobia, and hatred that would emerge the following year.

The zombie concept started to shadow September 11, unable to provide an explanation for the social transformations. Beck summoned “a multiplication and pluralization of modernities in the making” (2001, p. 262). Once more, the optimism jutting from this modernity is stark, energizing “a new kind of capitalism, a new kind of labour, a new kind of everyday life, and a new kind of state are in the making” (2001, p. 262). Such an interpretation does not carry negativity or critique. When Beck moves from this separation of modernities and into the zombie categories, there is no inflection or concern for this change.

I think we are living in a society, in a world, where our basic sociological concepts are becoming what I call ‘zombie categories.’ Zombie categories are ‘living dead’ categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu. In this situation I don’t think it’s very helpful only to criticize normal sociology, and to deconstruct it. What we really need is to redefine, reconstruct, restructure our concepts and our view of society (2001, p. 262).

Beck is disconnecting a version of modernity from the nation state, but also Westernization and Europeanization. Beck probed the relationship between risk and control, noting unevenness in the distribution of global risks (2002b, p. 42). He also offers a slither of commentary on neoliberalism. He states, “in times of crises, neoliberalism has no solutions to offer” (2002b, p. 48). Further, Beck offered a warning that “human dignity, cultural identity and otherness must be taken more seriously in the future”

(2002b, p. 48). Such statements may have held intent, urgency, and bite in 2002. However, this prediction was not realized. Human dignity has been denied to those from whom capital can be extracted, denied or ignored. Cultural identity, with its attendant investments in representational politics, has created little social change in the last two decades, but has fed the rise of the alt-right and ‘celebrity professors’ like Jordan Peterson (Brabazon, Redhead, & Chivaura, 2018).

Beck saw globalizing change and situated hope and opportunity within it. His analytical error was to enfold this realization into cosmopolitan sociology. He did not see that cosmopolitan sociology was in itself a zombie category, eaten alive by claustropolitanism. The zombie concept, for Beck, was tethered to ‘the state’ and therefore is rigid, dominating and a problem. Cosmopolitan sociology tended towards anti-statism, through its commitment to community, identity, multiculturalism, and organic and authentic connections between groups. But this rendering of the state is narrow and can bleed into critiques of public health, public education, regulation, and governance. This mode of anti-statism prised open the political space for neoliberalism. Once the state was removed from regulation and management of the public good, the flow and mobility so welcomed by the cosmopolitan sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, John Urry, Scott Lash and Anthony Giddens was used to move capital without regulation, but also block the movement of people. The cosmopolitan sociologists missed the changes to global capital caused through a lack of regulation and therefore had few intellectual resources, tropes, theories or concepts to understand the Global Financial Crisis.

For Beck, terms like ‘family’ and ‘nation’ were emptying of meaning. A full throttled critique of capitalism was beyond his brief, with only occasional mentions of neoliberalism. Zombies were used as a metaphor to convey that a husk of a term continued to survive and circulate. In other words, we live in ‘families’ that carry the assumptions of heteronormative procreation. However, most households – for some decades – is not composed of a heterosexual couple with children. Single-headed households, single person households, households without children, GLBTI+ households, and older citizens with no children living in a dwelling are the majority of ‘families.’ Because Beck continued to work within the ontological parameters of cosmopolitan sociology, he did not follow through on his metaphor. Zombies are not only infected. A body that is recognizably ‘human’ in some form continues to stumble through the landscape, but they infect all others with whom they come into contact. The infection is the propulsive priority to manage, rather than the empty corporeal husks. Therefore, these simple zombie concepts of family, nation, marriage, work and leisure, shamle through the intellectual and social environment, grasping and attacking the terms, values, theories, and methodologies that supposedly returns truth, rigour, accountability and meaning to scholars. As Anne Sophie Krossa confirmed, “a central question of sociological research for many decades has been how to integrate societies, and in a stricter sense, how to bring the aspect of heterogeneity under some control” (2013, p.17). What the 2000s and the 2010s have confirmed is that the integration has failed. Indeed, it is toxic. Contagious.

Our universities and institutionalized knowledge systems, through decades of neglect, have resulted in academics and ‘university managers’ shambling around the landscape and gathering money for ‘national priorities’ and ‘industry partnerships.’ The research conducted with defence and pharmaceutical industries has been reliant on funding organizations with very little commitment to any projects in ‘the public good.’ Indeed, this phrase has been zombified. What exactly is in ‘the public good’? That question is not

rhetorical. It is productive in its horror and confusion. Such an inquiry leads to an intense and expansive shift in knowledge, learning, teaching and research. Claustropolitanism is a productive concept that can move scholars to confront – perhaps with disgust, repulsion, fear, shock, dread, and terror – that the tools in our intellectual kitbag are infected, and killing us, alongside provocative and difficult knowledge.

Claustropolitanism, appropriately, was developed by a dying man at the end of the world. Steve Redhead, while resident in regional New South Wales and Adelaide in South Australia, started to develop the term as part of his Theoretical Times project (Redhead, 2017). Podcasts and blogs scaffolded the term (Brabazon & Redhead, 2014), and left fingerprints on Trump Studies (Brabazon, Redhead, & Chivaura, 2018). A political, social and intellectual critique, Redhead attempted to erode the calcification of the humanities and social sciences, cowed and carolled back into traditional disciplines and validated by RAE and REF panels, Field of Research (FoR) Codes in Australia, the ranking of journals, citation metrics, and ‘national’ funding priorities that value the sciences over the social sciences, quantitative over qualitative, and empirical over the theoretical.

Redhead offered a shard of theory, an intellectual stub, before he died of pancreatic cancer in March 2018. In the months after his death, posthumous publications opened intellectual terrain in digital leisure studies and Trump Studies. But Redhead realized – after his own sojourns into Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Slavoj Žižek - that the celebrity intellectual cultures which were fuelled by open access online journals, like *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* (2020) and *The International Journal of Žižek Studies* (2020), were limited in their capacity to reconfigure intellectual culture. In a 2015 interview, Redhead signalled this moment of change, and its rationale.

Leanne McRae: It’s been 10 years since we talked about the “Redhead Review.” We did it in 2005 and it was published in 2006. So, I thought it was time for us to have a think about how things have changed since then. Our jumping-off point last time involved talking about your early career and we discussed the emergence of Virilio because you were just about to release the two books on Virilio — the Reader and Theorist for an Accelerated Culture. Can you talk about that experience about how Virilio changed things for you, what happened after, and how you think it was received?

Steve Redhead: Yes — that is a great question, and it was fundamental to what I was doing then. Ten years on I am not sure that is any more, to be honest. What I was trying to do was try to find reorientation of my work I think partly because it was when I had migrated to Australia and when I was writing certainly, Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture and the Reader as well because a lot of my introductions were new to the pieces, we were extracting from Virilio, I kind of seized on his work. I had thought about his work before, but I suddenly seized on him in this obsessive fashion because I thought that his work would help me develop theories around what I call accelerated culture at the time, and what I still call accelerated culture and I have moved off into other concepts like claustropolitanism, and Virilio was responsible for the idea of claustropolitanism because he talked about claustropolis. So, I think a lot at the time I was trying to jump off his work into my own ideas. At that time, I really had not been able to do a lot of that. I was kind of really working with his texts — which I still think are interesting — but they . . . because his background in French phenomenology limits him, I think, and his kind of anarchistic Christianity. I think there are limits to the use of his work, although I still carried on using him for quite a long time. And I think people

should read his work, but I think there is a limit and that French Phenomenology and other aspects of his, if you like, personality and biography, do limit the use of his work (McRae & Redhead, 2016).

Building from Paul Virilio's 'claustropolis,' claustropolitanism is a theoretical lens of value. It discards phenomenology and awkward faith structures. The intellectual stub that Steve Redhead left scholars is important to summon. Significantly, it survived through marginal media: blog, podcasts and some refereed scholarship. Therefore, this article grasps the stub and extends its definitional parameters and applications, to offer a theory for the end of the world.

For Redhead, claustropolitanism was "the global condition" that followed the Global Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008 (Redhead, 2015). It was a hybridized movement from Paul Virilio's "Cosmopolis to claustropolis" that appeared in *Pure War*, with Sylvere Lotringer (2008). A saturating critique of globalizing power, Redhead described a series of "gated communities" that enabled the rich to "colonise" understandings of "a good life." From this foundation, the claustropolitan society emerged, and then its methodological arm extended to claustropolitan sociology, that rejected the cosmopolitan sociological perspectives that had dominated European sociology through the 1990s and early 2000s but did not possess the language or conceptual tools to understand the global financial crisis.

The question is always where the intellectual narrative commences. Where does the story begin? In the twentieth century, the wars were poles of beginnings and endings, whether lost in the trenches of the Somme, the devilish demolition of Dresden or the smell-of-napalm-in-the morning stench of Vietnam. In the still born 21st century, September 11 is the pull. It should not be. The reason for its importance is that it happened on American soil, indeed in the global city of the 20th century: New York. When assessing this event against the scale of the world wars, the death rate was equivalent to a few bad nights during the Blitz. The Eastern Front is not even measurable on the same scale. But it signalled the end of the American Empire, the end of American safety, the end of the United States moving through the world without consequences, meaning or impact. Suddenly, the United States was at war. The United States was under threat. On their own soil. Therefore nationalism, xenophobia and US-dominated television created the 'event' of September 11, beyond aeroplanes pounding into buildings at speed. Even now – decades on – to minimize September 11 is the equivalent of doubting the holocaust or focusing on Thomas Jefferson's alternative life with his mistress.

September 11 happened. 2996 people died. Subsequently, suicide took many of the survivors, and first responders died at a rate and scale beyond the general population through their exposure to toxicity, both chemically and professionally. But the trajectory of Covid-19 is not found in the Ground Zero memorial in New York. The start of the story must be the Global Financial Crisis. The period of 2007-2008 destroyed the banking system and the faith in finance capitalism. The resultant state 'bailouts,' because banks were 'too big to fail,' crippled public support for health, education and transformational infrastructure projects that could create structural interventions in the landscape, environment, and climate, enabled through the green economy.

As a theoretical, political, and social sensibility, claustropolitanism confirmed the foreclosing of the world. The world was dangerous, crowded, dangerous, greedy, and toxic. Labour surplus, unemployment,

underemployment, the precariat, and zero-hour contracts creating a workplace for the end of the world. Mobile phones users, with head bent and eyes cowed, disconnected a body from its analogue consciousness, experience and lived reality. This is a world in miniature, lacking long-term commitments, and bouncing through ephemera without purpose or meaning. Life is gamified. A Facebook post is 'liked.' We scroll through Instagram images, seeing a world that we can never possess. We feel trapped. From Redhead's theorization, the world is shrinking, and we want to – with a recognition of its full irrational commitment – get off the planet.

Extending this theorization is meaningful and important. Indeed, the world events and intellectual failures since Redhead's death can only intensify the need and meaning of this concept. Through the failed neoliberal project that zombified the international economy, citizens are trapped in junk mortgages, the credit card economy, and excessive consumerism to provide transitory relief and micro-pleasure as families, friends, faith structures, housing stability and traditional authority structures are zombified. Experts are abused or ignored. Scrolling through tweets replaces reading scholarly monographs. The celebrity intellectual culture that enabled open access academic journals on provocative scholars has been replaced by Jordan Peterson's YouTube channel, where nostalgic modes of masculinity, Christianity, families, and language are screechingly supported by the Greek Chorus of Fox News, the alt-right and religious groups. Identity politics has presented an unexpected and toxic tax. While the left validated identity as a politics, rather than as the foundation for consciousness and wider progressive agendas, the self-oriented worldview transposed into selfish politics. The 'I' did not build the political infrastructure to hook into 'we.' The failures of Jeremy Corbyn and Hilary Clinton are two of the most visible examples of the confusion between self and society. The disconnection from histories of the working class, women and citizens of colour has presented a zombified bill. Dead assumptions have led the left to the end of the world. The future is foreclosed.

This moment could be read as carnivalesque or an interregnum. Both are functional and useful terms. Both reveal limitations. What is clear is that claustropolitanism can provide the brutalizing, sharp reframing of our times, beyond Baudrillard's double refusal, and beyond Beck's zombie concepts. Claustropolitanism also provides the frame to understand a higher education system battered by market forces that are completely inappropriate to the development of teaching and learning. The impact of neoliberal business as usual on the humanities and social sciences has been destructive. Žižek expressed, "my anxiety about being excluded from academic apparatuses and not recognized as a 'serious' philosopher" (2017, p.3). The separation of science and art, serious and trivial, academic, and popular culture is one of the causes for the current state of politics. Without a powerfully theorized humanities, lost in representational and identity politics, "fake news" survives as a mantra because of the lack of attention to information literacy. In this interregnum – stuffed with death, disease, and ignorance – the humanities and the social sciences require a new context into which to place our social, cultural, intellectual, and political lives. Covid capitalism has created an unproductive tug-of-war rope between health and economic priorities. Political consequences are just emerging, with profound research published from Johnson, Pollock and Rauhaus showing the "potential for significant political changes due to the disproportionate loss of older voters in key swing states in the months leading to the 2020 presidential election" (2020). In other words, Trump supporters are dying at a faster rate than other political supporters, and they are in key swing states. While the victory of President Biden in November

2020 had many causes and correlative variables, the impact of Covid as a disease, a metaphor and a trope for change is clear. Noting such a ruthless reality, the expectations of intellectuals, the energy required for teaching and learning through lockdown, shutdown and social distancing, and the responsibilities of research are transforming. One such transformative paradigm that studies the sickness of capitalism and the sicknesses in capitalism is the focus of the next section.

### **3. Deviant Leisure**

Leisure studies should have been a major intellectual player through the 2000s. Instead, like cultural studies and media studies, these once rabble-rousing paradigms became as lost as post-Blairite third way politics. Event Management, creative industries, sports studies, and physical cultural studies started to chip away at the scholarly body of leisure studies. Particularly as work became casualized, transitory, brutalizing and bullying, the conventional ‘safety valve’ argument of leisure studies is not productive.

Deviant leisure as a paradigm and theoretical perspective has both an unusual frame and parentage, owing as much to Ultra-Realist criminology as leisure studies. The two leading proponents of the paradigm, Thomas Raymen and Oliver Smith, stated that our era is dominated by “meta-crises of liberal capitalism,” “harmful subjectivities,” and “normalised harm” (2019, p.115). Inverting many of the assumptions of classical criminology, capitalism – instead of individuals or groups - is crimogenic. Deviant Leisure theories summon harm and a catalogue of subjectivities that seem irrational, illogical, and emotional, but – considering the context of liberal capitalism – are understandable and – strangely - sensible.

Therefore, it is necessary to activate and study these harmful subjectivities and normalized harm. The election of Donald Trump was an important moment in this history, as was the violence of the concluding weeks of his term in office. For example, Mabel Berezin recognized the scale and scope of this historical moment.

Donald Trump’s election has forced a collective re-evaluation of who the ‘ordinary citizen’ or ‘forgotten man or woman’ is. Level of education distinguished Trump voters from Clinton voters. In spring 2016, Trump exuberantly shouted, ‘I love the poorly educated!’ The ordinary citizens who voted for Trump did not care about his well-documented outrageous statements (2017, p.1).

As the daily Covid briefings from President Trump through April 2020 were broadcast live on television, and promoted through his Twitter account, the application of Berezin’s analysis can be revealed. Fact, evidence, and truth are irrelevant. The application of these harmful subjectivities was revealed by Brandi Janssen: “while farmers mostly voted for Donald Trump, much of his platform is not favourable to agriculture” (2017). There was a broken link between intention and outcome, goal and result, argument, and evidence.

There is a context for this irrationality. Neoliberalism remains a failed system. The way in which the harmful subjectivities are recognized alongside the profound damage capitalism has executed emerges is through focused attention to the political economy. Wolfgang Streeck’s incisive focus has summoned such a project through his recent books *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2014) and *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (2016). The emphasis on ‘delayed crisis’ and



the ‘failing system’ are pivotal to revealing the present political and economic dilemmas. The end of neoliberalism has been predicted, but as Colin Crouch demonstrated in *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (2011), claims for its demise are inaccurate. Streeck described the Global Financial Crisis of 2007 and 2008 as *The Great Recession*. What is important is theorizing the space between the Global Financial Crisis and the rise of the right that builds the claustropolitan frame for Covid.

Individuals did not create the GFC. Gillian Tett, in her study of derivatives trading, confirmed that “dancing around the regulators” (2009, p.26) amplified market trends. Derivatives trading enabled traders to marginalize the wider context of finance. People were harmed through the behaviour of traders. Because the harms of the GFC modalities of capitalism were not logged, remembered, or recognized, Donald Trump became President, Britain left the EU, and Boris Johnson was elected as Prime Minister. The anti-regulatory narratives and anti-statism was sustained through the active forgetting of the GFC. Christopher Whalen confirmed that,

Perhaps the biggest change for all financial services companies and professionals in 2017 is that the political narrative regarding financial regulation has shifted from a punitive, anti-business focus to a more traditionally conservative agenda focused on growth and jobs (2017).

By the time the Covid health emergency erupted, the normalised harm of finance and real estate capitalism was buried. The blame culture – which focused on migrants, socialists, North Korea, China, climate activists, feminists, the trans community – did not address the corruption and corrosion of regulation and governance protocols. Protest movements emerged as a “Lockdown rebellion” (McGurn 2020) in several US cities. Like the Tea Party, an array of concerns, including anti-abortion and climate deniers, were part of the protests. But these Covid-19 deniers were a small minority. But they confirmed that the balance between the economic and the social – money and life - was still under debate, even during a pandemic. When the choice is work as usual or death, then a provocative splinter of the population is so affirmative of their rights to work, consume ice cream and have a haircut, that they have the right to die for it.

How has this happened? Simon Winlow, Steve Hall, and James Treadwell have written and published a remarkable ethnographic study of the English Defence League (EDL), with attention to English nationalism and the working class. They argued that “capitalism had become so triumphant, ubiquitous and unchallengeable that it was commonly understood as a non-ideological fact of life” (2016, p.13). The institutional amnesia about the Global Financial Crisis means that inequalities were hidden. When Covid emerged, and because the necessary critique and corrective about the domination of the market over all other social variables never emerged, the delay in implementing social distancing cost lives. The lack of leadership and the bizarre imperative for the working class to continue to work after the white-collar workforce retraced to social distancing in the home meant that anger was focused on migrants, foreigners, and China. The white working class managed what Winlow, Hall and Treadwell describe as “growing marginality and redundancy” (2016, p.83). White working-class men were invisible in Covid capitalism, marginalized from un/popular culture, and discarded into deeper unemployment with even casualized work disappearing.

As new markers of value emerge in the workforce through Covid-19, such as essential and non-essential employees, doctors conducting medicine with drive-throughs and by telephone, the accelerated consumerist culture reached a powerful barrier and was barricaded. The ‘want it now’ culture was no longer possible. Goods were not available, not matter what the price. As consumerist culture decelerated, analogue life filled out the spaces for activities other than shopping and spending. Put another way, through Covid, everyday analogue life decelerated, but was then digitized. The sharing of these moments then accelerates once more. The dialogue between everyday life and popular culture has never been faster or more complex. Yet scholars have never been more unprepared to understand their historical role. The next section tracks how deceleration and digitization creates spaces for un/popular culture.

#### **4. Making the End of the World Great Again: Unpopular Cultures**

Most political movements attempt to shape and represent their followers as intelligent, authentic, hardworking, ordinary people. Civilization and consensus align. When operating in a disintermediated, deterritorialized and digital environment, the brutalizing nastiness, the slogans, the profanity, and xenophobic hatred are created, witnessed, and revealed to any political party, politician, or leader. As the Ultra-Realist Criminologists showed, brutalizing research conveying these ‘ultra-realist’ outcomes rarely fit into the narratives of the right or the left. Aligning post disciplinary knowledge and post identity politics, the edges and margins of civil society are revealed. Those edges are sharp. Those edges are patrolled. Those edges are barricaded.

In a lockdown, and enabled through digitization, Covid transformed the home. Workers that were not rendered redundant completed paid tasks from a domestic location. Yet this domestic space reconfigured into a world gated by social distancing and a lockdown. The internet replaced the shopping centre, the gym, the pub, the meal with the extended family, and Friday night drinks. Marinated by digitization, the home became a film studio, a radio station, photographic hub, hair salon and a journalistic cluster. This was digitization of the domestic and the private that gained a public audience. Early in the outbreak, mobile phone footage featured consumers in supermarkets fighting over toilet paper (Nguyen, 2020). Finger pointing and blaming ensued, often tempered by racism, xenophobia, and ignorance. As the social distancing and lockdown were extended, the diversity of online activities increased, beyond bullying and violence. Outward critiques of the behaviour of others retracted to the personal, to feelings, remembering the past, the domestic, the home. These textualizations from the lockdown included the sharing of emotional states, the accelerated movement of Covid-inspired memes (Covid Memes 2020) and photographing food and gardens. Some of the more unusual and creative interventions emerged in Australia, with the weekly walking of the bin to the curb for collection becoming an opportunity for fancy dress, photography, and video, ‘sharing’ this micro-outing (Bin Isolation Outing 2020). Nostalgia also proliferated through collective online activities such as posting a photograph of “Me at 20.” A range of GLAMs – galleries, libraries, archives, and museums – opened their collections online, including ‘virtual tours.’ The ‘outside’ – places that were never visited before the virus lockdown – could be experienced in a new way, from the home.

Visual media dominated all other popular cultural interfaces and sensory opportunities. Zoom, YouTube, Skype and TikTok carried personal media to a wide audience. Office meetings were suddenly screened. Personal household objects, pets and family members became part of this work culture. Work bled into

leisure culture. Leisure bled into work through the screen interface. This was a form of (post) media and (post) work, revealing disintermediated grit that was not always convenient, productive, popular, comfortable, or useful. Daily life was more complex, crowded, and complicated.

Disintermediated media removes links in the supply chain between producers and consumers. During the lockdown, and through the cheap availability of cameras, editing equipment, free hosting through YouTube or TikTok - and dissemination through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram - domesticated media erupted into popularity. It challenged the nature of popular culture. What was mainstream? What was dominant culture? Home performances of music, angry or bemused commentaries at the nature of the world, shared weirdness and deep sadness have all juttred from Twitter and Facebook. Instagram and LinkedIn have proven less distinctive and important through the lockdown. The focus on celebrity workouts, or schedules of achievement during social distancing, were less relevant. Indeed, critiques of celebrity platitudes emerged, such as, “Thanks, Celebrities. The true heroes” (Jackson, 2020). Claustropolitanism, capitalism and Covid align to offer a pointed provocation and recalibration of the hierarchies of value, importance, relevance, and social change.

The strategies that have emerged to survive isolation could be described as carnivalesque, the simulacra, inversion, the interregnum, or the grotesque. The proliferation of alcohol and sharing experiences while physically separated resulted in a heightened and visible daily life. The banal became meaningful. Content production and information literacy transformed through this period. Google has an active role in how digital materials are preserved, discarded, discovered, and used. Founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, full text searching was enabled, which meant that conversational words and phrases could allow consumers – rather than citizens - to find texts, images, and video. Through this change, digitization was corporatized. Shopping replaced searching. While the search function was disintermediated, with searchers directly finding materials delivered from an intuitive search engine, reintermediation increased through the 2000s and 2010s through Amazon, iTunes, and a range of social media applications, including Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, information literacy was minimized, truncated, and flattened. A culture of equivalence was created between highly differentiated sources. A scholarly monograph can be found as easily as an Instagram ‘influencer’ promoting a particular brand of mascara. The “google effect” (Brabazon, 2006) – the flattening of expertise – has resulted in popular culture being accelerated, truncated, contracted, decontextualized and shredded. As witnessed through Donald Trump’s mantra of ‘fake news,’ the consequence of the google effect is a flat culture. Digital content is convenient and mobile. It is easily downloaded, uploaded, shared, and heard. The diversity of genres, formats and forms expanded, as did the category of popular culture itself. A long tail was created (Anderson, 2007). So is a colonizing, expansive present that grasps with desperation at the fodder of the past. This is not nostalgia. The past is wrenched into the present, foreclosed in its meanings, and shedding its context.

These changes to popular culture are transformative. The 3Ds – digitization, deterritorialization and disintermediation – are recalibrating the google effect (Brabazon, 2014). Deterritorialization of texts ensures that popular culture gains layers and undulates in new ways through space and time, at increasing speeds. Through a lockdown, texts can move regardless of national, regional or city boundaries. With hierarchies in flux, the relationship between popular and unpopular culture transforms. Un/popular culture discovers new audiences. The radical, the different and the defiant are hooked into the cloth of conformity

and then pull, bend and warms the stability of its surface. Through this commodification of information-seeking and the confluence of shopping and searching, popular culture warped under the google effect. It gained new textures as it moved. Popular and subcultures were founded on inventing – and investing in - the authenticity of texts, whether punks, mods, the Kinks, The Jam or Elvis Costello. Yet all texts are equal before the download. All texts are popular culture in waiting. To create and / or return hierarchies to cultural forms, digitization must be disrupted. Covid has shown that when the domestic and the digital dialogue with intensity and heat, the hierarchies of popular cultural value melt through both the speed of delivery and the emotional power. High popular culture is commodified culture. Low popular culture, which may also be productively described as un/popular culture, revels in the domestic, the messy, the funny, the uncomfortable, the frightening, and the odd. Why un/popular culture is such a useful phrase is that it confirms the speed of movement between categories and how unpopular topics, subjects and ideas can infuse the dominant environment. Like postmodernism and postcolonialism, the prefix holds a powerful role in the word that follows. As an andragogical term for claustropolitanism, the use of diverse punctuation can be productive: un-popular culture, un/popular culture, and un↔popular culture.

Popular culture splinters and fractures despite digitization, and indeed because of it. Everyday cultures are shredded, and expectations are subverted. With the proliferation of so many screens in the claustropolitan present, the management of information is challenging. The definition of high popular culture and low popular culture is determined by the speed and interface of delivery. It is also framed by information literacy: how much knowledge is required to decode the text? How is specialist vocabulary, history and genre managed and negotiated? In these microcultures – like dressing up and filming the process of walking a bin to a street curb for collection – this knowledge is celebrated and recognized. It is un/popular culture, a space for bins, anti-fashion, humour and excess. The question is how this digital moment and text finds micro-audiences. The circulation speed of un/popular culture creates a differentiation that blocks and shreds the simple binary oppositions of high and low culture and instead creates undulating, digitized, smash cut, time-shifting, customized texts.

One remarkable example is Existential Comics (<https://twitter.com/existentialcoms>, 2020). The smash cutting of words with very different etymologies is productive and important. It is un/popular culture for the end of the world. Described as “a philosophy webcomic about the inevitable anguish of living a brief life in an absurd world. Also jokes” (2020), it is rude, provocative, brilliant, and banal. Its tinkers with cultural categories and slices pretention with the skill of a surgeon. To offer some examples.

April 27, 2020, 5:08am

It must suck to be an economist right now. Even during normal times everyone understand that they can't predict shit, and now all of the sudden people are asking them things like “what effects will oil selling for negative money cause??”, lmao as if they will know (Existential Comics, 2020a).

April 23, 2020, 2.22am

So, it turns out that all the people who have been calling leftists entitled babies who can't deal with adversity are on complete meltdown because they can't have haircuts, golf, or Baskin-Robbins for like 3 months (Existential Comics, 2020b)

These Tweets are not just posted. They are discussed, analysed, pushed, and probed by 330,000 follows. This is un/popular culture: popular in its unpopular knowledge development. From such a context, the andragogical capacities of popular culture are clear. Citizens learn about men, women, sex, love, danger, profit, loss, work, pleasure, and despair. Such un/popular culture captures, codifies, and shares diverse and complex experiences and renders them meaningful. Un/popular culture is not ephemeral. It is weighted by the lived memories of the people that shared it.

At the end of the world, what civil rights mattered in Covid capitalism? Zombie Studies scholars had not prepared researchers for the answer. Claustropolitanism provides the productive frame to understand that toilet paper and the right to get a haircut at a time of our choosing were the priorities, even when the threat of sickness and death were foreclosing alternatives. Therefore, the last part of this article explores how knowledge transforms through the agitations of un/popular culture.

### **5. The Claustropolitan University: Research at the End of the World**

University time is slower than most of society, structured through semester and terms, grant deadlines and grade releases. Now, more is demanded of us. Particularly for those of us working the humanities and the social sciences, radical scholarship will not be funded through clichés of knowledge exchange, industry partnerships or national priorities. But through the 3Ds – digitization, disintermediation and deterritorialization – and open access dissemination portals, an accelerated academia can emerge. Rigour, clarity, and transparency are crucial. Accountability and verification are necessary. These attributes cannot be gained through the gatekeeping practices of disciplines and corporations that rank journals, exclude inconvenient citations, and devalue the scholarly monograph. Claustropolitanism demands more of us.

The greed of the Global Financial Crisis was sustained because public funding subsidized private excesses. The slogan ‘too big to fail,’ which was used to justify public bailouts of privately-run corporations, now applies more widely to the United States. David Cay Johnston described this culture as “bankers before brains” (2018, 194). The role of the researcher – squeezed by claustropolitanism – in this current crisis will be different. The United States can fail. The world will recover. Donald Trump’s lack of leadership during Covid, including the confusions between talking and reading, tweeting and the construction of policy, confirms that the US military, economic and political power has declined. Trump’s lack of experience with governmental structures, his volatile temper, and the insertion of family members into key posts signals the end of the long Global Financial Crisis. It took a pandemic, rather than incisive shift in regulation, to reveal the horrific portrait in the attic of capitalism.

The pathway for scholars is clear. Keucheyan suggest that, “the task of critical thought ... is to make a new sense of temporality emerge” (2013, p.248). Scholars do not accept a truth as offered by the powerful. They do not allow tweets to pass without comment. The transformations of capitalism – what Sam Sellar and David Cole described as “an endless now” (2017, p.48) – reconfigures notions of the working day, alongside expected roles, and responsibilities. Our task is clear. We are creating knowledge for the end of the world. The combination of claustropolitanism, capitalism and Covid has activated a post-truth, post-evidence, post-expert society where the truth, references, research, and verification do not matter. On April 23, 2020, as part of the performance art experiment that was the Donald Trump daily briefings about

the Corona virus, he proclaimed the value of exposure to light and injecting disinfectant to remove the virus from the body. Such a statement seems irrational, hysterical, bizarre, weird, and profoundly dangerous. However, this statement happened. It is real. This is claustropolitanism. This is politics at the end of the world.

A question that probably some of you are thinking of if you're totally into that world, which I find to be very interesting. So, supposedly we hit the body with a tremendous, whether it's ultraviolet or just very powerful light, and I think you said that hasn't been checked, but you're going to test it. And then I said supposing you brought the light inside the body, which you can do either through the skin or in some other way. And I think you said you're going to test that, too. Sounds interesting, right? And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in one minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning, because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it'd be interesting to check that, so that you're going to have to use medical doctors with, but it sounds interesting to me. So, we'll see, but the whole concept of the light, the way it kills it in one minute. That's pretty powerful (Trump in Funke, 2020)

Brilliantly and rapidly, un/popular culture summoned this irrationality and revealed the madness through Sarah Cooper's comedy and the TikTok interface. She re-imaged this speech, using the live words from the former president, but through the body of a confused woman (Watts, 2020). The chaos created by a man without expertise in science or medicine, and seemingly denying the relationship between ingesting poison and sickness and death, was not allowed to stand. Un/popular culture and claustropolitanism collided and created resistance through laughter.

Digitization, disintermediation and deterritorialization enabled a deviant leisure from lockdown. Twitter – which alongside TikTok is the metaphor and metonymy for accelerated culture – downloaded the rage, humour, disgust, and horror into a hashtag: #trumpisalaughingstock. Millions of tweets flooded this hashtag, mocking a President of the United States. His vanity – in broadcasting his opinions and commentary without expertise – has presented a bill. The scale of his errors was so clear that the world shared something extraordinary: laughing at an incompetent leader. This was a deterritorialized, disintermediated globalization that operated outside of the interests of corporations, neoliberalism, and capitalism. This was the cleansing claustropolitan laughter – perhaps tinged with hysteria – at the end of the world.

Donald Trump's response to being an international laughingstock was a failed and truncated press conference the following day and – perhaps appropriately – three tweets sent in rapid succession.

April 26, 2020, 7:31am

What is the purpose of having White House New Conferences when the Lamestream Media asks nothing, but hostile questions, & then refuse to report the truth or facts accurately? They get record ratings, & the American people get nothing but Fake News. Not worth the time & effort! (Trump 2020a)

April 26, 2020, 7.47am

Remember, the cure can't be worse than the problem itself. Be careful, be safe, use common sense! (Trump 2020b)

April 26, 2020, 7.53am

I never said the pandemic was a Hoax! Who would say such a thing? I said that the Do-Nothing Democrats, together with their Mainstream Media partners, are the Hoax. They have been called out & embarrassed on this, even admitting they were wrong, but continue to spread the lie! (Trump 2020c)

In each case, millions of respondents presented footage that demonstrated the lie within each of these statements. Because deviant leisure and claustropolitanism aligned in a domestic environment, the lockdown created the time and community for digitally enabled citizens to expose the lies. This is disintermediation. Ordinary people with an internet connection tweeted a president, and their views can be read by millions of people internationally. The impact of these tweeting culture – summoning an un/popular culture – cannot be measured. Yet the victory of Joe Biden and the – if overdue – banning of Donald Trump from Twitter can be contextualized through these cultural forces.

This is a different moment in history and popular cultural studies. This is high theory for the end of the world. It is not cosmopolitan integrationism. This is claustropolitanism, fuelled by deviant leisure, fragmentation, fear, denial, a deep consciousness about the limitations of capitalism, and the movement of inflections through a highly contagious virus without a vaccine. While neoliberal politicians attempted to recalibrate an economy and a return 'normal' exploitative capitalism, the cost of these policies is the death of citizens. Rarely in history have economic decisions revealed such a stark social cost. This is Marx on Meth. If there is to be a future of our choosing, then scholars in the humanities and social sciences must summon new interfaces, new research questions and honesty in the economic undergirding of our social inquiry.

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