Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, *The Anatomy of Loneliness: Suicide, Social Connection, and the Search for Relational Meaning in Contemporary Japan*

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The publication of *The Anatomy of Loneliness*—mostly written before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic—could not be more timely or needed: since 2020, Japan has recorded sharp increases in social isolation and suicide rates (particularly among women under forty), and public concerns about loneliness have grown (Ueda et al. 2021). The Japanese government eventually came to recognize loneliness as a public health issue and—following the British model—appointed a minister of loneliness and social isolation, Tetsushi Sakamoto, in February 2021. Concerns over loneliness, however, predate the start of the pandemic, as Chikako Ozawa-de Silva aptly explains in her book *The Anatomy of Loneliness*. Ozawa-de Silva expands on these concerns, beginning her introduction with the premise that feeling lonely "is becoming increasingly common in modern societies" (1), and we might, indeed, face a "global epidemic of loneliness" (2). In order to truly understand loneliness—which she explains as being "neither a physical condition nor a mental disorder" (2)—Ozawa-de Silva sets out to provide an "anatomy of loneliness." This anatomy, she stresses sensibly, "is not the (one) of a single individual, but a type of society" (2). A lonely society, she argues, is a society "that makes people feel uncared for, unseen, and unimportant" (5). Both the book's origins and the author's interest in loneliness date back almost twenty years, when Ozawa-de Silva initiated a research project on individuals who frequented so-called suicide websites and "realized that [her] research had to focus not just on suicide, but also on the deeper underlying issues facing young Japanese, especially the issue of loneliness" (4).

The book is beautifully written for a general audience (8), but it is based on the author's academic scholarship and previously published articles and is situated in various fields of literature: Japan studies; anthropological literature on suffering, resilience, and the good; and literature in "positive psychology" (8). Its structure corresponds to the author's

trajectory in the process of writing the book (6), a truly rewarding and mostly relatable approach. In seven chapters, the author takes readers along on her own (intellectual and literal) journey. Following the introduction and chapter 1, which comprises basic definitions and theoretical approach(es), the next section of the book (chapters 2–4) intelligently employs multiple perspectives and focuses on the topic of suicide, including suicide websites and internet group suicides. In the second half of the book (chapters 5–6), Ozawa-de Silva shifts this focus to "resilience, human connection, and . . . well-being" (7), using the triple disaster of 2011 as an example. While this change in topic, focus, and tone is at first quite surprising, the final chapter (chapter 7) incorporates these parts by developing two related theoretical perspectives: first, the "crises of subjectivity" (192) and the need for interpersonal and systemic "cultivation and recognition of human connections as antidote to loneliness" (8), and second, a "relational theory of meaning" based on the assumption that "as long as an individual experiences belonging, affiliation, and connection, questions of meaning are less likely to arise, because a key source of feeling meaningful (*ikigai*) is feeling that one is meaningful to others" (197).

The central questions that drive Ozawa-de Silva are "What characterizes the lonely society? Why are societies becoming lonelier? And what, if anything, might be done to change the tide of this steady movement towards loneliness?" (5–6). She first deconstructs what she calls common myths about loneliness and details that loneliness is neither a new phenomenon nor simply a symptom of (clinical) depression; that loneliness, "an affective and subjective reality" (12), must not be conflated with social isolation, "a physical and social reality" (12); and that it is, in fact, "everybody's business" (1). She goes on to define loneliness as "feelings of dissatisfaction that arise with regard to relationships to others or the environment" (16). Based on these premises, Ozawa-de Silva focuses on the interwovenness of loneliness, subjectivity, and empathy, introducing both her theoretical perspective and methodological approach in chapter 1, "Subjectivity and Empathy." Subjectivity, she explains, is the fact "*that* a person experiences, *what* they experience, and *how* they experience it" (20, italics in original); it is always intersubjective—"Janus-faced" (20)—and incremental for the process of establishing the self: highly dynamic, affective, and culturally shaped (20–26). The "outer manifestations of subjectivity" (29) constitute society, and the trend toward lonely societies, she argues, is closely related to neoliberalism and materialism. In order to examine the "interplay between subjective experience and social, political, and economic structures" (35), Ozawa-de Silva then proposes a methodological approach based on "critical empathy" (35, 37, 199) and triangulation (36).

The ethnographic data is the focus of the chapters that follow. In "Too Lonely to Die Alone" (chapter 2), which comprises a historical overview of suicide in Japan, Ozawa-de Silva introduces and discusses some of the influential popular writings on suicide produced since the 1990s, such as internet reviews and (newspaper reports on) "famous" group suicides. Extensive (and mostly unannotated) transcripts of so-called internet suicide websites are the focus of chapter 3, "Connecting the Disconnected." Complementary data—interviews with twenty-four "average" college students in the Tokyo area (109) on their views on suicide and meaning in life—constitute the subsequent chapter, "Meaning in Life." Finally, chapter 5, "Surviving 3.11," and chapter 6, "The Anatomy of Resilience," are based on ethnographic data from the author's fieldwork conducted in Ibaraki after the triple disaster in 2011. This data mirrors the changing focus of the second part of the book: while exploring the question of whether a

community as a whole can be lonely (139), the author increasingly focuses on resilience, partly moving away from despair and death.

The variety and centrality of ethnographic data are—in addition to the accessibility of the book to a broader audience while still maintaining theoretical and conceptual depth—certainly among the major strengths of *The Anatomy of Loneliness*. However, this is also where one of the biggest weaknesses of the book lies. While the long, mostly uncommented transcripts of written and oral narratives allow the reader to fully immerse in the stories and topics, I am not fully convinced by this approach, in particular regarding the newspaper reports and the transcripts of internet suicide websites (chapter 3). In my opinion, they raise ethical questions (a topic only touched upon briefly, e.g., 74), and, unfortunately, lack both (self-reflexive) analysis and a deeper engagement with the subjects and their feelings. The transcripts are daunting and support the author's argument, but the reader might feel like a mere observer or even a voyeur. However, it goes without saying that the topic is extremely difficult to research, and there is no easy solution to these problems. Another weakness of the book may be due to the intended audience. Ozawa-de Silva is writing for a more general readership, which perhaps inadvertently resulted in some inaccuracies, generalizations, and simplifications (e.g., with regard to the "commodification of intimacy"). And while the author repeatedly defies and criticizes a simple dichotomization of "West" (here mostly understood as the United States) and "Japan," she unfortunately falls back to such explanation patterns in some parts of the book (146).

The book concludes with five rather pragmatic, concrete suggestions on how to overcome loneliness and cure a "lonely society" (chapter 7). This is very much in line with Ozawa-de Silva's hopeful, almost optimistic, way of tackling the topic as well as her (successful and thoughtful) endeavor to move beyond the common explanation pattern of economic hardship and distress as the primary reasons for suicide. While one could address underlying, intersecting factors such as gender or class in more detail in a future study, her critical approach and her focus on relational meaning are highly convincing and add a new and important perspective on the topic. The amplifying effects of the pandemic have certainly proven that such an anthropological perspective—as well as context-sensitive qualitative research on suicide, social isolation, and solitude—is highly topical and necessary. The mentioned weaknesses aside, the book is fascinating not only because of its detailed insights on the topic and the (critical) analysis of the interwovenness of individual and society, but also because of its pragmatic, hopeful, and "resilient" perspective on suicide, social isolation, and loneliness (lonely societies). *The Anatomy of Loneliness* will prove useful for scholars and students of Japan but also for scholars of anthropology and sociology as well as practitioners in the fields of mental health care.

References

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