

Immersing in Peripheries and Questioning the Peripheral

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A simple search on boys love (BL) on Google Scholar leads to the many contributions of Mark McLelland in this field. This was how I, an avid BL manga reader, stumbled upon Mark's numerous scholarly works which have helped deepen my understanding of the media I have long enjoyed. In seeing his analysis of BL media and culture, I was inspired to pursue an academic career centred on Japan and popular culture. Little did I know that this inspiration would lead me towards Mark's office, where he and I spent afternoons discussing the development of my research and thesis as supervisor and graduate student. Given how my personal experiences as a fan resonated with his work, I expected an easy approval of my early proposal to write the history of BL media. Mark, however, suggested that I should move away from the familiar. Instead, Mark encouraged me to navigate and examine the tensions found at the margins of BL and its fandoms.

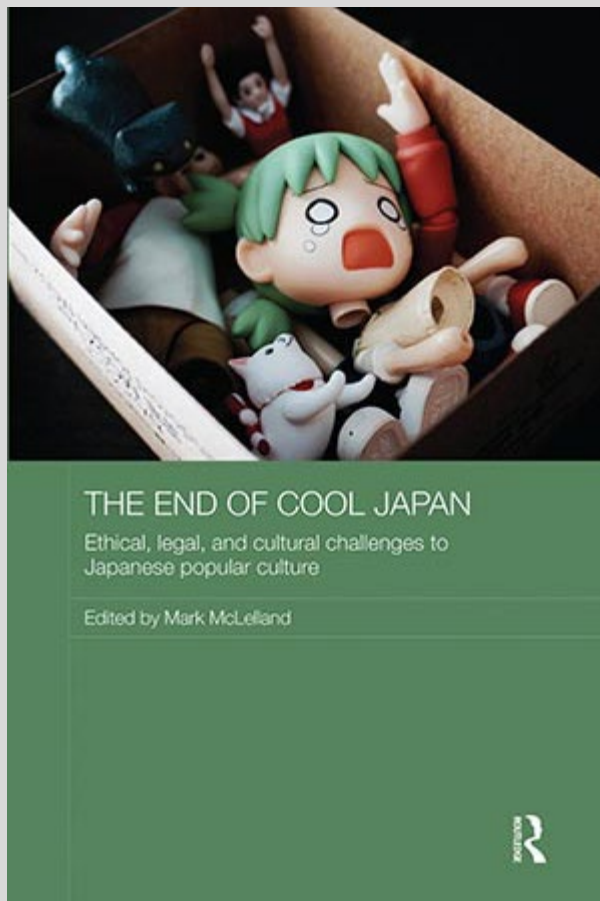


Figure 1. Cover of Mark McLelland (ed.), *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, cover by Kristine Michelle Santos.



Figure 2. Agnieszka Golda, 'Setting Scenes,' 2014, mixed media installation, *Protean Borders: Trans-cultural Encounters with Japanese Popular Culture*, TAEM Gallery, University of Wollongong, 24 October–8 November, 2014, exhibition curated by Agnieszka Golda and Kristine Michelle Santos, photograph by Vera Mackie.

Mark McLelland's works rest in the margins. He encountered BL culture at intersections between Japan's homosexual culture and women's queer media. [1] His examination of queer sexual expressions drove his analysis of *hentai* (perverse) media, which is often misunderstood or rejected as an acceptable subject of study because of its graphic sexual content. [2] The growing accessibility of Asian queer sexual content on- and off-line has also motivated him to examine how laws impact on its young consumers. [3] As a queer studies scholar, Mark often shared his pride about addressing topics that make some of his readers, as he fondly described it one afternoon, 'clutch their pearls'. In his work, he has argued against various iterations of moral panics. Mark's research advocates for people and spaces that are often marginalised because their practices operate outside norms of sexuality and sexual expression. By navigating topics found in the peripheries of social and sexual norms, Mark's research contributes to diverse representations and expressions needed in academia.

It is in this spirit of diversity that I took Mark's advice and immersed myself in BL's marginal communities and spaces. While BL is accessible all over the globe and has received a level of critical acclaim in cultural spaces, its largely female creators and audience continue to be subject to a measure of discrimination. Female BL fans are labelled *fujoshi* (rotten women or girls) because of their passionate queering of male homosocial relationships in popular media through imagined homosexual, at times homoerotic, romances. [4] The public outrage and panics surrounding BL media and its consumers captures half of the story. Despite efforts of many scholars to transform the negative connotations attached to BL culture, BL fans continue to face public scrutiny even within queer spaces. Mark has written about this tension through the banning

of BL works in select Japanese libraries.^[5]

The prejudice against women's BL practices has become my motivation in my own unpacking of the transformative power of women's participation in queer media. Inspired by Mark, I want to recognise women's queer practices in my research and help ease the misunderstandings surrounding their intimate queer imaginations.^[6] As I developed my thesis, it was increasingly clear that I needed to immerse myself in women's BL culture and dive deep into their 'rotten' fantasies. I examined thousands of women's fan comics that actively imagined and portrayed the most notable male heroes in Japan's *shōnen* (boys) magazines as potentially queer. Given the intimate aspects of women's expression in BL, I had to find a way to safely navigate their fantasies without breaching ethical guidelines and within the limits of funding and time. Fortunately, Mark had ample experience in understanding peripheries through his own examinations of peripheral ephemera.

From naughty online forums to cheeky commentaries on kisses in Japanese magazines, McLelland had an eye for spaces and materials forgotten or overlooked in social cultural memory. In bringing attention to various ephemera, he has highlighted the value of these materials as physical and virtual evidence of marginalised communities and their intimate expressions. As his student, I witnessed the creative and interdisciplinary methods Mark used to overcome the limits of his research. Many researchers who have read his works have been similarly inspired by McLelland's research methods to approach their topics creatively. My quest to find *fujoshi* ephemera for my own research has led me to various basement shops all over Japan, crouched in between towering bookshelves containing their self-published homoerotic fantasies. Had it not been for Mark's creativity and encouragement, I would not have known how to articulate my analysis of queer experience and women's culture. To this day, I continue to find value in these peripheral works as BL media becomes increasingly visible in highly conservative communities in Southeast Asia.

In the recent online memorial roundtable celebrating Mark sponsored by the Association for Asian Studies and Japanese Studies Association of Australia, a question was raised on the dangers scholars face in occupying the margins like he did. This question factors the conservative processes and attitudes that prevent critical inquiry on peripheral spaces and expressions, especially ones tied to intimate topics such as sexualities and sexual expression. I can almost see Mark roll his eyes over this concern. In many of our consultations, he lamented over these challenging hurdles that prevent us from doing our research with great ease. While he has taught me the importance of these structures in protecting vulnerable subjects and communities, the bureaucracy of such ethical clearance procedures also contributes to the silencing of research that aims to represent minorities. To negotiate these structures certainly has its risks. Mark's approach to research, however, serves as an example for many young scholars, demonstrating that conducting research from the margins is not impossible nor does it have to be completely dangerous. In fact, McLelland's work has shown the necessity of navigating the peripheries so that they might one day no longer be perceived as dangerous. Representing the peripheries and the peripheral contributes to dialogues that educate the public and empower the marginalised. I have now returned to a more conservative academic environment in the Philippines, and Mark's influence has emboldened my scholarship. Like him, I take great pride when pearls are clutched on account of women's queer expressions.

Notes

[1] Mark J. McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*, Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

[2] Mark McLelland, 'A short history of "hentai",' in 'Queer Japan,' special issue of *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* 12 January (2006), URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue12/mclelland.html>, accessed 20 May 2021.

[3] Mark McLelland, 'The world of yaoi: The internet, censorship and the global boys' love fandom,' *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 23(1) (2005): 61–71, p. 61, doi: [10.1080/13200968.2005.10854344](https://doi.org/10.1080/13200968.2005.10854344); Mark McLelland, 'Thought policing or the protection of youth? Debate in Japan over the "Non-Existent Youth Bill",' *International Journal of Comic Art* 13(1) (2011): 348–67; Mark McLelland, 'Australia's "child-abuse material" legislation, internet regulation and the juridification of the imagination,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15(5) (2012): 467–83, doi: [10.1177/1367877911421082](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877911421082).

[4] On *fujoshi*, see Tomoko Aoyama, 'Eurekadiscovers culture girls, fujoshi and BL: Essay review of three issues of the Japanese literary magazine, *Yuriika* (Eureka),' *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 20 (2009), URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/aoyama.htm>, accessed 8 Dec. 2021.

[5] Mark McLelland, 'Regulation of manga content in Japan: What is the future of BL?' in *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, edited by Mark McLelland et al., 253–73, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015, doi: [10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0013](https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781628461190.003.0013).

[6] Kristine Michelle Santos, 'Queer affective literacies: Examining "rotten" women's literacies in Japan,' *Critical Arts: South–North Cultural and Media Studies* 34(5) (2020): 72–86, doi: [10.1080/02560046.2020.1825506](https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2020.1825506).

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