Queer will: hikikomori as willful subjects

Rosemary Overell

To cite this article: Rosemary Overell (2018) Queer will: hikikomori as willful subjects, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 19:2, 206-219, DOI: 10.1080/14649373.2018.1463069

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2018.1463069

Published online: 18 Jun 2018.
Queer will: *hikikomori* as willful subjects

Rosemary OVERELL

Department of Media, Film and Communication, The University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

**ABSTRACT**

This article considers *hikikomori* as willful subjects. The *hikikomori* are a portion of the Japanese population who withdraw into their homes. These are mostly young people (between the ages of 15 and 35) and mostly young men. The focus of this article is how *hikikomori* constitute a challenge to dominant national imaginaries of Japan as a “corporate-family system.” This article analyses popular media and psychiatric representations of *hikikomori*, particularly from Saitô’s work as exemplifying Ahmed’s notion of “willful subjects.” It is argued that the *hikikomori*’s apparent willfulness produces them as Queer subjects who are out of place and pace with the dominant heteronormative, masculinist culture of contemporary Japan.

**KEYWORDS**

Hikikomori; Japan; media; “willfulness”; Queer

**Introduction**

I don’t want to meet anyone; I don’t want to answer my cell phone; I don’t want to do anything ….

(Yamamoto [2006] 2007)

This quotation comes from Satô, the protagonist in the anime adaptation of Takimoto’s ([2002] 2007) novel *Welcome to the N.H.K.* He articulates his anomie against a list of things he will not – and does not want to – do. Satô is *hikikomori*. The *hikikomori* are a portion of the Japanese population who withdraw into their homes. These are mostly young people (between the ages of 15 and 35); mostly young men – who become what, in English, might be called “shut ins.” The word derives from two verbs: *hiku* – to pull closed – and, *komoru* – to seclude oneself. Becoming a noun, *hikikomori* signifies a subject who has “willfully” shut himself off from the social sphere. The notion that *hikikomori* is a willful subject is constituted and maintained in Japanese – and lately English – popular media, and medical, discourse.

In Japanese media and popular clinical accounts, *hikikomori* are framed as childishly lazy – as parasaitô (parasites) whose willful withdrawal drains both their immediate family, and the national family of the Japanese state.

In what little academic writing in English there has been on the subject, *hikikomori* are generally presented as passive (rather than actively willful) victims of structural shifts in the Japanese economy (Furlong 2008; Saitô 2013), or considered pathologically – as triangulated in the Oedipus complex (Saitô 2013; Sone 2014; Wilson 2010). Instead, in this article, I consider the idea that *hikikomori* might be thought of as active “willful subjects” following Ahmed’s (2014) consideration that the charge of “willfulness” works to produce particular bodies as deviant, but also that such “willfulness” might work as a type of Queering. The quotation from that opens this piece demonstrates...
Hikikomori’s awareness of their aberration from normative Japanese culture – but also their willfulness to remain in this position in what could be read as a type of resistance to dominant values. While women are also hikikomori, the majority are men and, in popular media such as anime like Welcome to the N.H.K! as well as popular clinical accounts, the hikikomori is often synonymised as male.

Following from this, I suggest that the imperative in popular discourse to position hikikomori as problems, sick and disappointments is due to their apparent willful failure at embodying Japanese hetero-masculinity – so bound to the national imaginary of the “corporate-family” state discussed by Allison (2013).

In short, I want to unpack why hikikomori are considered a problem in Japan – what it might tell us about the contemporary imaginary of the Japanese nation. I do this primarily through an analysis of a book by Saitō (2013), on hikikomori. This book is called Hikikomori: Adolescence without end. I apply Ahmed’s ideas of willfulness to this text. While it may seem limited to focus on a particular book, I do this for a number of reasons. Saitō is considered to have coined the term hikikomori and his book is considered the authoritative volume on hikikomori in Japan and the West. This is reflected in the ubiquitous citation of Saitó’s work in academic articles (in both English and Japanese) but also in Saitó’s profile as an “academic expert” on the matter in Japanese and, lately, Western media. I take his book as productive, then, of the hikikomori subject within the Japanese imagination. This is not to claim that all Japanese people share Saitó’s opinions, just that – with the prevalence of his framing of the hikikomori subject in popular media and academic discourse, Hikikomori: Adolescence without end provides a useful case-study for understanding hikikomori as willful subjects. I also acknowledge that my analysis depends on translations of original Japanese text. While there is always something lost in translation, I still feel this is a valuable case study and, where possible, I have included Japanese words, and explained them, in cases where it is difficult to translate. It worth noting too that, lately, post-#Gamergate, and after the diagnoses of reddit and 4chan “trolls” as pathological, some Western media has taken up hikikomori to describe young men. While this is intriguing, it is the material for a different article. This piece is principally concerned with the hikikomori’s position in the Japanese socio-cultural context as produced and represented by a key thinker on the topic, Saitó.

Hikikomori

Hikikomori is a Japanese neologism, most commonly linked to psychiatrist Tamaki Saitó, referring to social withdrawal by, mostly young, mostly male, people (Saitó 2013, 22, 24–25). Saitó’s designation of this pathology came as a response to what he sometimes suggests is a peculiarly Japanese phenomenon. There is no equivalent in the DSM-IV. Saitó’s book was, and remains, a popular paperback in Japan and translated into English by prestigious Duke University Press in 2012. He presents a detailed account of hikikomori based on quantitative and qualitative surveys and reflections on his own clinics at Sofukai Sasaki Hospital. Saitó refrains from definitively attributing a particular cause for hikikomori. But his project – its very intention – is to categorise who hikikomori are and collate a collection of symptoms. Saitó’s book produces hikikomori as a pathological category. He presents possible clinical and familial solutions, focusing on how the issue can be addressed, particularly by the immediate family, but also by what I understand as the broader “national family” represented by the public health service and educational institutions. It is important to note that his work is prevalent in Japan, and he regularly appears as a “talking head” on Japanese television, and sometimes in Western media. Since Saitó’s original publication, hikikomori...
have become a regular part of the Japanese mediascape – often occupying what Furlong (2008) describes as a “folk devil” status. It is significant that discussions around hikikomori, and when Saitô is presented as an expert on the group, are often generated around moral panics where hikikomori are alleged to have committed a crime, of which more later.13 Nonetheless, hikikomori are also part of the broader cultural lexicon of cultural Japan outside these flashpoints. In their most, arguably benign, mode they occupy a kind of “oddball” or “cute nerd” position in spaces as prominent as Mainichi Shimbun (one Japan’s most popular newspapers) – which refers to them by the nickname “hi-ki” in recent articles. Welcome to the N. H. K.! too positions them as troubled, but zany characters. Common amongst such media representations, however, is the hikikomori’s inability to fit in the Japanese social norms.

Originally, Saitô prefixed hikikomori with shakaiteki – literally “of the social.” However, the phenomenon was quickly shortened to “hikikomori.” The original prefix, however, shows how hikikomori refers specifically to those who withdraw from dominant Japanese society. I suggest this is a mode of willful refusal, which can be understood as a type of act that draws attention to and works as a signifier of the fractures in Japanese society, and failures of, contemporary Japanese hetero-normative neoliberalism. I use Saitô’s popular book as an example of how his account presents hikikomori as a problem.

Saitô’s book (2013, 93) offers a standard psychiatric interventionist account of the condition whilst cautioning against a tendency to presume hikikomori are simply spoiled or lazy. Though he repeats this caution throughout Adolescence without end, Saitô does position the hikikomori subject as one who has failed socially. He frames this in psychoanalytic terms as their apparent disavowal of castration (Saitô 2013, 173–176) or failure to mature into the social system required in Japan.14 This social system, he emphasises, is characterised by an integration into the kaisha (company/corporation), and is thus dependent on success in exams at high school and the acceptance in to a good university (Saitô 2013, 142, 172).15 Saitô (2013, 175) also mentions integration into the domestic nuclear family through marriage as a key part of getting by in the national family context of Japan. Saitô reserves explicit moral judgement on whether these socio-cultural expectations are good or not. Rather, he takes this context as a given and demonstrates how the hikikomori diverge from this and, in the latter half of the book, how the hikikomori might (re)integrate into such a context.

I suggest that the hikkikomori work as an affront to the post-war national imaginary which Allison (2013) deems as characterised by a triangulation between the nation, the kaisha (represented by the father-as-salaryman), and the domestic (represented by the mother-as-housewife). This family corporate system triumvirate might appear at odds with Japan’s apparent embrace of techno-capitalist individualism. However, as Allison details, the nation as nuclear family imaginary – with both male and female toiling to rebuild Japan on the public and domestic fronts respectively – still holds significant sway in contemporary Japan. She argues that, in the current moment of “precarious Japan” – after the collapse of the so-called bubble economy – such a triangulation works as a nostalgic object. As job security wanes and relationships founder, a longing for the apparent stability of the corporate-family state surges forth:

I was rising the subway in Tokyo. Looking up, I saw advertisements for Japan’s National Rice Association plastered inside the train. Inciting commuters to buy and consume Japanese rice, the message was illustrated with a cartoon woman leaning over to feed her child a bowl of rice. A bowl of rice that was also her head: a woman whose very body had sprouted what is considered to be the heart of the Japanese diet. Domestic rice as the mother’s head feeding Japan. […] Just what Japan needs today – the message seems to say […] Heroes feeding the nation Japanese rice; mothers sacrificing
their heads to the family. Nostalgia for the past: for a social factory of [at] home-ism feeding the national economy and also [...] sheltering the soul. (Allison 2013, 98–99)

As Allison points out, Japanese popular media and medico concerns present the hikikomori as “unsheltered souls” – a quandary who demonstrate the loss of the family-corporate national imaginary. Much like in the West, there lies a reactionary nostalgia for when men were hardworking breadwinners and women ran the household.16 This nostalgia is spatialised as what Allison (2013, 99) dubs as “my-home-ism” which invests both the domestic space and nostalgic imagery (such as the rice advertisement above) with an affective charge. It also speaks to the dynamic between the heteronormative structure of the family and its role in the reproduction of the contemporary neoliberal context. Love for one’s family and the correct raising of socially adjusted – compliant – subjects produces a hard-working national-citizenscape.

The hikikomori have also been discussed in Japanese sociological and media studies (Furlong 2008; Hairston 2010; Wilson 2010) which have mostly focused on hikikomori as fallout from the fast ascent of neoliberal capitalism in Japan. Those who do not get along and start producing surplus are left out and maligned. This is indeed the case. But I want to consider the hikikomori from another angle – that of willfulness. I want to consider, in particular, hikikomori as a willful non-normative subject who presents a challenge to demands towards the hetero-normative family nation characteristic contemporary Japanese neoliberalism.

To return to Saitô: he draws on Doi’s ([1971] 1973) pivotal psychoanalytic examination of Japanese society as one of amae – of “love” based on dependency and indulgence. Doi argues that the Japanese family unit is based on amae – a type of loving (amaeru) by the parents (particularly the mother)17 that produces a co-dependent “loved” subject. It is a type of loving which is overly sweet or indulgent, according to Doi. It is notable that the kanji is also for “sweet” and “love.” It represents a candy on the tongue. Doi locates this over-loving as a familial response to decimation of Japan during the Pacific War. He suggests that post-war ushered in a pathological focus on the child as bearing the revitalisation of the nation. He regards the kind of fawning love associated with amae as producing an indebted child-subject.18 The love of the parent comes at a cost – the resuscitation of Japan. To love correctly is to bring one’s child into line with national targets of (re)production. Nonetheless, as Doi warns (and Saitô concurs), to overlove the child does the opposite, it stunts them and makes them unproductive. The management of amae is key. Despite what some have dubbed Doi’s “Japanese particularism” and relative unfashionability in Japanese contemporary psychology (Bovoroy 2012),19 Saitô repeats Doi’s contention that hikikomori is not only a Japanese problem (though he only looks at Japan), rather it is a family problem. I agree. However, I also expand this “family problem” to follow Allison’s understanding of the Japanese nation as a corporate-family. Hikikomori erupt from a familial context – but on a national rather than simply an individualised domestic front. This too complements Ahmed’s notion of the “general will,” of which more later.

The trouble with hikikomori, I propose, is that they reveal the instability of Japanese patriarchal nationalism post-war and the precarity of the national corporate-family through their willful divergence from this ideal.20

**Willful subjects**

Psychiatric and sociological discourse frame hikikomori as passive objects – fallout – within the broader economic decline of post-bubble Japan. Instead, I suggest hikikomori are, in fact, active and willful. Saitô’s work agrees with this proposal – though he frames this willfulness as a failing
which must be rectified through the proper love of the family and the production of useful Japanese citizens. Rather, I argue this “willfulness” – to withdraw, to refuse the obligation of the shishoku (high school-exam-university-career) life can be read in Ahmed’s terms as a Queering of normative masculinity in Japan.

In *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed (2014) offers an account of the figure of the “will” in, largely Western, history. Tracking back to Lucretius and Saint Augustine through George Eliot, Freud and recent self-help and child rearing literature, she suggests that the category of the willful person is someone who errs or deviates from given modes of being in the world. Building on her work on “feminist killjoys” in *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed (2010) argues that such givens are directives towards achieving happiness which complies with white, Western neoliberal patriarchy: “Happiness follows for those who will right” (Ahmed 2014, 4). Those who will correctly – however – are not “willful” (in fact, they are “willing”) – only those who err – who will wrongly – are willful. The willful subject is a problem subject. A perverse and irritating figure. As Ahmed (2014, 17) points out, the willful subject, too, is usually female. This woman – or girl, as often “willful” is a label used for young women – is not only a problem, however: she is also a threat. The figure of the willful subject matters – like the hikikomori do. To be (re)presented as willful or hikikomori is also about being positioned in a particular relation to the social sphere. Ahmed (2014, 3) writes: “by exercising will … ‘the will’ acquires coherence” – the willful subject is able to be named and materialises. To be called “willful” is to be interpellated (Ahmed 2014, 26–27). It produces embodied subjects who, in their very willfulness, deviate from (usually hetero-) norms.

Despite not being a Western country, the way that hikikomori are discussed, particularly in Saitô’s influential work, demonstrates the willfulness which Ahmed discusses. Saitô (2013) notes in *Adolescence without end* that a key outcome of his research is the ability to designate hikikomori as an object of knowledge for the Japanese state and thus generate what he deems proper clinical treatment. He even goes so far as to draw an analogy between hikikomori and pre-antibiotics era tuberculosis – ensuring that hikikomori are produced as unhealthy subjects treatable by medical science (Saitô 2013, 35–36).21 By constituting a signifier for the “condition,” “hikikomori” becomes an identity position that forges hikikomori subjectivity for both the hikikomori and the Japanese public (Saitô 2013, x).22

For Saitô, the hikikomori are neurotic and a clinical solution is prioritised (Saitô 2013, 29). Saitô does not frame hikikomori as a fixed typology based on genetic predisposition, however. They are not “born this way,” but come to matter, and come into being, via their encounters with social – in particular with the family. But, despite his emphasis on socio-cultural contexts, Saitô arguably produces them as clinical objects. The primary context, too, for him is the family and the circulation of amaе in the domestic space rather than a response to the national imaginary of the corporate-family. Though Doi located amaе as contingent on the Japanese post-war context of defeat, Saitô takes this context as given and immoveable – devolving responsibility onto the domestic family. Nonetheless, following Allison’s elision between the domestic and national family through the nexus of the kaisha we can usefully consider Saitô’s comments on the hikikomori family in terms of national familial imaginaries. He states that hikikomori condition is “fundamentally wrapped up in a grudge against the parents” (Saitô 2013, 46), and that this often manifests in a non-normative – regressive – relation with the mother. She becomes the object of violence (Saitô 2013, 41), but also the site for the constitution of amaе for both the mother and child. The hikikomori “wheedles” with her and, quite often (according to Saitô’s statistical survey) demands to sleep in the same bed with her (Saitô 2013, 44). There is no question, in his book, that these people (or young men as he regularly, and importantly, synonymises) are pathological.
Saitô even discusses *hikikomori* in terms of “will.” His third case-study (“Thirty Years Old Male”) displays unmanageable willfulness. He is a “demanding” (Saitô 2013, 20) man who terrifies his parents to the point of them evacuating the family home. The man rages when his parents do not buy him what he wants, eventually culminating in death threats addressed to his parents. On the other hand, the fourth case (“Twenty-Nine Years Old Male”) is described in terms of lacking “strong will” (“This man was not especially strong-willed”). In this instance, a lack of will is implied as what generates the initial withdrawal. Once withdrawn, however, this man develops a will. This is a will to “do nothing” (Saitô 2013, 20) in the face of his family’s attempts for him to get a job and leave the house. This is further characterised by Saitô as “listlessness” (rather than, as he emphasises “laziness”) due to a lack of resolve to force themselves to leave home/their room. The *hikikomori*’s will, in Ahmed’s terms, is misaligned.

As Ahmed (2014, 61–62) writes, “good” will – that is a *willingness* to be compliant with dominant or normative society – needs to be intervened upon (by experts) and worked on by the individual subject. Willingness works as a sign of growth and maturity. It is laboured over – the subject must work in order to will correctly:
The will must be worked into existence in order to maximise one’s chances for living a healthy, happy, and good life. (Ahmed 2014, 61)

According to Saitô, the domestic family is the key site where this labourious process of willing correctly supervised by parents must occur. While claiming to avoid “blame” and moralising, Saitô argues that the domestic unit is chiefly responsible for the *hikikomori*’s predicament and necessary for their “cure,” which he implies is, of course, morally good. Here, Saitô draws on the language of addiction studies to frame the family as co-dependent on the *hikikomori* child who refuses to separate from the private family and integrate into the national family of the Japanese state (Saitô 2013, 98). As in addiction discourse, the family is urged to hold a bottom line in terms of not “waffling back and forth” and remaining “steadfast” (Saitô 2013, 99, 144) in their refusal to indulge the *hikikomori*’s symptoms. This too, echoes neoliberal homilies about individual responsibilisation. Ultimately, Saitô suggests (Saitô 2013, 99), “it is the responsibility of a healthy adult to work” thus “the responsibility of the sick adult is to make efforts to get better.” The family are told, in fact, to “steel their resolve” (Saitô 2013, 103) – to become willful themselves in order to reconstitute the *hikikomori* child as willing to get along in society.

The mess of *hikikomori* is their failure to live up to expectations. They are overwhelmingly from middle-class families, which fit the national imaginary of Allison’s familial triad between nation-corporation-family. Commonly, the father worked in a *kaisha* and the mother as a housewife; usually there were two children, including the *hikikomori*. Divorced and separated families were rare (Saitô 2013, 50).

**Willing nations**

*Hikikomori* are out of place in the domestic family, but also in the national familial imaginary. They refuse the general will – which as Ahmed argues, is often complementary with a national will. She considers how willfulness matters and then, in turn, needs management – particularly in terms of national projects. Building on her genealogy of the willful child in cultural representations, Ahmed also discusses the nation in terms of a family. The stranger/migrant or refugee, then, occupies the role of the wayward unwilling, willful offspring:
The right [willing] path is the path of duty but also of kinship [...]. The willful part is the one who leaves the path of becoming part [of the national family “body”], breaking or threatening to break, the tie that holds a community, a family, a nation together. (Ahmed 2014, 115)

The *hikikomori* is a such a willful subject. They won’t become part of the functioning national family of Japan. Following Ahmed (2014, 13), they “turn up in all the wrong places.” The willful subject is out of place and pace with social norms. In Allison’s terms (2013, 99), they upset the “my-home-ism” associated with the “social factory” of the corporate-family system. They are an irritation or obstacle or affront to the relentless “progression” of (neo)liberal humanism which requires subjects to be (re)productive.²⁸ The *hikikomori should* be in the *kaisha* but instead they are in the home. They refuse the *shûshoku* life laid out for them. They refuse what Ahmed (2014, 56) calls the “general will”; to be caught up in the “momentum” or “press” to comply with the national norms, due to their refusal to go into the *kaisha*. Theirs is not good will in the sense – following Ahmed (2014, 60) – that they do not aspire to or work towards the nationally imagined “good life”²⁹ also outlined by Allison (2013, 143–147) as increasingly precarious. The *hikikomori*’s apparent lack of good will makes them, in turn, apparently undeserving of the good will of others.

To be willing is to be *in place* and to be in place is to comply with a process of normalisation – to willingly become part of the general – to concede to the will of others. The willful subject “recedes into the background” (Ahmed 2014, 89). In the case of the *hikikomori* there is a desire to disappear; to willfully refuse to wear the badge of a *kaisha*.³⁰ As Šatô says in *Welcome to the N. H. K.!* about *hikikomori*, he is and wants to be “nobody.” This too – we might say – is reflected in the comorbidity of depression diagnosed by Saitô. The Japanese word for depression is *utsu byô* – the kanji is associated with hollowing out, receding and disappearing as a subject.

**Willful men**

I suggest though, that willfulness might actually counters the hollowing associated with *utsu byô*. Firstly, to refuse, to be willful, is laborious – it is materialising. As Ahmed (2014, 89) points out – it takes work to disappear into the background when one is already marked as pathological or non-normative. To be unwilling and instead be willful draws attention and makes matter. We can see this in the *hikikomori* subject. They become the locus of family rhythms within the domestic unit and, in their representation in popular media discourse they become an object of worry and concern.

An important point is that, while willfulness is often feminised, Ahmed tracks a specific genealogy of willful men in her work. Importantly, she notes that the willful male is often elided with the willful subject’s failure to comply with the imagined good life of the nation. That is the willful male who is perversely framed as being weak willed due to their lack of *willingness* to adhere to dominant social norms. They are out of place and pace with the nation. This might refer to migrant men or “strangers” or Queer men. This, in turn, constitutes a demand for “education” or training of the failed national male subject in willing correctly. That is, to be *willing* rather than willful (Ahmed 2014, 62).³¹

The unwilling male is seen as misplaced and aberrant. This positioning is certainly evident in Sai-tô’s popular book. The *hikikomori* he discusses experience a sense of being without a place or position in society which Saitô contradictorily acknowledges – albeit following Doi – as potentially due to “some pathology in contemporary Japanese society” whilst also attributing it to individual families. He also notes that standard “straightening” institutions such as school regularly fail these
young men: pressure and bullying at high school were often identified by hikikomori as a trigger for withdrawal (Saitô 2013, 48, 50, 51–53).32

Stewart (2007, 74) discusses the desire to pathologise aberrant adolescent male behaviour in Ordinary Affects. She writes of the post-Columbine rush to diagnose the killers: “It’s as if some quick knowing of why bad things happen would be a sign that we care.” The knower then becomes the one who possesses care, virtue and good will – the will to make the willful become part – to integrate with society.33

This out of place-ness generates hikikomori as a willful subject. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare recognised hikikomori after Saitô’s popular book, but were also spurred on after the two criminal incidents mentioned earlier apparently perpetrated by hikikomori in the early 2000s. Following these crimes (and extensive national media coverage) the Ministry produced a report in 2003 intended to preserve the psychological health of young people who were socially withdrawn (Allison 2013, 73–74). This report – which was distributed to mental health workers throughout Japan. This constitutes hikikomori as a population in the Foucauldian sense of producing them as a group in need of governmental management (Foucault 1991).

They not only needed management due to their spectacular crimes but also due to their apparent “non-productiveness” (Saitô 2013, 32) in terms of Japanese social expectations. This is in terms of working (as either a salaryman or a student working towards becoming a salaryman) Saitô directly links the hikikomori’s pathology to their inability to participate in consumer capitalist society. Saitô (2013, 131) outlines at length the importance of urging the withdrawn child to receive and spend an allowance in order “stimulate desire” but also as a means for encouraging the hikikomori to “participate in society.” According to Saitô, inclusion within Japanese society is contingent on commodity consumption.

Interestingly, Saitô discusses sex in the same paragraph – for the hikikomori are also seen as non-reproductive in terms of their lack of willingness to procreate and adhere to heteronormative relationships. According to Hikikomori: Adolescence without end, a high percentage of hikikomori profess “no experience with the opposite sex” (Saitô 2013, 37, 62).34

The hikikomori’s energy is seen as mis-placed. As Saitô (2013, 60) points out, one symptom is perhaps putting energy into a hobby or furitaa (part-time low-skilled) job rather than, in Ahmed’s terms, becoming a compliant part of the general will and participating as a producer and consumer in contemporary Japanese society.35 This is echoed in an interview with an anonymous psychiatrist in Japanese news website Carpe Fidem (2013). Here, the psychiatrist notes that hikikomori are “hopelessly stuck” without a company job. The hikikomori here is also presumed to be male.

These young men are not only out of place in the national imaginary but also out of time (Saitô 2013, 29). Saitô’s book is “adolescence without end” – a refusal to grow up. He repeatedly talks in terms of “immaturity” (this is throughout the book, but especially on pages 42–45) and “social maturity” being incompatible with the hikikomori.36 In his discussion of co-morbidity, Saitô (2013, 43) emphasises regression – “reversion to childhood” as a key symptom of the condition. This he links tentatively to amae claiming that along with regression, the hikikomori’s dependence on their parents also reverts to childhood levels, which are, in turn in need of proper management or parenting.37

Saitô (2013, 33–34, 35) warns against “romaticis[ing] truancy” which is often the first sign of oncoming hikikomori he worries that by ignoring skipping school parents potentially risk a point of early intervention. Saitô goes on to point out that by failing at school these young people are likely to “slip through the cracks” and will not be able to “participate in society.” Saitô (2013, 43) associates
what he sees as a lack of participation, and lack of willingness to be disciplined by social institutions, as being “out of time” – the *hikikomori* “let … time go by pointlessly.” Pointed time, it is supposed, is being socially and financially productive rather than “spending the entire day in an absent-minded state, wrapped in a blanket.”

**Queer subjects**

Following Queer theory and the ideas of Queer temporality discussed by Halberstam (2005) and Muñoz (2009), we might understand the *hikikomori* as Queer subjects. I do not mean that these young men identify as non-heterosexual, rather that their position in the national imaginary of heteronormative, (re)productive corporate-family Japan is Queer. In Ahmed’s (2010, 7–8) terms, they refuse to straighten up – and out – of deviancy, and align their will with the general (re)productive imperatives of the nation. Saitô frames this as a failure to “mature”:

> [O]ne can look at social withdrawal as arising from the failure to mature as one travels along the path of character development. (Saitô 2013, 28)

Queer temporality – broadly – refers to a pacing a-part from heterosexual markers – biological clocks and such. For Muñoz, this takes the form of cruising – a way of marking time differently. While the *hikikomori* does not cruise, we see this Queer temporality at work in Saitô’s clinical descriptions of the *hikikomori*. *Hikikomori* as occupying adolescence without end is also Queer – they refuse to grow up and move along and align with the general will. He emphasises their aberrance from standard hetero-normative and capitalist modes of timeliness, punctuated by particular points. Apart from their listlessness, a key problem with the young men, Saitô notes, is their unwillingness to produce a future family – to fail in their reproductive duties. Along with the support of the *current* domestic family within which the *hikikomori* is ensconced, Saitô notes the importance of the *potential future* domestic family for the maintenance of the *hikikomori*’s “recovery.” This hypothetical, possible family is necessarily heterosexual. In fact, Saitô equates the *hikikomori*’s healthiness with the demonstration of heterosexual desire:

> I have seen over and over again that a relationship with the opposite sex can be the beginning of a cure for many hikikomori young men … here … love works only when it comes about by chance. (Saitô 2013, 109)

This complements Ahmed who notes how popular discourse frames willfulness as immature or childish. The implication, she argues, is that *willingness* to conform demonstrates maturation and adulthood:

> To become a member is to be willing to participate in a whole. We learn more about why willfulness is deposited in the figure of the child. The child […] signifies the not-yet-subject, as well as the subject to come, the one who comes after. (Ahmed 2014, 123)

Saitô’s insistence on hetero-normative relationships as generative of “recovery” for *hikikomori* normalises heterosexuality within the context of the Japanese national family, but also ensures that the “unrecovered” *hikikomori* is also placed outside this normality. Part of their failure to integrate is their lack of heterosexual identity – their implicit Queerness. This potential, imagined family is normal, straight and curative. As Ahmed (2010, 139) describes, the willing (rather than the willful child) must not only become part of the family, a willing member, seated at the family table, but as part must become a point, willing to extend the family line, to “assemble a new body.” Recall, Saitô’s declaration that the *hikikomori* spends time pointlessly.
The present family – the hikikomori family – on the other hand are also Queered through the allusion to the future temporalised, idealised, hetero-family. As Saitô states, the family works as a co-dependent system which enables the hikikomori’s behaviour. The child, too, and their Queerness, or refusal to integrate rubs off on the family – pushing them further outside the normative national family. The hikikomori does not just hold the individual captive. As the individual takes shelter from the social body, it holds both the individual and family in its grasp. (Saitô 2013, 110, emphases added)

We see here the obvious language of will – the reference to the social/familial body of the general will – but also how this body is disturbed by the willful subject.

In fact, Saitô (2013, 97, 107, 125) argues that key to the hikikomori’s pathological immaturity and failure to integrate into the national family is their inability to recognise their domestic family as Other. The family then collapses – within the hikikomori system – with the affected child to the point where “[p]eople in withdrawal seem to see their families […] as if they were a part of their own bodies.” The Queerness is a family affair of “warped relationships.” The hikikomori family unit is seen as loving Queerly – or incorrectly, or pathologically – to Saitô. This is particularly embodied in the concept of amae where “[t]he sweet feeling of sacrificing oneself for one’s child helps solidify an overly close relationship […] become[s] a kind of intoxicating poison” which Saitô translates into Western psychiatric discourse as “co-dependence.” He continues Doi’s ([1971] 1973) psychiatric assessment that the key problem in post-War Japan is amae. That is, the mode of “over-loving” apparently typical of Japanese mothers contributes to a type of which is at once pleasurable and overwhelming, generating a “poisonous” sickness (Saitô 2013, 126, 133) (the kanji character, recall is a sweet on the tongue).

This Queerness is also spatialised within the “warped” domestic family home. As Saitô (2013, 139) notes, an “unnatural tens[ion] begin[s] to rule over the house.” The home too becomes a pathological site – we see this in popular media as well, particularly in Welcome to the N. H. K! where one of the hikikomori characters, Yûichi, is a bad-tempered 40-year-old who beats his sister and fills the house with rubbish while playing video games online.

In a telling paragraph, Saitô (2013, 136, 137) advises parents to tolerate the hikikomori’s symptomatic messiness within the “sacred territory” of their bedroom, but warns against allowing the child’s “slovenliness” to take over “communal spaces.” In a typically Queer manner, the hikikomori is out of step with the time and place in which they find themselves – whilst the home is their refuge, they also made to feel that they do not belong there (Saitô 2013, 61, 116). Further still, we could understand Saitô’s warning of the hikikomori’s potential expansion into shared space of the domestic family home as indicative of a broader concern that the hikikomori’s “willfulness” might grow in to and Queer the national space of Japan. It is notable that Japan is particularly concerned with declining birth-rates, towards which the hikikomori appear to contribute. Instead, Saitô’s (2013, 159, 161) approach focuses on containing the hikikomori’s unnaturalness within the home space, then the clinic, until eventually they may move into designated social sites like a “hang out centre” with other afflicted young people. Only once the domestic family space has stabilised, advises Saitô, may the hikikomori “turn … outward.”

**Conclusion**

In my introduction, I began with a quotation from Satô, the main character in Welcome to the N.H.K! The quotation “I don’t want to meet anyone; I don’t want to answer my cell phone;
I don’t want to do anything … ” was not complete, however. In fact, the quotation ends with “I don’t even want to live; but dying is such a hassle.” This points us to the willfulness of hikikomori – even if it does appear perverse. It is correct – the hikikomori’s will is one which refuses to live within the normative framework of the national corporate-family imaginary of contemporary Japan. Due to this unwillingness to comply with the general will of the Japanese nation, the hikikomori are pathologised as failures. In this article, I have demonstrated how hikikomori are pathologised primarily through an analysis of Saitô’s book Hikikomori: Adolescence without end. To this significant text, I applied Ahmed’s recent notion of willfulness as a way of understanding the hikikomori as Queer subjects, out of place and pace with the national ideal. While dying might be a hassle, sometimes it is more important to live as a hassle as a means of embodied, material critique of dominant heteronormative masculinity. That is, what I think, hikikomori do.

Notes

1. Figures vary wildly – between 5000 and 1.2 million – depending on sources (cf. Hairston 2010, 312). For some perspective, the Japanese population is 127 million. In Saitô’s (2013, x) work, however, he notes that due to shame many hikikomori remain unreported. Furlong (2008) offers a detailed survey of quantitative data on hikikomori in his work.
2. See Saitô (2013, 31), which is based on a survey he conducted in 1989.
3. Ahmed deliberately spells “willful” with a double “l” to draw attention to the presence of “will” in the standard notion of “willful.”
4. See Beran’s (2017) article “How the ‘isolated man-boys’ of 4chan turned a meme into the president of the United States.”
5. Though Norihiko Kitao is credited with coining the term in the mid-1980s (Furlong 2008; Saitô 2013). I have not been able to read Kitao’s article as it has not been translated into English.
6. Though in Saitô’s more recent work he notes that recent government led surveys indicate hikikomori are ageing. The average age in a 2009 survey was 32 years old.
7. Again, there are exceptions to this. In fact, Saitô’s opening case-study is of a woman.
8. Though social withdrawal was listed as a symptom of mental illnesses such as schizophrenia.
9. Saitô has also written subsequent works on hikikomori, which have not yet been translated in to English.
10. “We can think of it as a system – a vicious circle, in which various psychological factors work together and one external trauma gives rise to another” (Saitô 2013, 53).
11. As he writes: “what I am really talking about are the parents” not the individual child (Saitô 2013, 123).
12. He has been interviewed in English media, such as The Independent and Correspondent as well as in Japanese press, a few recent examples from daily newspapers are Yomiuri Shimbun’s coverage and Kenko100’s coverage of recent TV programmes about hikikomori.
13. Two key flashpoints for moral panic were the murder of a primary school student in Kyoto and the kidnapping or a woman in Niigata. Furlong (2008, 313) discusses these incidents in terms of media amplification in his article.
14. He muses throughout the book on whether hikikomori is peculiar to Japan, comparing it to the Western diagnosis of “avoidant personality” early on. However, Saitô (2013, 80) does appear to suggest that the “peculiarities … the cultural and social situation in our nation” do contribute significantly to the constitution of the hikikomori subject.
15. See Mathews and White’s edited collection for a discussion of this same pressure to integrate, in particular Mathews’ (2004) article on Japanese young people and the workforce.
16. This is most evident in Japan in the mediated panic around sôshoku danshi or the “herbivore man,” originally coined by Maki Fukusawa, a Japanese journalist, in 2006. These were men regarded as soft, sensitive, “non-meat eaters” who were coddled by their mothers. The herbivores were pilloried in the media as weak and less masculine than the salaryman norm. Allison (2013, 77–121) discusses this in her chapter “Home and Hope” in Precarious Japan. See Harney (2009) for a popular account in English. There is little written from an academic perspective, save Morioka’s (2013) “A Phenomenological Study of

17. Saitô (2013) also notes the importance of relationship with the mother throughout his book. See page 41 for a description of a hikikomori man with obsessive compulsive disorder whose symptom included a need for approval of his habits by his mother. For a further discussion and analysis of Doi’s account of the mother and ama e, see Taniguchi (2012).


19. A key reason Doi’s work is treated with relative suspicion is, in fact, his Japanese particularism. The notion of a peculiar and vaunted Japanese-ness or *Nihonjinron* was, of course, a key tenet of the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War. Since their defeat and following the emergence of a reflexive and critical understanding of the racism (particularly under the auspices of the Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere) of *Nihonjinron*, concepts which depend on an understanding of Japanese particularism have been critiqued. For a critical discussion of Japanese engagements with (strategically in the 1970s and 80s in terms of courting foreign trade and more recent distancing from the concept), see Morris-Suzuki (1998); Iwabuchi (2002) and Yoshino (1992).

20. This sometimes manifests literally – such as the brutal beating of a father (a salaryman/representative of kaisha) by his hikikomori son. See Saitô (2013, 17).

21. Though Saitô does acknowledge that as hikikomori is “having to do with the mind” (rather than the body like TB), a type of “sure fire cure” like antibiotics is unlikely (Saitô 2013, 35).

22. Compare with translators’ intro where he discusses in terms of Foucault’s *Will to Knowledge* (1991, xii). See also Saitô (2013, xiii).

23. See Saitô (2013, 31). Also, “it is clearly a mistake to see young people who have withdrawn from society as living peaceful lives of indolence” (Saitô 2013, 48).

24. This echoes Payot (as quoted in Ahmed 2014, 62) who wrote *The Education of the Will* in 1909. This text focused on the young men “suffering from malaise” as the apex of a “weak will.” The solution at this time was much like to day – education – a training of the will.

25. See particularly Chapter 5 “Hikikomori Systems” (Saitô 2013, 77–89). Though it is beyond the scope of this, Japan-focused, article, it is worth noting that the 4chan, reddit subjects who Beran (2017) discusses are also often framed as “addicted” – to online gaming, social media and pornography.

26. Saitô (2013, 104) goes on to write: “The family should not vacillate between joy and sadness at every little word or deed […] they should […] behave in a level-headed manner.”

27. Compare with Stewart’s (2007, 97–98) discussion of the United States’ national imaginary in *Ordinary Affects:* “FREE FALLING: There are bodies out of place. There are plenty of people in free fall. There are people whose American dreaming is literally a dreaming cut off from any actual potential. But that doesn’t stop it – far from it.”

28. Ahmed (2014, 77) puts it simply, willful subjects are “in the way’ or what is ‘on the way.’”


30. In Japan it is customary to wear a small badge with your employer’s logo on your lapel.

31. Ahmed (2014) draws particularly on French scholars Ribot and Payot here as well as Locke. I would also venture that Arnold’s ([1869] 2009) work on culture fits this genealogy.

32. See also Saitô (2013, 59–61): “Student Apathy and Retreat Neurosis.” This is repeated again and again in popular media stories about hikikomori in the West (BBC; ABC; WSJ).

33. Stewart (2007, 74) writes: “the kids, or the records they leave behind, tell stories that have their own complex trajectories: they’re caught in an obsessive focus on the details of a BIG scenario; they’re surging to escape a trapped life; they’re dangerously depressed; they’re alone with their cadre and their plan. These stories don’t end in a moral but are left to resonate with all the other ways that intensities rise out of the ordinary and then linger, unresolved, until memory dims, or some new eruption catches our attention.”

34. The “herbivore man” is similarly regarded as sexually incompetent and impotent (Morioka [2005] 2013; Tomikawa 2011).

35. This is described in the co-morbidity of Student Apathy section.

36. Saitô (2013, 37) writes: “after one person has achieved a high level of social maturation, then it is rare for a person to slip into a state of social withdrawal. At least, I do not know of any such cases.”
37. *Hikikomori*, according to Saitô (2013, 44), “become increasingly childlike […] they might do things like cling to their mothers, speak in a wheedling, infantile voices, or express the desire to touch their mother’s bodies.” The *Carpe Fidem* piece (2013) echoes this: “if the parent ignores the problem [of the child becoming/being *hikikomori*] the child becomes stuck in their situation […] good or bad families clearly exist. Phrases like ‘everyone is different’ and ‘you can’t compare [families]’ are nice to hear, but they don’t help to solve real problems. If the family is too slow to act then they are indulging them like a child.”

38. *Hikikomori* temporality is also discussed in other Japanese representations. In *Carpe Fidem*, the anonymous psychiatrist warns parents of running out of time if their *hikikomori* child reaches their 30s. In *Welcome to the N. H. K.*! Satô is regularly shown “losing track” of time due to his absorption in video games.

39. Ahmed (2014, 113–114) continues: “Even when a child is still a child, the parents can speak to the child about their anticipation of becoming grandparents, as if it was a fait accompli […] Becoming part can mean to become another point on a line […] The family line can become a rod: a technique for straightening out.”

40. Another example of Saitô’s use of the Western language of addiction.

41. Writes Saitô (2013), on page 121, it is important that parents are mindful and steadfast in setting boundaries so as not to be “swallowed up” by over loving.

42. The full quote is as follows: “the intoxicating effect of the poison of *amae* is strong enough that both people begin to feel they cannot live without one another […] when one is trying to help a child get better, one should restrain oneself from practicing this kind of ‘love.’”

43. This also parallels Satô’s self-loathing vision of himself in an episode where he becomes addicted to online role-playing games.

Notes on contributor

*Rosemary Overell* works at the University of Otago. Her most recent work considers how gendered subjectivities are co-constituted by and through mediation. She draws particularly on Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore a variety of mediated sites. In particular, she considers the intersections between affect and signification and how these produce gender. Rosemary has looked at media as varied as anime, extreme metal and reality television.

**ORCID**

*Rosemary Overell* [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8808-7638](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8808-7638)

**References**


**Special terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hiku 引</th>
<th>komoru 笠る</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shakaiteki 社会的</td>
<td>kaisha 会社</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amae 甘え</td>
<td>kanji 甘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utsu byō 嬰病</td>
<td>furitaa フリーター</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>