

Tokyo drifters: The negotiation and regulation of generational precarity in *Terrace House*

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NECSUS 10 (1), Spring 2021: 5–25

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/tokyo-drifters-the-negotiation-and-regulation-of-generational-precarity-in-terrace-house/>

Abstract

As reality television has shifted steadily in the direction of scandal, drama, and high-stakes emotionality, the Japanese reality series *Terrace House* is notable precisely because of the ordinariness of its content; hinging on the observation of young working individuals as they live together and get to know one another. This article aims to explore the significance of this series, particularly in terms of the growing precarity of younger generations in Japan, demonstrating how *Terrace House* cultivates a neoliberal subjecthood whose aim is to master the art of precarious living – both for the sake of the individual and the nation.

Keywords: drift, Japanese popular culture, national futurity, reality television, youth precarity

Introduction: *Terrace House*, an ordinary anomaly

Episode 4 of *Terrace House: Boys & Girls in the City* opens with two housemates, Hasegawa Makoto and Nakada Minori, hanging out in the living room of their luxurious shared home in Tokyo. Midori notes that none of their other housemates are home, before announcing that she is bored. Makoto agrees, and invites her out for a run. They decide to cook something beforehand. Upon checking the refrigerator they realise that there is nothing to eat. Makoto instead suggests that they go to a *yakiniku* restaurant, and Midori sleepily exclaims her excitement at the prospect of eating meat for dinner. Although

this scene may seem relatively uneventful, these kinds of mundane daily interactions are at the very core of the Japanese reality series *Terrace House* (Fuji Television 2012 – Present; Netflix 2015 – Present). Hinging on the observation of six strangers living together and getting to know one another, in *Terrace House (TH)* we watch as the show's participants hang out on the couch together, as they do household chores, and as they casually date one another. There are no challenges for the cast members to complete, no prizes, and no winners. In fact, the cast members are not required to interrupt their work or social schedules in order to participate in the show, and are free to move out of the shared *TH* home whenever they please. Indeed, for many viewers, especially those outside of Japan, this 'boringness' or 'ordinariness' is central to the show's appeal, offering a change of pace from the scandal, voyeurism, and high-stakes emotionality that has come to dominate reality television production.[1]

The banal atmosphere of *TH* is constructed both through the show's 'open format' and the lack of guidance or rules set for the participants. However, this same banal content and open format also serves to facilitate subtle forms of social interrogation and regulation that are at work within the series. Although there has been relatively little academic focus on *TH* thus far, it is notable that prior discussions of the series have also focused on both its open format and lack of overt drama. Urbano and Araujo, for example, note that the show's flexible format, and the lack of guidance given by production staff, encourages the participants to embody a specifically Japanese form of authenticity, one premised on preserving a sense of common good and morality that is highly valued in Japanese society.[2] Similarly, through a discourse analysis of conflict resolution within the series, Smith demonstrates that there is a tendency among the *TH* participants to prioritise the harmony of the group over their individual concerns, in such a way that is very much in line with Japanese societal expectations[3] While both of these analyses may point to the ways in which *TH* reinforces social norms surrounding collectivism and moral duty, both overlook the ways in which the series is also engaged in *renegotiating* or *redefining* acceptable social trajectories in Japanese society. This renegotiation is most evident when we consider two key factors of the series: the generational and economic makeup of the participants, and the panel commentary that punctuates each episode of the show.

By focusing on the lives and lifestyles of members of Japan's younger generations, *TH* negotiates how we see and understand the often precarious

realities these young working individuals face. And, in typical reality television fashion, *TH* regulates the behaviours of the cast members as part of a broader pedagogical framework.[4] By observing not just the social interactions of its cast members, but also their economic activities as both workers and consumers, *TH* utilises its contestants to construct neoliberal behavioural templates for its audience.[5] Most importantly, *TH* features a team of panelists who offer commentary on the actions and interactions of the cast members. The series then not only observes the daily routines of members of Japan's increasingly precarious generations, but also explicitly comments on, interprets, and evaluates their behaviours. By demonstrating how the *TH* format is constructed with the social and economic realities of young Japanese workers in mind, and by analysing the regulatory discourses propagated by the show's panelists (and to an extent the participants themselves), this paper will demonstrate how the series seeks to mould generational precarity into something desirable and productive. In short, this paper aims to reveal how the specificities of the *TH* format are crucial to its efforts to promote subjectivities that not only perpetuate the social order, but also adapt it in times of precarity.

A generation adrift

One of the most crucial details to this analysis, and one that should be made clear from the outset, is that the everyday banality so central to *TH* does not immediately read as precarious. As far as reality programming is concerned, the depiction of younger generations in this series has much more in common with the kinds of attractive lifestyles portrayed in shows like MTV's *The Hills* (2006-2010) than it does with more exploitative 'poverty porn' forms of reality television. Rather than employ handheld or remote cameras, the cinematography in *TH* hinges on wide-angle shots that allow us to indulge in the glamorous and trendy environments occupied by the cast members, from the beautiful homes they share, to the restaurants and cafés they frequent. These wide-angle shots allow us to revel in the spectacle of their lifestyles, while a minimal editing style and the pervasive use of soft-focus lenses contribute to the creation of a relaxed and carefree aesthetic. However, as representatives of young, working generations in Japan, the seeming lack of precarity among the cast members of *TH* begs the question as to whether

these individuals are genuinely unprecarius, or whether we need to re-evaluate how we understand and identify precarity. The question of recognition is particularly important here as precarity is not a uniform affection; one need not tick all the boxes of its definition in order to experience a precarious existence. As a feeling or condition, precarity is made up of many distinct yet interlinked insecurities, and experiences of precarity can vary from one local or national context to the next. Identifying the signifiers of a precarious existence, then, is central to understanding how *TH* regulates the present reality of generational precarity in Japan.

In his discussion of the emerging ‘precariat’ class, Guy Standing outlines the central characteristics that differentiate the precariat from other class groups, noting that a common thread running throughout the conditions that define a precariat ‘consciousness’ is a ‘constant sense of transiency’[6]. Standing demonstrates that the labour instability intrinsic to global capitalism requires members of the precariat to ‘flit between activities’, leading to an occupational instability that feeds into a larger crisis in self-narrative.[7] Alienated from traditional career paths, as well as the ethics, communities, and life trajectories these careers encompass, members of this precariat class find themselves increasingly frustrated, directionless, and uncertain in relation to their futures, both professional and private.[8] Standing argues that the precariat are a group whose membership is defined by various forms of instability and transience, with ‘insecure jobs, [and] uncertain access to housing and public resources’ particularly prevalent.[9] Most notably, Standing points to a new and growing variety of precariat, populated by educated twenty- and thirty-somethings who had been promised ‘a bright career of personal development and satisfaction’, only to find that neoliberalism and globalisation have brought about a society premised on ‘tiered membership’ and ‘flexible insecure labour’.[10] Economic liberalisation, alongside a competition-based market system, has created an environment in which this precariat class must drift from one uncertainty to another.

These forms of socioeconomic transiency are very much visible in the Japanese context. Following the collapse of its ‘miracle economy’ in the early 1990s, Japan implemented extensive neoliberal labour market reforms.[11] This neoliberal reform has led to the decline of Japan’s once prevalent lifetime employment model, while also heralding a corresponding increase in *freeter* work, with these non-regular and part-time workers becoming a significant aspect of Japan’s stagnating economy.[12] Between the years 2007-2012, 26% of male school graduates and 49% of female school graduates took

on non-regular employment following graduation, figures that increased dramatically from 8% and 19% respectively in the 1980s.[13] Those engaged in such contingent work also face discrimination within the broader labour market, and it is increasingly difficult to secure full-time employment if one has previously engaged in non-regular work.[14] This is particularly the case for women: while the majority of men entering the workforce between 2007-2012 found regular employment by the time they reached their thirties, the number of women in regular employment within this same age bracket decreased.[15] Of course, the implications of neoliberal reform do not stop at the level of employment, and Japan's economic decline, combined with its ageing population, has also created particularly unique housing and social crises. The instability of Japan's economy has brought with it diverse forms of urban housing insecurity; 'internet cafés, capsule hotels and fastfood [sic] restaurants' have now become common housing alternatives for those who find themselves confined to contingent and part-time work, unable to afford rent.[16] Lacking secure and stable housing, this 'drifting poverty class' is consequently unable to establish strong social ties.[17]

Such feelings of social dissociation also relate to the 'status frustration' noted by Standing, where these younger precarious individuals increasingly feel alienated from established social structures, and struggle with a 'feeling of having no future'.[18] This sense of lacking a clear trajectory or life-defining narrative further exacerbates the problems of sociality and social reproduction affecting younger generations in Japan.[19] Flexible, liminal, and transitory experiences are now the new norm for younger generations in Japan, with processes of temporary place-making, both in domestic and professional spheres, becoming an essential practice. What is common or collective in these different precarious realities is that they each involve the *drifting* of the individual. Many younger Japanese individuals must increasingly practice processes of imperfect belonging when it comes to employment, housing, home-making, and sociality. They must drift in and out of any number of contingent realities, learning to frequently re-adjust themselves to impermanent conditions. What is collective or communal about precarity for these young working individuals is that it is defined by a sense of drifting transience, as they move from one form of social and/or economic insecurity to the next with very little to tether them to the corporate-family nexus that has long been the definition of stability in Japanese society.[20] This sense of drifting transience is the foundational characteristic that defines this genera-

tional precarity among young workers in Japan. At the same time, where precarity has become the norm for these individuals, it is also something they can learn to master. Mastering precarity, learning to *drift* better than others, is now a necessary skill that many younger Japanese individuals must acquire.

A genre for generational precarity

It should be stressed that this notion of *drift* functions as a rhetorical device that helps to conceptualise, and therefore make more readily identifiable, the specific precarious socioeconomic realities that have become common among young Japanese workers. Moreover, understanding this generational precarity as a drifting experience, as something defined by intransiency and impermanence, also grants a new perspective to the flexible ‘open-door’ format of *TH*, especially when we consider the working realities of many of the show’s participants. While a few cast members do have more stable careers, the majority balance part-time jobs in retail or food service with occasional modelling work, university studies, sport and dance training, and other forms of non-regular employment. For example, cast member Yuuki Byrnes (*Boys & Girls in the City*) works as a hip hop dancer and entertainer alongside a part-time job in a burger restaurant. Similarly, Haruta Mizuki from the *Opening New Doors* season works as a freelance translator and writer while also starting her own lingerie brand. The majority of *TH* cast members find themselves balancing multiple working commitments in similar ways, always bound by liminal and transitory conditions. Crucially, these cast members often claim to be working towards some kind of personal or professional goal, but very few actually realise their ambitions during their time on the show. Instead, they are often bound to a state of vacillation, trying to realise their ambitions, while also having to juggle multiple professional commitments to make ends meet. The cast members convey a drifting and transitory existence in that they are always in the process of working towards something, of trying to get somewhere, but very rarely do they arrive at their destination. They are always in motion.

The facilitation of these drifting socioeconomic realities is built into the very format of *TH*: by allowing its contestants to continue to lead their personal and professional lives during their time on the show, and by allowing them to move out of the house whenever they please, the show both recognises and makes room for transient socioeconomic realities. More than

simply accommodate these drifting realities, however, *TH* is also engaged in the negotiation and regulation of such generational precarity for its viewers. In particular, the unique 'open-door' format of *TH* harnesses and exploits this drifting condition in order to regulate how precarity is perceived by the audience. The question of genre is particularly pertinent here, as genre is a device that already serves to address and manage lived experience. As explained by Berlant, genre functions as an aesthetic lens through which life is given meaning and order can be maintained.[21] It is a set of expectations about how to act in, and how to interpret the present. Following this line of thought, Elliott and Harkins see genre as a mechanism that allows for the interrogation of neoliberalism's 'territorial and temporal boundaries', as well as its 'cultural formations'. [22] It is through a coalescence of 'aesthetic forms, formation of capital, and institutionally sedimented forms of reading' that genre becomes more than a traditional formula for discourse, and instead can function as a kind of constructive and constitutive form of documentation, one that reveals not only how neoliberalism undergoes periodisation, but also how cultural and aesthetic forms arise within and in response to the neoliberal condition.[23] Genre, then, is a means of both charting socio-economic change and documenting how these changes are interpreted and regulated.

Crucially, where established generic conventions no longer speak to lived experiences, Berlant argues that new conventions will emerge that serve to mediate changing affective experiences of the world.[24] Similarly, Elliott and Harkins suggest that neoliberal economic realities colour aesthetic forms and transmute generic conventions to reflect the prevailing conditions of their production.[25] These 'genres of neoliberalism', they suggest, are specific aesthetic mutations of established generic conventions that surface in response to changing socioeconomic conditions.[26] These aesthetic mutations can, in turn, engender new perspectives on neoliberalism's own periodisation.[27] In the case of *TH*, the series' specific interpretation of the observational co-living reality format is indicative of the emergence of new generic conventions that seek to respond to the shifting socioeconomic realities faced by younger generations in Japan. In this way, *TH* can be understood as a refashioned interpretation of the dating and 'intimate strangers' reality sub-genres outlined by Misha Kavka, with the cast members sharing beautifully designed, aesthetically pleasing homes, with separate shared bedrooms for the male and female participants.[28] This romantic intimate strangers concept is then situated within the domestically popular variety show framework,

with the show employing a dedicated team of celebrity panelists whose commentary punctuates the observational footage.[29] Moreover, in allowing the cast members to continue to frequent their jobs as normal, these shows recognise that one's employment status (or lack thereof) is a defining feature for the neoliberal subject who must navigate a highly competitive labour market. This allows the show to acknowledge that the social, moral, and romantic capital of these cast members is contingent on their ability to successfully adapt to shifting socioeconomic conditions.

Moreover, by not allowing the cast members to make a permanent home out of their shared accommodation, *TH* further encourages its cast members to lead transitory existences by requiring temporary forms of place-making. Crucially, the open-door nature of the show prompts the cast members to embrace their temporary condition rather than attempt to establish themselves in any one social context. The housemates are encouraged to not only take advantage of the social and personal opportunities presented by the show's open doors, but also to take control over their own temporariness and move out of the house of their own accord. The open-door format of *TH* ensures that its cast members continue to lead a drifting existence by necessitating their continued economic participation, which itself requires them to remain bound to insecure and non-regular forms of employment, while also taking on the additional precarious labour of reality television participation. The contingency of this participation further contributes to the liminal and transitory conditions experienced by these drifting cast members. Even if they do not enter the house in a particularly precarious situation, *TH* ensures that they all engage to some extent in insecure, liminal, and transitory realities.

Alongside these more structural factors, the commentary provided by the celebrity panelists supplies an important interpretive and regulatory function with regards to the lifestyles of the show's contestants. Unlike other reality shows in this subgenre, *TH* does not feature 'camera confessionals' in which the cast members reflect privately on their experiences in the house.[30] Rather, this form of reflection and interpretation is provided solely by the celebrity panelists, who discuss together the interactions of the cast members and their implicit meanings. While this commentary is mostly humorous and light-hearted in tone, in evaluating the behaviours, lifestyles, and morals of the cast members these celebrity panelists participate in the interpretation and regulation of neoliberal subjecthood. And, given the

show's focus on the lives of young working individuals, the panelists are actively engaged in managing both how the lives of this drifting generation are perceived, and the kinds of social capital available to them. In particular, as the working lives of the cast members figure prominently alongside their social interactions, the panelists are negotiating not just the social and the romantic, but are in fact regulating the intersection of work ethic, sociality, and social reproduction. In this manner, they play an important role in determining how the lives of this drifting generation are understood, how they fit into the wider social order, and crucially, how this social order can be maintained and managed during a period of heightened socioeconomic change.

The 'right' kind of flexibility

The generational microcosm cultivated by *TH* is one populated by flexible *freeters* and transitory individuals, and within the world of the show drifting socioeconomic realities are very much the norm. But such non-regular forms of employment and social transiency are not typical markers of success in a neoliberal economy, and for a generation widely excluded from traditional modes of socioeconomic progression, social capital is an increasingly elusive concept. In this manner, *TH* is not merely normalising the precarious transitory existences that affect Japan's younger generations, it is also negotiating the kind of drifting conditions that can be accommodated within a neoliberal subjecthood. The capacity of reality television to set such behavioural expectations is well documented, with Alison Hearn noting that reality programmes typically provide their audiences with 'templates' for acceptable forms of subjecthood.[31] As a 'site of ideological and material production', reality television is typically in the vanguard of 'new modes of capitalist value-generation'.[32] The 'reality' of *TH*, however, is focused not only on the promotion of new modes of value-generation under capitalism, but also the reframing of neoliberal subjecthood in times of precarity. The discourses cultivated by *TH* seek to ensure that the capitalist modes of value-generation can continue by constructing a mutated neoliberal subjecthood that embraces a productive drifting condition, while condemning aimless and unfocused drifting individuals.

A central component of the 'acceptable' drifting condition constructed by *TH* is an effortless and cool flexibility, one that runs throughout the profes-

sional, social, and domestic lives of the cast members. ‘Flexibility’ here suggests an adeptness and proficiency in processes of temporary place-making, both in professional and private spheres. A drifting condition defined by flexibility can be considered valuable, as it signals a willingness to adapt to shifting socioeconomic conditions in order to succeed, even if these conditions are increasingly precarious. The valorisation of flexibility in *TH* is most visible when it comes to the working lives of the cast members, and a central thread that runs throughout each iteration of the show is a preoccupation with the careers of the individual cast members. When the cast members meet each other for the first time, their employment status and line of work are an important talking point, and the first impressions associated with their working lives become a decisive factor in their reputations throughout the show. The cast members and panelists consistently return to the topic of work in their conversations, commenting on and evaluating the career trajectories and work ethic of the different *TH* residents. It is through the discourses of the cast members and the panelists that a template for the ‘right’ kind of flexible worker is constructed, as they negotiate the kind of labour flexibility that is deserving of social valorisation. In *TH* those admired for their hard work are the cast members who display a natural flexibility while maintaining high standards across their various jobs.

Cast members such as Nakamura Takayuki (*Opening New Doors*) and Handa Yuto (*Boys & Girls in the City*) are complimented by the panelists and their fellow housemates for demonstrating precisely this kind of flexible, effortless, and consistent work ethic. Handa Yuto is a particularly illustrative example. An aspiring architect, Yuto balances part-time work as an interior designer and outfitter while completing his degree and preparing for his graduate school application. Immediately upon his arrival Yuto is dubbed ‘Mr. Perfect’ by the show’s panelists for being good at everything he does. Described as ‘perfectly balanced’ (P2: Ep 25) by panelist Yoshimi Tokui, Yuto is admired by the panelists and his fellow housemates alike for his hard work, consistency, and level-headedness. Upon his departure he is referred to as a ‘legend’ by Tokui, while panelists Babazono Azusa and You struggle to believe that ‘there’s actually a man like him’ in the world (P2: Ep 35). Yuto is considered cool and attractive by the panelists because he embodies perfection ‘from beginning to end’ (P2: Ep 35). He successfully balances school and work with his time at *TH*, and maintains high standards in everything he does. Yuto is praised because his ability to be flexible does not hinder his productivity. The discourses surrounding the working life of Yuto and other cast

members like him indicate how one can be considered a valuable member of society even where traditional markers of social capital are not present.

While productive labour flexibility is celebrated in *TH*, cast members who are flexible in unproductive or inconsistent ways find themselves criticised or questioned by the show's panelists, and by their fellow housemates. Matsuzaki Shohei, a cast member from the *Tokyo 2019-2020* series is a case in point. Like many *TH* cast members, Shohei works several different jobs to get by financially. Primarily a model and actor, Shohei also takes on construction and journalism work throughout his time on the show. Although Shohei openly espouses the principles of a diligent flexible worker, stating he admires those who have 'tried many things' and who 'are good at all of them' (P1: Ep 2), he is later criticised by his housemates and by the panelists for his poor work ethic. In particular, while Shohei repeatedly states that he tries to give an equal amount of time to all of his interests, there is no indication that he does any of them very well. As panelist Yamasoto Ryota puts it, his desire to give equal time to his different projects is a way of excusing his 'lack of effort' (P1: Ep 2). Although he is a flexible worker, Shohei is not considered remarkable or constructive because he does not excel in his flexibility. Shohei, then, is almost too willing to embrace a drifting condition; he is happy to float without much concern as to where he will end up, and without feeling the need to shape or perfect his movements. While *TH* seems to promote the acceptance of a liminal and transitory existence, it only celebrates those who work to make their transitory realities a beneficial and productive experience.

Directed drifting

These discourses on productivity and work ethic go beyond the promotion of a flexible drifting condition, with purposefulness also becoming a distinguishing feature of the 'right' kind of drifting individual. In *TH*, a flexible work ethic alone is not admirable unless it carries with it some kind of meaning or significance. Criticism of Shohei, for example, is not focused solely on his mediocre flexibility. Rather, he is criticised for his overall lack of purpose, a failure that in turn impacts his personal and professional reputation. Shohei considers himself a 'jack-of-all-trades', and perceives this kind of unfocused adaptability to be a legitimate approach to flexible working realities (P1: Ep 4). However, those around him, particularly fellow housemate Haruka, see him as aimless and unfocused for not having a 'true passion' (P1: Ep 2). Unlike

Yuto, who is dedicated to his goal of becoming an architect, Shohei works multiple different jobs but has no overarching narrative or purpose to give meaning to his efforts at work. While Yuto balances several different jobs, there is no question as to his motivations for working hard; he clearly states on multiple occasions his desire to become a successful architect. Shohei, on the other hand, is seen as unmotivated, not simply because he does not put enough effort into his work, but because he lacks a goal or dream that would validate that effort. Flexibility is most valuable, then, when it is done with purpose.

In this vein, those who do not work hard enough to achieve their goals, or whose goals are deemed unsatisfactory or unrealistic, are often denounced or chastised by their housemates for their lack of determination. Nishinoiri Ruka (*Tokyo 2019-2020*) is one cast member whose aimlessness is questioned by the panelists and his fellow housemates, with his vague and rather childish goal of becoming a 'Marvel superhero' a particular concern. Notably, his fellow cast members feel that he is not putting enough effort into achieving his goals, however unrealistic they may be, and they encourage him to take up additional activities such as English lessons and acting classes to benefit his employment prospects. Ruka does work part-time, but, like Shohei, because he is not working toward any particular goal, his sole part-time job is deemed insufficient. Unlike Shohei, however, Ruka does demonstrate personal growth during his time on the show, taking the criticism of his fellow housemates and the panelists into consideration. Ruka learns how to be a more productively flexible individual, taking on additional part-time work, while also working toward achieving smaller personal goals, like learning to cook or studying English. His efforts are celebrated by the panelists, who recognise not only that he has 'come a long way' during his time on the show, but also that he has the potential to achieve even more (P3: Ep. 2). Ruka learns the value not just of hard work, but of working toward a certain goal, of having a direction, and for this reason he gains social legitimacy with the panelists and his fellow cast members.

The difference in attitudes toward Shohei and Ruka reveals that neoliberal yearnings continue to govern the transmission of social capital for this drifting generation, despite their incompatibility with contemporary precarious realities. Neoliberal citizenship is largely regulated by an aspirational politics that values self-reliance and self-improvement, while normalising middle-class social and professional ideals.[33] Those who fail to conform to these aspirational politics are marginalised and faulted for their inability or

unwillingness to adhere to this narrow set of neoliberal criteria.[34] Indeed, the very idea of a drifting aimlessness seems antithetical to the purposeful self-improvement of neoliberal subjecthood. However, where this template of the determined and self-driven neoliberal subject is no longer compatible with increasingly insecure socioeconomic realities, *TH* attempts to expand typical conceptions of neoliberal subjecthood in order to preserve an increasingly fragile social order. Many of the cast members in *TH* seem to be acutely aware of the important role played by such aspirational politics in their ability to succeed as neoliberal subjects; they recognise that striving to realise one's dream is a means of garnering social legitimacy, and they consistently encourage one another to work hard with this in mind. In a society that still values 'well-trodden' career paths and middle-class aspirations, working towards a defined professional goal becomes a means of gaining some level of social capital, even where that dream may never be realised.[35] Working towards a goal, drifting with *direction*, becomes a source of social capital where established paths are no longer accessible, even if those goals never come to fruition.

Most notably, many of the cast members are working toward particularly distinctive goals that do not adhere to the 'Japanese dream' of company-oriented lifetime employment.[36] In fact, the goals espoused by the cast members are typically quite ambitious, such as aiming to join a national sports team, working towards becoming a commercial pilot, or wanting to be a Hollywood actor. These are goals that require both skill and dedication in order to be fulfilled, and are accompanied by celebrity status, prestige, and elevated forms of social capital. By aiming to realise such distinguished goals, however close they may or may not come, the *TH* cast members hope to garner social capital by association rather than through actual achievement. Drifting in the direction of something ambitious or impressive is a means of gaining social capital in times of precarity, when traditional avenues to social legitimacy are increasingly difficult to follow. Directed drifting of this nature functions as a means of legitimising contingent working realities, and this legitimacy, in turn, allows these individuals to garner social capital despite their drifting condition. So long as one is working hard toward a respectable or impressive goal, and does not drift aimlessly, then precarious working realities can be accommodated within the framework of neoliberal subjecthood.

The branded self

Given that such directed drifting can only provide a limited form of social capital and stability, the cast members must, in a sense, compensate for their drifting condition by reinforcing their neoliberal subjecthood via alternate means. In particular, the goals declared by the cast members need to be part of a larger process of constant self-refinement. Their personal and professional aspirations need to be in line with the overall self-narratives and self-improvement trajectories professed by each cast member upon their entry into *TH*. Aspirations, then, are most effective as a means of gaining social capital when they are part of a wider self-branding effort, one that spans the personal and the professional. In this sense, the goals of the cast members are important not only because they provide a kind of intermediary social capital, but because they also contribute to the construction of a cohesive and profitable self-brand, which in turn helps to generate reputational capital. Indeed as Urbano and Araujo note, the *TH* format creates an ideal space in which the contestants can perfect the image they project for others.[37] Central to this process is that the show encourages its participants to watch the show while they are living at *TH*, allowing them to see how they are perceived by the panelists and their fellow housemates.[38] This reflexive quality of the *TH* format thus provides the participants with the occasion to perfect their personal self-brands.

As discussed by Alison Hearn, personal investment in the management of one's reputation is an increasingly important social and economic practice, particularly when 'personal visibility and fame' are imbued with cultural value under a capitalist 'image economy'.[39] Where attention is monetisable, processes of 'self-branding' become increasingly important, with individuals undertaking such affective and immaterial labour with the aim of garnering reputation, attention, and potentially even profit.[40] The personal visibility engendered by these processes of self-branding seeks to generate positive reputational capital that can then be profited from in the 'digital reputation economy'.[41] In this reputation economy, self-branding is a strategic skill that involves the management of relationships for economic gain, with the performance of sociality helping to create a positive personal reputation that also carries professional significance.[42] The skill with which the individual is able to move between the personal and the professional while maintaining a consistent and cohesive self-brand becomes a testament to their social and economic value.

The logics of these image- and reputation-based economies are perpetuated by the *TH* format; time spent at *TH* amounts to an additional form of labour and an additional source of capital, both economic and social. *TH* becomes another opportunity to construct a positive self-image and reputation with the aim of increasing one's work prospects. The combined exploration of the personal and professional at work in *TH* is reflective of these self-branding processes, and the cast members with the most consistent and well-defined self-brands are often those recognised as attractive by the panelists. The clarity of character that defines a cast member like Yuto, whose purpose and goals in life are clear, and whose overall conduct is always consistent, is precisely why the panelists can identify him so readily as 'Mr. Perfect'. Yuto's self-branding is well-defined; he presents himself early on as a determined worker and diligent individual, and his actions are consistently in accordance with the expectations set by these self-branding efforts. Consequently, his self-brand and the reputational capital it generates allow Yuto to drift *better*. Yuto is recognised as attractive and desirable by the panelists and his fellow cast members not just because of his looks and personality, but because his strong self-brand indicates both his adherence to a neoliberal ideal of self-improvement, and his ability to employ neoliberal ideologies as a means of mastering his precarious drifting condition. Rather than prevent his self-improvement, Yuto's drifting condition becomes a valuable tool, one that allows him to demonstrate the consistency and strength of his self-brand despite the inconsistency of his drifting experience.

Other cast members, like Shohei or Kobayashi Kai (*Tokyo 2019-2020*) are socially problematic in the eyes of their housemates because they do not play to the logics of an economy based on image and reputation. Shohei, for example, is chastised by Haruka for not having an identifiable brand, either personal or professional. She states that it is disappointing if a person 'can't tell what you're about after talking to you' (P1: Ep. 2), pointing to the negative reputational impact poor self-branding can have. During a particularly tense confrontation, Kai is berated by his fellow housemates for not living up to the expectations his brand creates. Although he presents himself as an aspiring comedian, he is chastised by the other cast members and the panelists once they realise that he is not particularly funny, and that he often suffers from stage-fright when performing. Not only does he not live up to his comedic self-brand, but he is also unemployed, and only takes on occasional part-time work where absolutely necessary. In both the cases of Shohei and Kai, their willingness to drift without effort or purpose hinders their ability to self-

brand or self-improve, and this negatively impacts their social standing in the house.

TH values and promotes as desirable the cast members whose self-brands are both consistent across multiple spectrums and profitable in socio-economic terms. Crucially, the promotion of self-branding as necessary to the labour of 'being' serves to further naturalise and perpetuate the logics of a neoliberal reputation economy. As Hearn notes, reality television is a genre that, through both its textual content and modes of production, advances the 'broader logics of contemporary capitalist production'.^[43] In particular, the 'branded selves' the performers construct through their participation in reality television become templates for the audience, demonstrating how one's self-presentation and self-performance can become profit-generating activities.^[44] In particular, many of the cast members who have consistent and popular self-brands go on to secure paid social media advertising deals and modeling work. In this manner, *TH* constructs a behavioural template for its audience that promotes the monetisation of the self through branding tactics as a legitimate and necessary labour for the socioeconomic success of this drifting generation. Those who are seen as socially and professionally problematic, like Kai and Shohei, have their failures blamed on their incompetent or reluctant self-branding efforts. Never mind the structural and cultural barriers that have engendered their precarious realities, for both Kai and Shohei their socioeconomic inadequacies are simply the result of a failure to engage with neoliberal skills-of-the-self.

Envisioning the future in times of precarity

Where precarious and drifting realities are the new norm for Japan's younger generations, *TH* attempts to renegotiate the criteria for neoliberal citizenship by constructing and promoting a drifting individual who embraces productive precarity as an integral part of their self-refinement processes. If neoliberal subjecthood is defined by the values of self-gain and self-reliance, then the ideal neoliberal individual constructed by *TH* is one who gains reputational and social currency through the self-management of their drifting condition.^[45] In a sense, *TH* helps to define a successful 'hustle' specifically tailored to the socioeconomic realities faced by young Japanese workers, essentially selling precarious employment conditions as a path to fulfillment and success. Central to this process is the series' promotion of a subjectivity

that sees drift as legitimate, desirable, and rewarding. As noted by Hearn, reality television often serves as a means of confirming the ‘desirability’ and ‘naturalness’ of new forms of affective labor for the audience, promoting forms of subjectivity that embrace the logics of free market capitalism.[46] By populating the series with decidedly attractive and stylish *freeters*, *TH* both normalises and romanticises generational precarity to construct a subjectivity that presents drifting as a normal, if not gratifying, experience.

The question remains however, as to what purpose this normalisation of drift serves, especially when we consider how the lives of the show’s cast members deviate so drastically from Japan’s longstanding norm of ‘corporate familism’.[47] The key to understanding this renegotiation of neoliberal subjecthood is to look beyond the issue of generational precarity itself, and to contextualise *TH* within Japan’s equally precarious and uncertain sense of national futurity. As drifting realities become more and more common among its younger generations, and as fertility rates continue to decline, Japan is heading towards an increasingly uncertain and precarious future. As in many other countries, the development of Japanese society has hinged on what Lee Edelman refers to as ‘reproductive futurism’, that is, the notion that hard work in the present will build a better future.[48] Central to this concept is the figure of the child, who becomes a symbol of futurity and thus embodies the social good.[49] But, where conceptions of the nation rest on the nuclear family and stable employment, the collapse of these structures also signifies a symbolic collapse of the nation and the promise of its future. It is here that shows like *TH* aim to intervene; through the observation and management of ‘ordinary’, young working individuals, the show regulates not just present generational precarity, but also helps to shape national futures. If the present precarity of youth threatens to become the future precarity of the nation, then *TH* attempts to mitigate these risks by co-opting how precarity and its causes are perceived in such a way that will allow the nation to persevere despite the disintegration of its current foundations. Ultimately, *TH* aims to give shape to, and restore a sense of optimism towards, an increasingly unpredictable and disconcerting national future.

Crucially, the open-door format of *TH* facilitates the construction of behavioural templates that seek to provide stability within or in spite of drifting realities. The social microcosm constructed by the *TH* format helps to envision new forms of national futurity. The lives of the cast members indicate what national futures could and/or should look like. The flexible, purposeful, and productive drifting condition idealised in *TH* helps to shape a nation

where precarity is no longer perceived as a threat but rather becomes the new neoliberal ideal. Most importantly, the blueprint for national futurity constructed by *TH* also rests on the manner in which romance becomes fused with labour and profession. Although not quite the corporate-familism that once drove development, *TH* seeks to reassert a form of reproductive futurism by closely associating economic productivity with romantic capital in such a way that aims to promote social reproduction. The series attempts to shift its normative centre in the direction of part-time and flexible working realities, thus accommodating and regulating Japan's drifting generation. In many ways, the promise of futurity offered by *TH* is a contradictory or false promise. It is a series that both curates and perpetuates what Berlant refers to as 'cruel optimism'; that is, a dedication to the fantasy of the good life, and all of the social, economic, and political structures that promise to make this fantasy a reality, while also rendering it out of reach for most.[50] *TH* may attempt to renegotiate what the normative centre looks like to suit shifting socioeconomic realities, but as with all norms, those who fail to fit the mould are relegated to the social periphery.

And yet, it is within the social microcosms of these shows that we also find a glimmer of hope. As noted by Anne Allison, where traditional social structures no longer dominate, new forms of 'social living and belonging beyond the workplace and family' are required.[51] The nuclear family has long signified home, belonging, and hope for members of society, but with the decline of dating and marriage, new forms of belonging and hope need to be constructed. The unique co-living arrangement of *TH* offers precisely this; it represents new forms of social living and belonging designed specifically with young, liminal, and transitory generations in mind. And with new forms of belonging comes the possibility of new forms of hope. Where younger generations in Japan are increasingly experiencing feelings of disidentification and disaffection as a result of their precarious social realities, the communal environments constructed by *TH* offer not just new opportunities for social anchoring, but also possibilities for social cohesion from which new hopes for the future might emerge.

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Notes

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- [3] Smith 2018.
- [4] Kavka 2012.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Standing 2014, p. 16.
- [7] Ibid., pp. 17-23.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid., p. 16.
- [10] Ibid., pp. 10-17.
- [11] Piotrowski et al. 2015; Vij 2015, p. 171.
- [12] Lee & Shin 2017; Piotrowski et al. 2015; Vij 2015.
- [13] Gordon 2017.
- [14] Lee & Shin 2017.
- [15] Gordon 2017.
- [16] Hirayama 2010, p. 119.

- [17] Ibid., p. 123.
- [18] Standing 2014, pp. 30-31.
- [19] Ibid., p. 22.
- [20] Allison 2015, p. 39.
- [21] Berlant 2011.
- [22] Elliott & Harkins 2013, p. 7.
- [23] Ibid., p. 11.
- [24] Berlant 2011, p. 9.
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- [26] Ibid.
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- [28] Kavka 2012, p. 83.
- [29] Galbraith & Karlin 2012, pp. 6-7; Lewis et al. 2016.
- [30] Kavka 2012, p. 84.
- [31] Hearn 2016, p. 10.
- [32] Ibid., p. 3.
- [33] Lavrence & Lozanski 2014; Pimlott-Wilson 2015.
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- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Mathews 2006, p. 122.
- [37] Urbano & Araujo 2020.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Hearn 2016, pp. 9-10.
- [40] Ibid., p. 10.
- [41] Hearn 2010, p. 423.
- [42] Gandini 2016, p. 124; Powell & Snellman 2004.
- [43] Hearn 2016, p. 3.
- [44] Ibid.
- [45] Esposito & Fernandez 2014.
- [46] Hearn 2016, p. 11.
- [47] Allison 2015, p. 39.
- [48] Edelman 2007, p. 117.
- [49] Edelman 2007.
- [50] Berlant 2011, p. 3.
- [51] Allison 2015, p. 54.