

Reading Mark McLelland: Queering Japan, Queering Ourselves

Katsuhiko Sukanuma

Like many others, my preferred way of mourning the passing of academics is to read their works. This is just what I have done for Mark McLelland. I have also read and reread some of the reviews and critiques of McLelland's works since his passing. It has been a meaningful journey to reflect on what he wrote, and I would like to suggest that readers of this essay should do the same in their own manner if they are to learn something from Mark and his publications.

McLelland's work on Japanese queer cultures started to earn recognition in the early 2000s, when I was an undergraduate student. Reading his publications, I instinctively knew that Mark, like myself, was someone who had a keen interest in understanding how sexuality operated in the context of cross-cultural contact. One of his early journal articles, entitled 'Is there a Japanese "gay identity"?',^[1] informed us of the principal analytical framework that he would apply to his subsequent long list of works on Japanese queer cultures.

In this article, acknowledging his own privilege as a 'white male writing at the beginning of the twenty-first-century [sic],'^[2] Mark stated that he did not intend to replicate the Orientalist and ethnocentric views of Japanese queer cultures in opposition to the so-called 'West.' By purposely putting the words 'gay identity' in quotation marks in the title of the article, McLelland suggested that we should 'problematize the idea that we already know what a gay or lesbian identity means in Euro-American societies'^[3] before we ask the question of whether such an 'identity' exists in Japan. To him, labels like 'gay' or 'lesbian' identity were not comprehensive enough to accommodate the multiplicities of the desires of queer people. This nuanced view of sexuality and gender is in line with one of the key axioms of queer theory put forth by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who reminded us that 'people are different from each other' even among the members of social minorities.^[4] Furthermore, McLelland's anti-identitarian and anti-categorising perspective, which again resonates with what Sedgwick inventively calls 'nonce taxonomy,'^[5] is important enough for us to conduct research on any cross-cultural matters.

Readers of this essay may wish to explore for themselves whether and how these methodological concerns were carried out or reflected on in his actual analyses in the following years, as part of a series of projects on queer cultures in Japan. Other academics who have worked on Japanese queer cultures have already expressed their own views in relation to those of McLelland. Among others, I take in particular critical reviews of his second monograph, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*,^[6] by Diana Khor^[7] and Keith Vincent,^[8] to be sincere and constructive pieces which assist us in learning from McLelland's achievements while also building on those foundations. In their reviews, both Khor and Vincent caution us against the ways in which binary discourses could resurface even in the works that purport to problematise them. Akiko Shimizu's review essay on the edited volume *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*,^[9] which was co-edited by Mark, James Welker and me, provides us

with critical questions which we continue to ask ourselves when tackling the field of LGBTIQ+ studies in Japan and beyond to the present day. Shimizu emphasises the importance for scholars who publish their works in English to respect and carefully consider 'the accumulated history of academic and theoretical analysis' conducted by Japanese authors.^[10] Furthermore, I humbly wish to note that the monograph, *Contact Moments: The Politics of Intercultural Desire in Japanese Male-Queer Cultures*,^[11] was my own response to McLelland's work as well as critical insights provided by some of the abovementioned reviewers.

As a coda to his *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Mark wrote that:

If this book is to have any affect at all, I hope that it will be to encourage others to engage with *kono seka* ['this world'] in multiple ways in search of other stories, other lives.^[12]

This is perhaps what many academics, including myself, hope to accomplish when we publish our work. At the same time, this wish alone would not entirely pardon some of the oversights and contradictions that we might end up making. We, as scholars, with numerous forms of privilege, should seriously consider the consequences of publishing our works, especially in the globally dominant language of English, even when, or precisely because, a so-called 'publish or perish' regime has become increasingly rampant in current academic institutions.

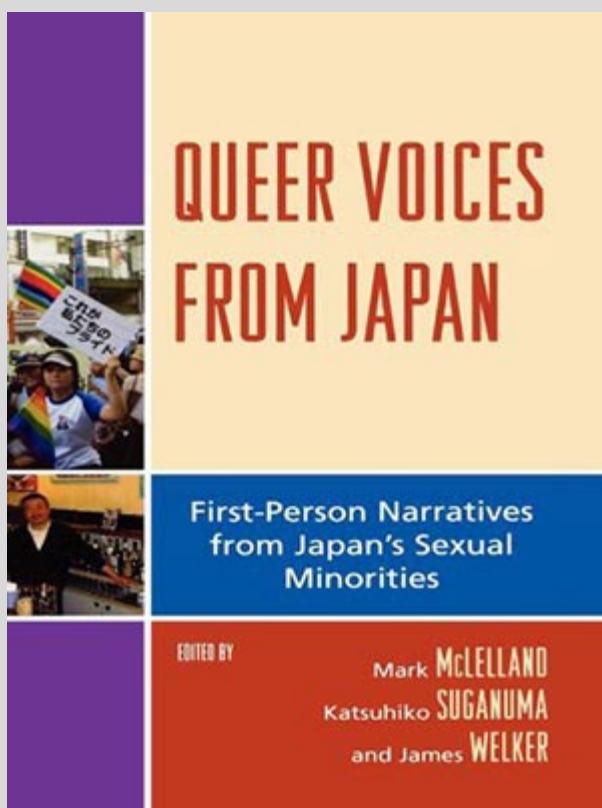


Figure 1. Cover of Mark McLelland, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker (eds), *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Being able to 'engage with' a certain research subject—'*kono seka*' in Mark's words,^[13] is already in itself a privilege. Some people, like LGBTIQ+ communities in Japan and abroad, may not be able to engage with or *disengage* from their '*kono seka*' in accordance with their free will. Rereading works by Mark and others' responses to them since his passing makes me once again reflect on my own privileges of being 'male,' 'Japanese,' 'able-bodied' and a tenured academic. Having said that, this set of privileges has perhaps clouded my perspective on writing about Japanese queer cultures thus far. Mark can no longer comment on Japanese queer cultures or provide us with further reflections. If we are to truly make the most out of the legacy of McLelland's works, we should continue to humbly engage with Japanese queer cultures not only

by queering the subject matter, but also by queering ourselves.

Notes

[1] Mark McLelland, 'Is there a Japanese "gay identity"?' *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 2(4) (2000): 459–72, doi: [10.1080/13691050050174459](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050050174459).

[2] McLelland, 'Is there a Japanese "gay identity"?' p. 468.

[3] McLelland, 'Is there a Japanese "gay identity"?' p. 462.

[4] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990, p. 22.

[5] Sedgwick states that the practice of 'nonce taxonomy' involves 'the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world.' See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 23.

[6] Mark McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

[7] Diana Khor, 'The foreign gaze? A critical look at claims about same-sex sexuality in Japan in the English language literature,' *Gender and Sexuality* 5 (2010): 45–58.

[8] Keith Vincent, Review of *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19(1) (2010): 173–79.

[9] Akiko Shimizu, Review of *Queer Voices from Japan: First-Person Narratives from Japan's Sexual Minorities*, *Social Science Japan Journal* 11(2) (2008): 357–61.

[10] Shimizu, Review of *Queer Voices from Japan*, p. 360.

[11] Katsuhiko Suganuma, *Contact Moments: The Politics of Intercultural Desire in Japanese Male-Queer Cultures*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, doi: [10.5790/hongkong/9789888083701.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888083701.001.0001).

[12] McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, p. 222. 'Kono seka' (this world) is one way of referring to queer subcultures in Japan.

[13] McLelland, *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*, p. 222.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue46/suganuma.html>

© Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

Last modified: 18 Dec. 2021 0955