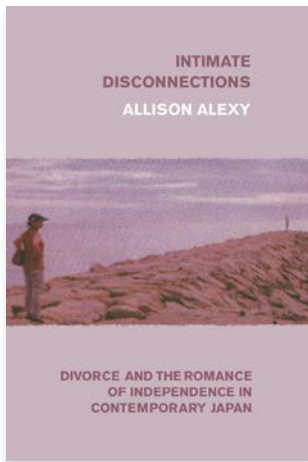


Intimate Disconnections: Divorce and the Romance of Independence in Contemporary Japan



ALLISON ALEXY.

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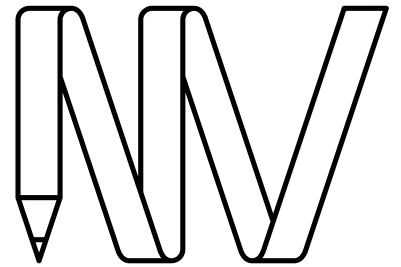
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Allison Alexy's monograph, *Intimate Disconnections: Divorce and the Romance of Independence in Contemporary Japan*, is a detailed yet broadly sweeping account of divorce trends that is both a fascinating and insightful read. Alexy is an associate professor of modern Japanese culture at the University of Michigan who is building a reputation as a leading figure in research on intimacy, marriage and divorce in contemporary Japan. There is a clear line of connection between this monograph and Alexy's coordination of the edited collections *Home and Family in Japan: Continuity and Transformation* (with Richard Ronald in 2011) and *Intimate Japan: Ethnographies of Closeness and Conflict* (with Emma E. Cook in 2018), with each offering incisive commentary on how dynamics in the private realm shape broader public and social phenomena in contemporary Japan. Alexy has also actively pursued open-access publishing with both this monograph and *Intimate Japan*, making her research available to those scholars relying on digital resources or with limited access.



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Intimate Disconnections tells the story of divorce as both institution and practice in contemporary Japan. It largely takes up from where Fuess (2004) left off, framing this narrative with questions at the heart of both relationships and their endings: what do people want from a relationship when they decide to formalise it, how do they decide when it should end, and how do they go about ending it? Exploring these questions, Alexy interweaves analysis of current cultural, political, legal and discursive contexts with interviews and individual stories to illuminate popular perceptions of divorce and their sources, as well as the greater complexities that underlie these often-sensationalised narratives. At the centre of the work is an ongoing challenge to so-called common sense ‘truths’ about divorce in contemporary Japan: that once women earn more money they are more likely to want a divorce, and that men are the unsuspecting victims of this new trend. Importantly, Alexy does not simply seek to debunk these perceptions. Rather, she acknowledges the extent to which these stereotypes play out in society while also demonstrating the variations present in lived reality.

This is not a disinterested, objective account: Alexy’s affection for her interlocutors, as well as her awareness of her own impact simply by being in the room, is highly present throughout and offers a well-considered articulation of contemporary anthropology. Alexy consciously places herself as researcher within the work, both in explaining her methodology and how the project came about, and also by sharing how she became known as the ‘divorce lady’ and hence became the recipient (consenting or no) of a multitude of tales from contemporary Japan’s divorce landscape. There is some gender disparity in her interviewee numbers, with only eight male stories included against nineteen female. This reflects the fact that there are male-only spaces in which Alexy is unable to place herself, while female-only spaces and support groups are accessible to her and therefore more visible in the work. Yet, the male experience is neither sidelined nor devalued and remains central to the narrative, and Alexy is reflexive in acknowledging this disparity.

The way the work is structured invites the reader to gain a sense of divorce as an unfolding narrative that requires significant work and negotiation, and Alexy returns to certain characters multiple times, allowing the reader to develop their own relationship with the informants across the monograph. The monograph is separated into three sections: “The Beginning of the End”, “Legal Dissolutions” and “Living as an X”, each of which deals with a different stage in the divorce process. Each chapter combines theoretical and cultural contexts with brief (two- or three-page) accounts from her interviewees. In this way, the theoretical understandings help to shed light on complicated real-life experiences. Likewise, the separation of the material into the successive stages of divorce focuses the reader’s attention onto each step of the process in its own right.

The first two chapters examine why people decide to get a divorce, looking at how successful or unsuccessful intimacies are conceptualised and revealing the sources of popular myths regarding marriage and divorce. Here Alexy highlights the thinking behind the reasons for divorce, the tensions between expectations and reality in marriage, the rise of romance discourses in

contemporary popular culture and society, and the major shifts in marital expectations across generations. Firstly, the author draws our attention to the neoliberal labour market and governmental bids at reforming the gender disparity in this system, and shows how this shapes the marriage choices that individuals make. Alexy then shifts to the emergent discourses of the past two decades around how to avoid divorce and what a successful marriage is now meant to look like in Japanese society. In particular, she highlights the present-day ideal of ‘connected independence’ in friendship marriages, as opposed to the previous generation’s ‘disconnected dependence’ with clearly separated gender roles. This new ideal aligns with current neoliberal and labour values but also demands versions of intimacy that were not necessarily valued by previous generations. In one striking example, Alexy outlines how relationship gurus now advocate for partners to directly say ‘I love you’ to each other—although some interlocutors still greeted this practice with derision.

In the second section, Alexy unpacks the legal system and its lack of support for divorced or divorcing parents, along with the complex and innovative manner in which individuals negotiate their options. In Chapter 3 Alexy looks beneath the statistic indicating that 87.6% of divorces in 2015 were uncontested, demonstrating how often-lengthy negotiations are taken between partners in order to arrive at what is legally recorded as an uncontested divorce. The absence of real oversight and power on the part of the family court to either support or manage people’s divorce and post-divorce experiences is also put under significant scrutiny here. Chapter 4 focuses on issues of child custody and what is best for the children involved: the incredibly rare dual custody, or the far more common and mythologised ‘clean break’. Alexy reveals to her readers the multitude of different ways in which people are navigating these challenging choices, as well as how gaps in the welfare and regulatory frameworks in this area can create additional burdens in already strained situations.

In the final, and shortest, section, Alexy looks at the longer-term consequences and outcomes of divorce. Chapter 5 focuses on the costs of divorce—in particular the risks of poverty for women, but also the social stigma that continues to be attached to divorce, which has historically been perceived in Japanese culture as a personal failure. In contrast, Chapter 6 presents a counter-narrative that divorce does not automatically equal disconnection from society. Following divorce, many of Alexy’s informants actively strove to forge new connections through support groups and friendships. Further, they still desired romantic relationships and indeed many hoped to marry again someday. This section makes clear that the process of divorce can continue until well after the papers are processed, bringing with it long term material and emotional consequences. However, the final chapter offers a refreshing challenge to the ‘sad, lonely divorcee’ narrative, instead highlighting the many ways that divorcees continue to strive for new relationships and experiences.

I strongly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in understanding the current marriage and divorce landscape in Japan. However, its relevance goes further than this: the book also includes excellent insights into the

legal, economic, and labour realities in contemporary Japan, providing a useful overview of shifts over the past two decades. Although Alexy herself acknowledges that gender is not a direct subject of analysis, gender issues permeate the work and the narratives it tells, making it an important resource for understanding Japan's current gender-related norms and media discourses as well. For those already active in these fields, many of the statistics and popular discourses (e.g., 'relationships like air') will be familiar, however Alexy uses them effectively to create a new picture. For those who are newer to the field, this work reads as a strong companion to Tokuhiro's (2009) *Marriage in Contemporary Japan*.

A crisis discourse around marriage has emerged in the Japanese media over the past two decades. In response to this, scholars have turned their attention to both this discourse and the lived realities of marriage and divorce, both in historical and contemporary Japan. In the conclusion to *Intimate Disconnections*, Alexy explains: "[t]his book has attempted to represent the personal, social, legal, and economic work required to end a marriage in contemporary Japan, as well as demonstrate the analytical value gained by paying attention to such endings" (177). She has certainly achieved this goal, and no doubt *Intimate Disconnections* will quickly find its place as a canonical text for scholars of contemporary Japan and beyond.

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