

A Theological Anthropology of the Undead: Did We Fail to Decay?

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To conceptualize a non-anthropocentric theological perspective that can help humans navigate through the age of the Anthropocene, I construct a theological anthropology of the undead by exploring the decomposition happening on the body of zombies. To do this, I will first argue that there are real-life zombies whom the neoliberal political-economic process has expelled. Arguing that *hikikomori* are such zombie, I examine the life of *hikikomori* by looking into the space they occupy offline and online through a non-intrusive, observation-based cyberethnography. These spaces reveal ingenuine mechanisms that avert people's gazes. The dynamics of such aversion exposes a powerful process that decomposes the political system of democracy and the economic system of neoliberalism. From this analysis, I construct a theological anthropology of the undead by revising the Christian concept of resurrection from the perspective of decomposition.

1. Introduction

Today's human-caused climate crisis that bestowed the title of Anthropocene to our time calls for an alternative to an anthropocentric perspective that governs the current theological anthropology of Christian communities. This work excavates wisdom from the world of microbes or decomposers, the often disregarded elements in our ecosystem, to view the political and economic world of humans. Zombies' decaying skin, hunger, and lifeless life provide a very fitting location for this task. Using the metaphor of zombies as the undead, I build a novel understanding of the *hikikomori*, or individuals living in seclusion in their room for extended time without outside contact, who have a prophetic voice that may allow us to look at our world in a radically different light. However, the journey to get there follows a convoluted path through a very unfamiliar territory.

Therefore, I start with a roadmap for our journey. I will first argue that there are real-life zombies whom the neoliberal political-economic process has expelled. To construct this claim, I examine the life of *hikikomori* by looking into the space they occupy

offline and online. These spaces have ingenuine mechanisms that avert people's gazes, so I will examine the dynamics for such aversion in detail, revealing a powerful process that decomposes the political system of democracy and the economic system of neoliberalism. From this analysis, I will construct my theological anthropology of the undead by revising the Christian concept of resurrection, which assumes the individuality of the resurrected body.

1.1 We Fail to Decay

We start our journey with zombies' birthing ground—the tombs. The modern tomb culture operates in a sphere that puts a significant distance between the dead and the living, which was not the case in the near past. James Scarth Gale, a missionary of the late nineteenth century to Korea, recorded his crosscultural experiences in his journal (2018, 22). His first impression of Seoul at that time was centered around the smell of dead bodies decomposing. He visited Seoul during various deadly epidemics, so each household probably had a dead body decaying in their front yard in the tradition of hay



burial (*Ch'opun*): the dead body is placed on a raised wooden table or stone pile and covered with hay so that the body can decay completely. Then the remaining bones are collected and carried outside of Seoul's wall to be interred into a raised ground tomb, where the rest of the funeral process will be completed (see Chöng and Choi 2003). Not so long ago, the dead decaying among the living was not an unfamiliar sight.

Similarly, the official funeral of the king also involved a five-month period in which the body decayed among the living.¹ The length of the time the dead body was allowed to stay with the living was determined by social status of the dead, with the longest period reserved for the king. Among the thirty-six ritual steps from the king's death to the construction of the royal tomb, the delicate process of preparing the corpse involves first putting on the daily attire of the king and then covering the body with more than 100 layers of clothing. These clothing items function like the hay in the hay burials, protecting the decaying body, providing a safe decomposition site. The king's body decays in a special place prepared in the middle of the palace where the royal coffin is placed for the coming five-month period, receiving daily visits from family members and officers, until the royal coffin is finally moved to the official tomb site that is built during this period.

Such funeral practices were erased during the Japanese colonization period, namely for public health reasons but also to destroy traditions that could be the base of any political resistance. Decomposing bodies were to be erased from the public view. Hay burial practice, which requires double internments, were replaced by single internment practice that puts the dead body in underground tomb within a certain time frame. Thus, the distance between the dead and the living grew greater.

The modern world of coffins and vaults reveals the human fear of decomposition. The technology of corpses involves all efforts to prevent the natural elements from interacting with the dead body to slow down the decomposition process. The most ecologically sound corpse treatment remains simple inter-

ment into the ground and covering with dirt so that no other chemicals and human-made materials enter the underground to form chemical or microplastic pollution. For countless reasons, we are failing in this task.

A Western burial ground once taught me that the theology of resurrection can touch the primal fear of the posthumous decomposing body. I was passing by a cemetery with an atheist friend, who read the inscription on its gate, "The Dead Shall Be Raised." He commented that this inscription always creeps him out. This eschatological phrase signifying resurrection was a signifier of the zombie apocalypse for him.

1.2 Zombie

Zombies, while deformed, remain in their bodies. The individuality of the zombie, with the expression of personhood in decaying skin and singular hunger, manifests in the most marginalized spaces. Reports like, "Tranq Dope: Animal Sedative Mixed With Fentanyl Brings Fresh Horror to U.S. Drug Zones" (Hoffman 2023), pinpoints such spaces where the xylazine/fentanyl (the so-called zombie drug) epidemic actually produces zombie-like experiences on the streets in Philadelphia. Or maybe we find similar scenes in the most impoverished places in our society where medical care barely reaches, as reported regarding the city of Los Angeles in an article titled, "Medieval Diseases are Infecting California's Homelessness" (Gorman and Kaiser Health News 2019). However, while we find such marginal spaces often hidden from public view, they show up in media constantly, addressing this society's direst and most prevalent social and economic margin—zombies have a long history of representing such social reality.

Since they first appeared in the 1932 movie *White Zombie*, zombies have been haunting theater, literature, and the imagination of scholars across fields. Even without considering metaphors like zombie enterprise, zombie clients, zombie personal computers, and zombie mines, zombie-ness has become terminology that defines the narrative of political science and economics as in zombie liberalism (Lee 2014), zombie capitalism (Harman 2009), and zombie society (Krugman 2020). In Korean scholarship, zombie research focuses on understanding humanity and the lack of political agency in the neoliberal world (Lee 2018; Söng 2020; Kim Ŭ. 2021; Kim Y. 2021; Lee 2021). The most recent Korean Netflix series *All of Us Are Dead* (2022) is a critique of the so-

¹ The details of this process were recorded by Hong Kyehi in 1758 during the reign of King Yöngjo in Kukchosangryepop'yön, which is translated into modern Korean by National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage in 2008. A helpful educational video demonstration of this process can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/96cUjU25NgY?si=FDbM2cDOgucD7u7w>.



cioeconomic divide in public schools that projects the public fear into the deadliness of the Zombies created out of a teacher's desperate effort to rescue his ostracised son, while another Korean Netflix series *Kingdom* (2018) depicts the politically powerful manipulating the general populations, who turned into zombies, perhaps reflecting the ultimate fear of those in power. The uncontrollable deadly zombies are the media's social commentaries on the society where the human decays without will in the neoliberal world.

In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown (2015) analyzes democracy's undoing by the neoliberal process in which the neoliberal rationality of the *homo oeconomicus* vanquishes the political agency of *homo politicus*. In this paradigm, the rationality of neoliberalism has turned human political subjects into economic objects and human beings into human capital rather than economic agents seeking their profit. The rationality of neoliberalism permeates every nook and cranny of contemporary human behavior and desires. Pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn (2016) observes that the human agency assumed in political equality is replaced by the principle of equal opportunities, thus turning political human agency into human capital competing against other human capital, isolating each human in their cage by blaming failures as their fault. This situation generates what he calls the third order of suffering, often unnamed and undiagnosed but ubiquitously felt in the neoliberal society.

While the third order of suffering pervades everywhere, neoliberal society's marginalized constitute surplus human capital in the economic terms of the neoliberal world. These individuals do not merely experience agony; instead, they face ejection from the system, a phenomenon sociologist Sakia Sassen (2014) calls "expulsion." The expelled have many faces and names: lepers, crazy, criminals, homeless, and zombies. If we overcome the instinct to avert our eyes from the scariness of zombies, we see that their faces and bodies are traumatized, decaying in pain. Given their birthing ground in neoliberalism, their trauma tells the story of Roger-Vaughn's third-order suffering. Then the question becomes, how do they look in real life?

There are several scenes of expulsion already familiar to Korean eyes. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when Korea systematically implemented the punitive measure of neoliberalism imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), we witnessed a surge of suicide and homelessness in the

adult male population, who had been the head of the household. Recently, Korean society has been struggling with a high suicide rate in the teen and young adult population. Korea has been marking the highest suicide rate in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries for many years, with unusually high rates in the teens, 20s, and the elderly population. The threat of expulsion seems to be ever-present among us.

1.3 Hikikomori

The *hikikomori* phenomenon is curious in the context of neoliberal expulsion and self-destruction. *Hikikomori* are individuals who, for various reasons, have cut off all social ties outside of or even with their family and have lived in seclusion in their room for extended periods: three months or more, or six months or more (definitions vary). They have given up on being an economic contributor to their society. *Hikikomori* is a Japanese term coined by psychiatrist Saito Damaki in 2003 (Korean translation 2005) and translated into Korean as *Ŭntunhy-öng Oetori*, which means loner in reclusion. Due to the difficulty in its spelling in English, I will use the Japanese term *hikikomori*, which has been familiar to Koreans for the last twenty years.

They are invisible, hiding in their rooms, but their traces are everywhere. Their hiding is painful to their family members, and their stories abound among psychotherapists. I have relatives who are semi-*hikikomori*. Students bring stories of their family members and neighbors. Angry at the world, their surroundings, their family, and their supporters that did not give them enough resources to compete in the market; they have given up on their possible financial contribution to the family. Whether they have experienced school bullies or domestic violence, I sense that they hover in the unbearable clarity of their societal location—they are about to be expunged. However, their family members are frustrated by their lack of productivity due to their withdrawal. One student who had to support a middle-aged brother in hiding reported the sense of grinding the endless mill for his sake, a Sisyphian task. One mother sighed, "My son feels like a vampire, sucking on my blood." *Hikikomori* thus turns into the undead. As the about-to-be-expulsed, they could have gone through self-destruction or erasure, maybe to the point of suicide and substance overdose, but they are somehow alive, sucking on the blood of their family members.



Thus, the studies on *hikikomori* observed a high level of anxiety, gross lack of social skills, social withdrawal, hypersensitivity in interpersonal relationships, and aggression in this population (Yang et al. 2007). Another study (Kim and Park 2014), which probably misidentified symptoms as causes, suggests that the tendency to be a *hikikomori* influences gaming addiction behavior. However, as Rogers-Vaughn points out, looking for the cause of suffering within the third order can inadvertently result in secondary victimization within neoliberal trauma.

After the Japanese government recognized the severity of the *hikikomori* problem, they implemented a social support system to address *hikikomoris'* psycho-social limitations and boost their economic productivity. To address the *hikikomori's* social awkwardness, Japan implemented creative ideas like cafes where they served drinks through tiny windows in teddy bear costumes as reported in a *Sora News 24* article (McGee 2021). The goal is to turn the surplus and the expunged into functioning human capital by finding different ways to help the individual function in the market. The experts note that we need patient efforts devoted to these individuals to achieve such restoration.

However, as the undead, the *hikikomori* perhaps demand a more radically alternative perspective. Just as zombies do not recognize relationships and are only out to satisfy a single need, one might perceive their outward appearance as stubbornness and insensitivity to the concerns and pain of those around them. However, if we view the economic productivity they have abandoned as resistance to the paradigm of the neoliberal homo oeconomicus, who have lost their political subjectivity and become human capital, their seclusion may speak to a different form of political identity and subjectivity that warrants deeper exploration. Then, understanding how economic and political subjectivities play out in their lives becomes a critical project. Maybe their undeadly spectral intentionality has a call that I need to answer (Caputo 2015).

2. Method

To answer this call, I look into the space the *hikikomori* occupy by conducting a non-intrusive observation-based cyberethnography. My method was simple. After identifying a cyberspace as a place the *hikikomori* occupy, I regularly set aside several time

slots a day for about one month to stay in that space and observed the dynamics without engaging them. As people in hiding, *hikikomori* are difficult to approach. We know that the room into which they have retreated is a part of their home, overlapping with cyberspace where they quietly but actively engage with the world beyond their physical space. This space is a fractal space haunted by spectrality.² They report that night and day are not distinguishable, as they fall asleep when sleepy and wake up when their eyes open. Their awakening times start by looking into the smartphone, erasing the boundary of time and space. As early as 1997, cultural theorist Paul Virilio noted that in this screen space, architectural elements like a house or room begin to “drift and float in an electronic ether, devoid of spatial dimensions, but inscribed in the singular temporality of an instantaneous diffusion” (Virilio 1997, 360). This undead *hikikomori* inhabits a fluid and liminal space, distorting the gaze directed at them. Therefore, this research articulates the dynamics formed in this liminal space as it engages with the researchers' and others' perspectives, seeking to understand the political and economic subjectivity of the *hikikomori*.

2.1 The Space the Hikikomori Occupy

2.1.1 Family as Their Space vs. the Gaze

Hikikomori isolate themselves within their family environment, which is especially peculiar since psychotherapists unanimously point to family issues as the root of their psychological struggles. Domestic violence, parental pressure, divorce, and alcoholism are often the issues they report. *Hikikomori* are not exclusively from disadvantaged families; some belong to middle-class or affluent families. Yet, they found their external environment intolerable, prompting them to withdraw further into their rooms. This situation is curious to me, having seen many former clients cast outside their family space, forcing them to roam on the street, not allowed back home, or not having a home to which to return. Outside their locked door, the family members that

² I conceptualize the theological methodology of exploring the spectrality in the boundary space of the empire, which is characterized by its fractality, in “Postcolonializing Practical Theological Methodology as Cartography of Boundary Dynamics” (Park 2019).



pained the *hikikomori* are pacing around in frustration, concern, anger, and despair.

What should one call this ironic turn of hiding space? Those who might have run away now run inward despite the acknowledged pain around them. Many regard them as socially withdrawn, viewing them as those who failed in the fierce competition in the competitive market or as surplus humans who might have otherwise roamed around the outskirts of human society. Michel Foucault (1995; 2006) had traced them in the population of the lepers, the poor, and the vagrants, who ironically turned into the mad, the insane, or criminals, who were ultimately hospitalized in asylums or incarcerated. In this strange turn of the hiding place, the vagrant or the marginalized had imprisoned themselves within the family structure, forcing the family members to be the correctional officers. Only this time, the enforcer, the authority to incarcerate, is with the incarcerated. What does this reversal of agency achieve in social exclusion? Perhaps protection? What do they protect themselves from, and how?

As I am teaching spiritual counseling and pastoral theology, depressed students often visit me, seeking help. One student who had gone through severe withdrawal into her room, struggling with depression, anxiety, and an eating disorder, confided in me that many eyes always gaze at her. Their gazes follow her everywhere, and not only her. They show up in many other counseling sessions with young adults. One exemplary theology student once confessed that God is part of or even the whole of such surveilling eyes, distant but always watching, not in the loving parental gaze, but rather in the strict and distant austerity, waiting to see if she fails. These gazes refract with ambiguous angles when they enter the room of a *hikikomori*.

I say refraction, but the gazes may not even reach these spaces. In *Seeing Like the State*, political scientist James Scott (1998) explores how the state invented ways to make the land and population legible to the gaze of the state. Surveying and mapping the land to read the land as the taxable production area translated into accurately naming the people to count them as tax-paying servants of the state. However, in this room, *hikikomori* evades the counting gaze of the state. The investigators of *hikikomori* repeatedly report the difficulty in creating accurate statistics of this population for various reasons. They blend in with the job-seeking population, concealed by families who avoid labeling their secluded

children and siblings as *hikikomori* to protect the smidge of family honor. Instead, they insist their young ones try to achieve the expected neoliberal objective of becoming valuable human capital.

This hiding within the family is especially effective in Korean and Japanese society, where family liberalism functions. According to sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup (2018), in family liberalism the nuclear family functions as one economic decision-making unit, unlike in Western liberalism, where each individual is an economic unit making financial decisions. Paradoxically, in the case of *hikikomori*, the family's economic unit formation makes the individual family member invisible to the neoliberal state, as sequestered within the family's functioning economic structure. Their room, located within the family liberalism's economic unit, effectively evades the state's gaze.

2.1.2 *Internet as Their Space vs. the Gaze*

My effort to find them on the internet was unsuccessful, as they evaded the state's gaze and mine. However, it was obvious that they were gazing outward through the liminal and ethereal screens on their computers, tablets, and smartphones, secluded in their rooms, their voices mixed with others'. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to distinguish them from the others: they resist distinction, categorization, and control.

Regardless, I searched hard to catch the gaze of *hikikomori* looking out from the window of the internet. As they travel through the liminal space of the internet, their gazes turn into fonts, icons, jpeg files, and gif files, then ultimately into the visual language, their visible voice, sometimes even audible. Thus, the search for the gaze turned to the search for their voices on various online platforms. As a non-gamer, I have asked gaming youth about the possibility of finding someone to talk to "live" in the internet games, but this effort taught me how unfit I am for such a task. My search for their political voices in the news media, where people can anonymously comment on each news article, also became impossible, as the voices of *hikikomori* are indistinguishable from those functioning without hiding. On the internet, the distinction between individuals crumbles down, and the unidentified subjectivity of the multitude safely sequestered the voices of the *hikikomori* simply as one of them. Thus, the internet is a safe space where they can see without being seen.

2.1.3 *Their Room and the Tomb vs. the Gaze*

However, their space also has a physical dimension. The image of the physical space floats around on the internet, reported by former *hikikomoris*. The image of their room with piled-up trash formed out of instant food and delivered food packages looks uninhabitable, but the *hikikomori* continue to live there. The plastic items in the trash cannot rot or decompose, yet something is decaying here. The undead seems to be lying in the plastic pile, like the oh-so-familiar scene of the undead lying in the coffin, ready to rise and roam around the human world. Figure 1 depicts a *hikikomori* room.



Figure 1. A photo provided by the owner of the room in *No Cut News* (November 22, 2022)

In the images of their rooms, the resemblance to the tomb or burial vault seems uncanny. The undead occupies both. A grave is where the state no longer gazes; a sheol where even God's grace and gaze do not reach. My constant frustration to find their gaze and voice finally reached this ironic conclusion: I am simply looking at the tombstone that marks its location, but I cannot see inside. A rare occasion in which one looks into the tomb after its interment is to investigate a crime or punish the dead posthumously. The state's gaze has no business there until they identify the corpses as criminals. Thus, their space is unreachable to my gaze until an accident warrants a police investigation.

2.1.4 *Gazing the Space: Depression Gallery Suicide Live-Broadcasting Incident*

In April 2023, a high school girl committed suicide, broadcasting herself live on Instagram as she jumped from a high-rise building on the busiest street in Gangnam, Seoul (Kim D. 2023). At the core of the accident was a "depression gallery," a live discussion board on an internet community platform called *dcinside.com* (see Figure 2). As an SNS platform created to share digital camera images a decade ago, this platform fossilized the term gallery to



Figure 2. A screenshot of the depression gallery page, taken by the author.



denote the discussion boards, which, to the surprise of many, has outlived all other online platforms and still functions as one of the most active interactions in cyberspace.

The depression gallery accident on April 16, 2023, prompted police and news media investigations. These inquiries revealed that primarily depressed teenagers and young adults in their twenties use the discussion board to share their emotional difficulties and find empathy from others facing similar challenges. However, it also attracted cyber predators who prey on vulnerable youth by luring them offline and sexually exploiting them. This girl had posted about being raped by someone she met on this platform and involved in prostitution. In April, she began to urge people to join her in her suicidal effort. They would dine at the gourmet beef BBQ place, play karaoke and games, and then proceed to the building’s rooftop to broadcast the whole process. As the broadcast began, someone called the police, but the efforts to build an air mattress to catch her failed.

The media analysis and reaction to this accident focused on the sex-trafficking crime (*Manyöban-söngp’okryök Hwaldongga* 2023), and the strongly recommended course of action was to close down the depression gallery (Lee Y. 2023). Initially, the police investigation prompted the company to strengthen its policing function. It consisted of erasing questionable posts without warning and adding suicide hotline information at the top and bottom of the boards. As of May 15, the court has decided that there is insufficient irregularity to warrant closing the platform, which has enraged the concerned experts, including forensic psychologists and psychiatrists.

2.1.5 The Dynamics within the Depression Gallery

For me, this incident pointed toward a research jackpot. I found the most probable space frequented by *hikikomori*, and I spent hours in the depression gallery to figure out this community’s dynamics. The gallery’s layout is like any discussion board on online teaching platforms like Canvas or Blackboard. When I clicked on the newest post, it had a terse phrase, often esoteric slang, that I constantly needed to look up on urban dictionary-type online lexicons (Figure 3). These posts all had a picture file that users used almost as identifiers. I learned later that the rules of *dcinside.com* require the picture file, as it originated as a digital camera picture gal-

lery. Once I came out of reading the newest post, the discussion board had ten or twelve more new posts that pushed the post I just saw way down the list.

우울증 갤러리

오른쪽 탭타고 흐른 눈물이 배개 적시는동

2023.06.03 22:46:06



사탕..

Figure 3. A post on the depression gallery

After spending many days on this platform, I looked into other popular galleries where users consumed five pages of discussion board posts each minute. Depression gallery, as fast as its advancement looked in my perspective, was a slow, depressive gallery that moved slower than the non-depressive topic galleries. In this fast turnover, several conversation threads occurred through their likes, which read *kaenyöm*, or “concept,” and *bich’u*, or “not recommended” (Figure 4). If a post grabs the attention of many, it will gain a thread of conversation within the post, which becomes visible by the number of visits and recommendations as a “concept.”

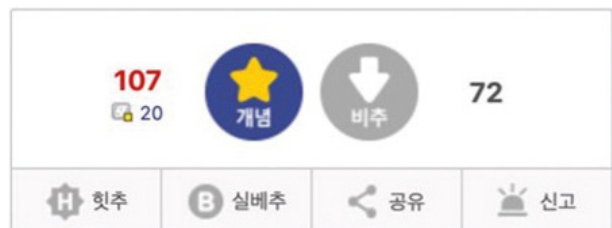


Figure 4. Concept and Not-recommended as Likes and Dislike

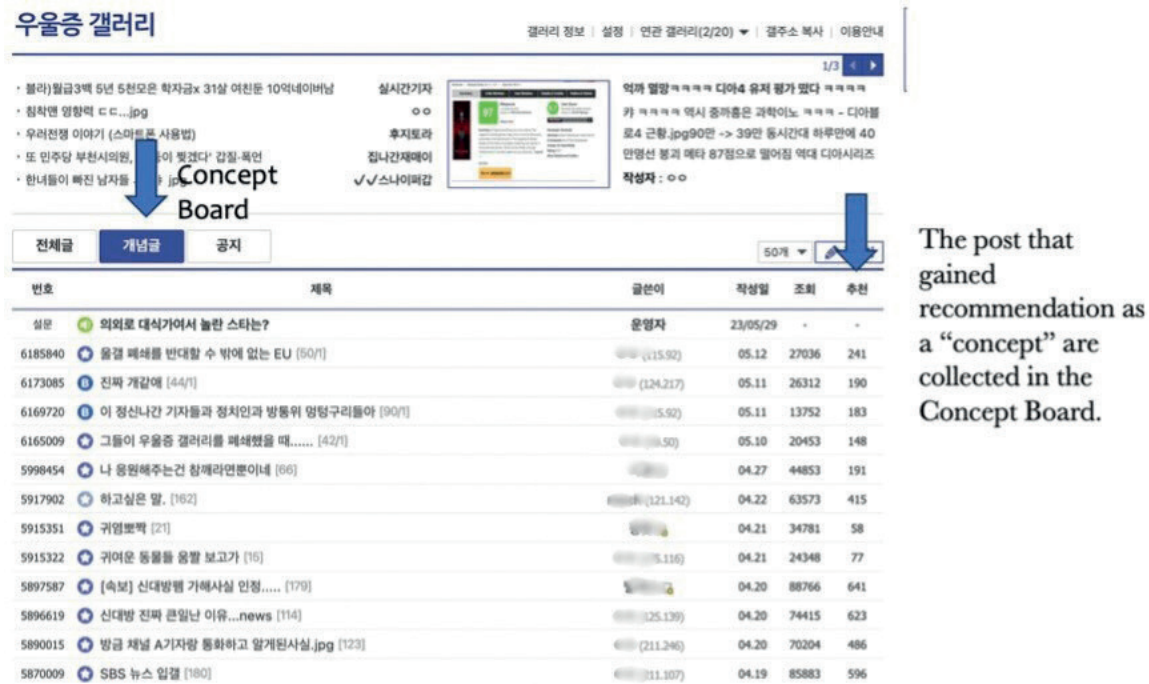


Figure 5. Concept Board

A post gaining many discussion threads moves to another board called Concept Gallery. This board thus turns into the historical record of the most popular posts that generated many responses. When a post gains legendary popularity, the fame travels through the internet, and people take a “pilgrimage” to this post to pay homage and read through the conversation (Figure 5). However, as a general process, the discussions on the depression gallery look fragmented and meaningless. Even the approaches of the sexual predators to the vulnerable seemed fragmented and unintelligible. For a conversation to happen, you need to understand who is speaking to whom, but such fundamental elements were not very visible to me.

Even here, *hikikomori* are not distinguishable. On this board, it is difficult to spot anyone who spends the whole day in this space alone. Those visibly active seemed to stay here chatting for about two hours. Each time I came to the board, new sets of nicknames conversed. The contents of their talk are depressive, but impressively, their activities are not limited to the depression gallery. After pouring out their fragmented thoughts to the unknown others for a while, they find other galleries with more upbeat material and journey through cyberspace. Thus, cyberspaces and cyber actors mingle and become indistinguishable. In other words, the *hikiko-*

mori here do not need to identify themselves as such. They are equal contributors to the relational dynamics forming in this space.

Nevertheless, their traces are there. Among the pilgrimage sites that internet users visit to commemorate a significant internet moment is a ghostly space on the Yahoo Korea server where dcinside had its IP address once upon a time. There remains the suicide note of a super *hikikomori* who terrorized internet communities 24 hours a day—the time spent on the internet by this user marked him as a *hikikomori*.³ This user, *daesenunchönrnyak* (roughly translated as mainstream-by-strategy), had roamed the internet, populating the boards with toxic comments and hate speeches, which made the managers block his posts, and other users resist his engagements. These activities ended when he committed suicide by jumping from his parent’s high-rise apartment building, which the police reported to the community after an investigation. The pure efforts and time invested in these activities became a legend in these communities, warranting commem-

3 The following site is one example where the information about this user is recorded. (<https://bbs.ruliweb.com/community/board/300145/read/30568996>). Gilho Lee (2013) kept a detailed record of this super *hikikomori* in his cyberethnography.



oration in the next cohort of internet users. This user proved that in this space a *hikikomori* can gain the visibility unattainable offline. Thus, the maintenance of such an online presence becomes immensely meaningful.

2.2 Decomposition Happening in the Depression Gallery/DC Inside

2.2.1 Relationship/Friendship

Decomposition happens in this cyberspace. The first site of decomposition is relationship and friendship. The depression gallery operated with an ethical norm drastically different from the life outside the room of *hikikomori*. Although cyberspace constantly displays vulnerability, relationships are not the aim of such expression. In many posts, the users repeatedly evoke the ethical code against *ch'inmokchil*, a derogatory term for friendship. Namuwiki, a Korean wiki site forcefully toned with sarcasm, contains well-researched articles on widely spread phenomena. It devotes thirty-some pages to describing the *ch'inmokchil* phenomenon. This ethical code deters friendship formation on the anonymous internet site, as personal connections expressed on platforms like dcinside galleries would prevent new users from joining the community. In other words, if one newly visits the gallery and notices that the existing users know each other and form conversation based on a personal connection, the new user will assume that this board is operating to maintain their fellowship rather than to talk about the topic of the board. Preventing friendship permits all voices freedom of expression, guaranteeing absolute equality that forms radical democratization. The depression gallery operates very much under such a principle. Each user expresses themselves without receiving friendly empathy. Instead, they see the accumulation of expressions that normalize and validate their experiences.

Some of the most popular posts that got collected as the concept post (*kaenyömkül*) express such process as follows:

Coming to Depression Gallery, I get to see others who are going through similar experiences as mine. It was comforting to see so many of them here. Some had severe symptom histories, but they all said what was on their mind—I also expressed myself without holding myself back. This site helped my healing process. Outsiders say bad things are happening here, but that is only a minor part of our gallery. Those who inhabit this space get com-

forted and even get better. I finally got a part-time job and will go out to do the work. Do you know how much my mom cried out of joy? Have you ever thought about how much this depression gallery is contributing to lowering our suicide rate? (ngng 2023: translation by author)

Researchers pay attention to this ethical code of no-friendship and note the devastating effect of *ch'inmokchil* (friendship) that destroys the online community's self-correcting resilience, ultimately destroying the community (Chöng et al 2018). According to anthropologist Lee Gilho (2013), who conducted a cyber ethnography of the dynamics of dcinside.com, under the anti-friendship code, the collaborative process forms through honoring each individual's freedom rather than through respectful language. Such freedom calls for rigorous maintenance of one's agency instead of succumbing to others' needs, which behavior others passionately disdain as the "slave mentality." Creating an in-group is part of such a slave mentality, and the term that denotes people with such sense is, interestingly enough, a zombie. My pastoral sense of community broke down in this ethical code of no-friendship. A radical sense of equality forms with a new sense of relationality.

2.2.2 Language

A radical community requires radical language. Here, the linguistic hierarchy that distinguishes the formal and informal language breaks down, as the informal language with heavy internet slang becomes the lingua franca. Furthermore, the vulgar speeches that one would deem hate speech outside this space become the usual turn of phrases. The first impression of the linguistic environment of this space seems disrespectful, politically incorrect, and antisocial, but once immersed in it, one gains the sense that it is primarily a way of communication that does not necessarily carry the emotional weight of the terms. The roughness of the language has much to do with the no-friendship ethical code, as the aggressive language prevents friendship formation, which is necessary for the health of their anonymous online community (Lee 2016).

The language decomposes as the free agents and system control collide. First, vocabulary goes through a rapid transformation. Let me give you an example of a famous case of the birth of the term *Jujak*. The users of the StarCraft Gallery noticed that the host of a live-streaming online game fabricated the result and began to make fun of the

host. The host responded by blocking the term *chochak*, which means fabrication, but the users responded by substituting other terms for *chochak*. First, they changed the syllable *o* to *u* to make *chuchak*, which had another meaning. It meant red phoenix, a god belonging to an old pantheon. When the site blocked that term, the users used the names of other gods from the same pantheon, *hyönmu*, *chöngryong*, and *baekho*, to continue their mockery. In the resistance to such system control, the remnants of the currently used terminologies have transformed so much that the users are recording the genealogy of the new terms. Sites like *namu-wiki* archived the detailed history of such terminology developments by linking the events to the original posts, the so-called pilgrimage sites, in which the terminology broke down and, in my term, decomposed.

2.2.3 Democracy

Language decomposition leads to political decomposition. In each gallery of *dcinside.com*, a gallery manager is only visible through the announcement post that always floats on the top of the board. There, the manager claims the right to erase or block users using inappropriate language or posting unrelated content. Given that the lingua franca of this space is unacceptable in the offline world, this claim gives unchecked power to the manager in the eyes of the users. Korean society is well aware of two critical events resulting from such censorship. When the collection of the most recommended posts in *dcinside* turned more and more problematic in its aggression, the managers conducted proactive censorship, which prompted the gallery users to find another site to which they diligently moved the most recommended posts.

This situation was the case with *Ilganbest Chöchangso* (Daily Best Archive) or *Ilbe*, whose users are known for their misogynistic undertone in their language, often hovering over antifeminist political rhetoric. *Megalian* is another site that purports to mirror the misogynistic voices of *Ilbe* through effective yet sometimes very threatening tactics. Both sites gained tremendous public attention as they generated many debates and even violence that required independent examination. Discussions and criticism on the destructive influence of these websites abound. However, here I pay attention to how they resisted the managers' powers, which they call the "state," to maintain their free-

dom without turning into the "slave" of the state. The meaning of the term "state" as the managerial power, however, merged into the concept of the actual state as the political entity in their conversations. Their resistance to such a "state" generates images, videos, and texts full of vulgar satires and slang disparaging state control. Sometimes, they express their opposition through offline activities that defy societal norms, flabbergasting the general population (Kang and Shin 2019).

Under such political understanding, the evaluation system of thumbs up/like or thumbs down/dislike turned into Daily Best or Democratize (Figure 6). In other words, the term democracy deconstructs here to mean the negative system they all agree to dislike.

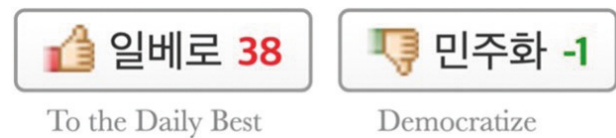


Figure 6.

As public media described *Ilbe* as the problem space characterized by aggressive, misogynistic hatred, it is often scandalous when one's anonymous participation in this online community surfaces. Nonetheless, *Ilbe's* decomposed terminologies of democracy proved to be impactful even among young women. A K-pop idol group member caused a scandal when she used the term in *Ilbe* style during a public radio appearance. She stated that her group did not discriminate against people and added, "We don't do democracy," thus revealing that she frequents the *Ilbe* sites.

Returning to the neoliberal processes that generate the third-order suffering and expungable population, I note that the *hikikomori* are here, possibly being the most engaged and active members of the community given their time at hand. The upper generation sometimes translates their negative public perception into losers, social evil, or a more colorful language such as "trash collection, fascists, extreme soap opera" (Chöng 2013, 332). However, several emerging researchers are calling for alternative perspectives. Taehun Chöng, a history doctoral student at Hanyang University, notes that the dynamics in this community are rather anti-authority and anti-majority, resulting from the exclusion they have experienced (2013). Many younger scholars observe the *Ilbe* population with curiosity and an empathic stance rather than as the object of hateful criticism (Pak 2016; Kang 2013; Han 2013).



The combination of neoliberal expulsion and radical equality forming the radical community resulted in a derogatory yet revolutionary self-conceptualization. Yang Kimin (2014) notes that underneath what is antisocial hate speech lies the *Ilbe* members' self-understanding that they are themselves worms, parasites, and ghosts, calling themselves *ilbechung*. Such language describes their lowly way of existence in the community, which allows the absolute freedom of expression that is less geared to despise the other. It is instead the language among the lowest of the lowest, interacting with one another in the muddy field of dirt, trash, and compost. Their political agency, which cannot function with legitimacy due to their age and social status, becomes that of a sub-human, not bound by political correctness, ethical norms, or state control.

2.2.3 Economics

The economic activities performed in this internet space are no longer neoliberal. While the websites have advertisements on the sides, keeping the "state" going, the relationships among the users are not that of the neoliberal market competitors. However, they are active producers endlessly generating new material and consumers eager to consume and transfer the goods to other internet spaces. Anthropologist Lee Gilho (2013) takes a detailed look into these economic activities, which he conceptualizes in conversation with the gift economy paradigm of Marcel Mauss, Levi Strauss, and Maurice Godelier. Users gain fame for their nicknames in this space when their meme production gets traction. Such production needs a context that draws everyone's attention, from which they construct a humorous/satiric/sarcastic digital meme that can circulate in the space.

When a meme grabs consumers' attention, they receive it with gratitude and adoration, leading to its copying and distribution around the internet or creating a mutation of the meme that circulates online. Through this generative process, the producer becomes recognized in the community as the meme's creator, and they receive acknowledgment for its origin. This process becomes a concentrated activity that requires a significant amount of intellectual energy. The entertainment value in this process is worthy of such devotion and time consumption that does not involve any monetary gain. The neoliberal market does not operate there; instead, it's a space for individuals to share their creations for others to

enjoy. This sense of gratification may not be as accessible outside the internet space.

Such economic activities of the online community users have many other layers of dynamics that make them all the more engaging and enjoyable. In a podcast interview with I Hyön (Hyun Lee) aired on April 12, 2023, economist Ha-Joon Chang addresses the issue of growth in this time of environmental challenges (Lee 2023).

He notes that economic theories have functioned like theologies of medieval times, representing the voices of the ruling class that control the society, and urges us to look beyond the paradigm of the current hegemony of the neo-classical economics that brought about the neoliberal paradigm that sees everything in terms of the market operation. Stepping out of the neoliberal framework, the original intent of the economic pondering becomes apparent: economics is the field that aims at better human life.

Chang notes that economically advanced states must focus on intellectual consumption when facing the current ecological challenges. At the same time, we should allow developing countries with a GDP of less than 10,000 USD to achieve material advancement. In other words, in countries where immediate physical security and hunger are not critical to resolve, we should encourage non-material consumption to derive human satisfaction, thus directing natural resources more effectively toward improving human well-being. The intellectual production and consumption happening in cyberspace achieve exactly such satisfaction. The *hikikomori* who spend hours online engaging in such consumption contributes to ecologically friendly economic activity. The social outcasts on the internet do not engage in self-destructive drug addiction or homelessness. Instead, they indulge in eco-friendly alternative political and economic activities that deter the expelled from material consumption-driven neoliberalism, actively defying the neoliberal rationality that governs everyone offline.

3. Theological Anthropology of Decomposition

Now, I want to move us to another space, equally liminal and transitional as the online space: the world of mythology. In 1927, anthropologist Adolf Jensen (Jensen and Niggemeyer 1939) collected the myth of Hainuwele from northern Indonesia, which



centralized decomposition and began theorizing the dema deity myth.

Nine families of mankind came forth in the beginning from Mount Nunusaku, where people had emerged from clusters of bananas. An ancestor named Ameta found a coconut speared on a boar's tusk and, in a dream, was instructed to plant it. In six days, a palm had sprung from the nut and flowered. Ameta cut his finger, and his blood dripped on the blossom. Nine days later, a girl grew from the blossom, and in three more days, she became an adolescent. Ameta cut her from the tree and named her Hainuwele, "coconut girl." But she was not like an ordinary person, for when she would answer the call of nature, her excrement consisted of all sorts of valuable articles, such as Chinese dishes and gongs, so Ameta became very rich.

During a major religious festival, Hainuwele stood in the middle of the dance grounds and excreted a series of valuable articles (Chinese porcelain dishes, metal knives, copper boxes, golden earrings, and great brass gongs). After nine days of this activity, "the people thought this thing mysterious . . . they were jealous that Hainuwele could distribute such wealth and decided to kill her." The ancestors dug a hole in the middle of the dance ground, threw Hainuwele in, and danced the ground firm on top of her. Ameta dug up her corpse, dismembered it, and buried the cut pieces. These pieces gave rise to previously unknown plant species, especially tuberous plants, which have been, ever since, the principal food of Ceram. (Smith 1993, 303)

For Jensen, this was the etiological myth that explains the origin of the principal crops of the region, in which the dema deity, like Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*, whose dismembered body became the fertile ground from which other living beings formed. However, Jonathan Z. Smith (1993) exegetes this story to reach a very different conclusion in *Map is Not Territory*. The central paradox faced in this story is that Hainuwele excreted the valuable objects, usually used as money in Ceram, thus curiously producing dirty money. This story denotes how the native and European economic systems crashed in what he calls the cargo situation. The cargo generates and exchanges mysteriously produced goods without honoring the reciprocity principle of the gift economy, thus making the gifted items extremely problematic. Therefore, the people killed and buried alive the suspicious products-excreting Hainuwele, but as grotesque as it may seem, such killing is not an unfamiliar theme in many cultural mythologies.

What draws my attention is that Hainuwele's body, regardless of its suspicious origin, decomposes and spawns previously unknown new crops.

Whether her body was mythical as signified by the prophecy in Ameta's dream, by a supernatural ability, or by the colonizing, manipulative deception, her dead body decomposed and produced life-giving crops. Decomposition equalized the previous political and economic agendas and turned them into life. In this process, the former entity, personality, and the former political and economic structure have all disintegrated and regenerated as new living beings, which the community then consumed. Thus, it incorporates into other living beings.

Here, I reach a new theology of resurrection that can contribute to a theological anthropology of the undead. Underneath the resurrection theology that inspired the cemetery inscription of "the dead shall be raised" lies the assumption that the resurrected body will somehow have individual bodily integrity, precisely the premise behind the individuality of each not-entirely-decomposed zombie.

The cyberspace where the *hikikomori* mingles with others who need to resist the neoliberal political and economic system turns into a site of decomposition, which at first seems unpretty and foul-smelling, as we see in the language and the breaking down of the political correctness. However, good, life-generating compost can form in the proper condition, as decomposition has already started. Something radical is beginning; regardless of whether it fits our comfort level, it is gaining its life and resurrecting. In this virtual world, the expelled *hikikomori* and others gain a political and economic platform radically different from what has expelled them. However, those on the outside have not glimpsed this world.

If so, can a Hainuwele type of resurrection happen in this place? Here, the vision of democracy, capitalism, patriarchy, feminism, empires, and colonies all seem to flow in and get decomposed, forming a mirky mess. Then, the next ecological process may turn them into a new life, totally unrelated to what has entered cyberspace, just like Hainuwelen crops. Could such new life constitute resurrection?

In the time of the Anthropocene, when we face the challenge of conceptualizing a radically different, non-anthropocentric vision of the world, I wonder whether we could confront and revise the conventional Christian concept of resurrection. When we resurrect, might we resurrect not in our individual, integral body but as a nutrient to many plants, fungi, and microbes in the ecological world, forming many different lives? Maybe in our ecological pyramids, our hope for resurrection and new life



should be becoming part of radical others, dirt, stone, micro life, fungi, plants, animals, and more, humbly returning what we received.

To put this theological anthropology in a larger frame, I turn to an atheist astrophysicist, Neal de-Grasse Tyson, whom *Time* magazine asked in an interview, “What is the most astounding fact?” He answered:

The most astounding fact is the knowledge that the atoms that comprise life on Earth, the atoms that make up the human body, are traceable to the crucibles that cooked light elements into heavy elements in their core under extreme temperatures and pressures. These stars, the high-mass ones among them, became unstable in their later years. They collapsed and then exploded, scattering their enriched guts across the galaxy, guts made of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and all the fundamental ingredients of life itself. These ingredients become part of the gas cloud that condenses, collapses, and forms the next generation of solar systems, stars with orbiting planets, and those planets now have the ingredients for life itself. So when I look up at the night sky, I know that yes, we are part of this Universe, we are in this Universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts is that the Universe is in us. When I reflect on that fact, I look up—many people feel small because they are small and the Universe is big—but I feel big because my atoms came from those stars. There is a level of connectivity. That is what you want in life; you want to feel connected, you want to feel relevant, and you want to feel like a participant in the goings-on of activities and events around you. That is precisely what we are, just by being alive. (Schlickemeyer 2012)

Then, the stars resurrect in me as my atoms. If a decomposition, even in a cosmic way, can result in my life, I say this is resurrection grace more than enough.

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