

'Mark, See You at the Club'

[John Whittier Treat](#)

I cannot remember when I first met Mark McLelland. It may well have been when he was still a graduate student—scholars of Japanese sexuality, but especially homosexuality, sought each other out across great distances in those days. Our encounters were regular over the years but none long. We never worked in the same place. Reunions had to be arranged. When he invited me to Brisbane I stayed in his house and met his multiple cats; when he visited one night with me in New Haven, he made a begrudging acquaintance with my single goldfish. In between were rendezvous in London, Bangkok, Melbourne, Lisbon; anywhere but Tokyo, oddly enough, and now it is too late. My dearest memory of him? There was a silly evening in Hobart during the Asian Studies Association of Australia Biennial Conference in 2002, when Mark, Romit Dasgupta and I took turns mimicking Hyacinth Bucket ('Bouquet') from the BBC's comedy *Keeping Up Appearances*.^[1] Why, besides the surfeit of drinks? Because that afternoon, we had met the wife of the British Governor of Tasmania at a reception, at His Excellency's residence, and she had been very much like Patricia Routledge's 'the lady of the house speaking'. We built our friendship around Japan but also gay men's camp, which meant we could laugh about anything. It is a useful skill to have, as Mark's abbreviated life proved.

Eventually I knew Mark well enough to hear his stories: about being at Cambridge with the wrong accent; as a graduate student in Hong Kong, not Oxford or Berkeley. About being not quite clubbable enough for that job in London. As Truman Capote quipped, 'A fag is a homosexual gentleman who has left the room',^[2] and that is how Mark suspected he was spoken of. Over the years I also heard about, and through him made the acquaintance of, that extraordinary group of Japan scholars in Australia and New Zealand, their numbers now diminished, who pioneered Japan cultural studies worldwide. In the last years, I heard about Mark's wonderful, stylish home and garden in Wollongong, where he settled at last after so much roaming; and where I had been hoping to visit him, one more time, last fall, when, however, Covid-19 travel restrictions came along on the heels of his illness and ruined our plans.

We shared something in common. I was at the older end, and he at the younger, of that generation of Asia scholars in the Anglophone world who did not care much who knew we were cocksuckers. In fact, we told everyone that we were. It was being-in-your-face, part of our professional duty to be rude. Proper manners had kept our forebears in closets.^[3] We were telling our colleagues to get over themselves, but our affront was also the necessary prelude to our own, belated getting down to work. Get to work was what Mark did: those books about homosexual, gay and queer—he used all those words—Japan; mass culture in print (manga) and digital (the Internet) formats. He edited. He organised. He translated. He led. We followed.

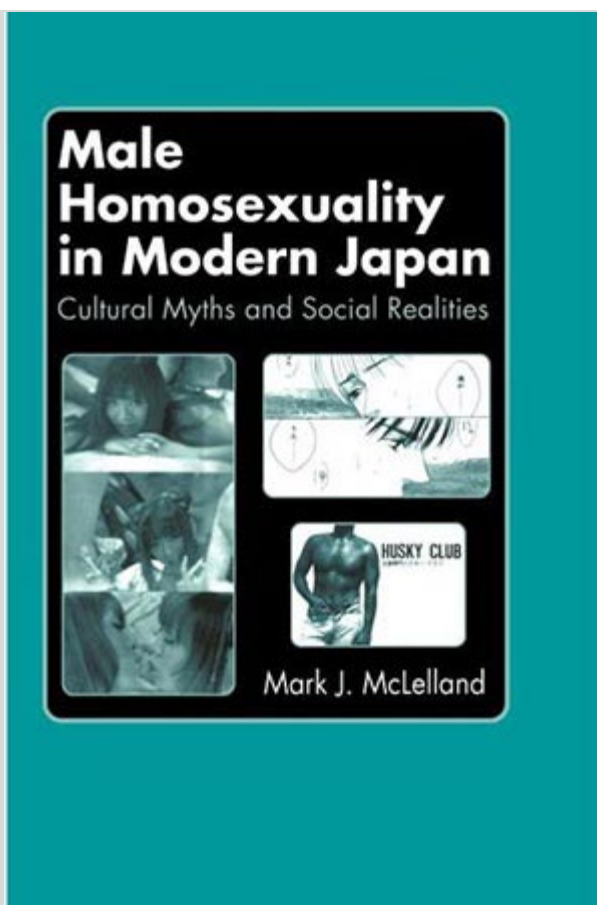


Figure 1. Cover of Mark McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan*, Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

There was a price to pay. Academic disciplines are hardly exempt from the rules of the sex/gender system, and it has assignments for us. Some fields are more butch than others, and LGBT studies knows its place at the femme end. Economists wear suits and ties to meetings, Mark wore t-shirts with insolent slogans. When a teacher comes out as homosexual, some things are awarded you but other things are taken away: perhaps you have gained self-respect, but you will never enter a classroom seen as anything else. At the start of his signature work, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan*, Mark quotes Arjun Appadurai: 'While we can make our identities, we cannot do so exactly as we please ... as many of us find ourselves racialized, biologized, minoritized, somehow reduced rather than enabled by our bodies and our histories, our special diacritics which become our prisons.'^[4] Like our female colleagues, who are assumed to want to work on women's issues, and our Black colleagues who are expected to specialise in Black topics, a queer in our profession must, well, write about being queer, or what is the point of having you around. The bedroom closet is replaced by the academic cubicle. I have done it. Mark did it. We performed our repressive-tolerant performances for our universities and were rewarded for it. Mark made it to the top of the ranks, and so did I, but in a circumscribed way. We were the side shows to the three-ring circus that is still heterosexual and heterosexist and which, like bigotry versus systemic racism, does not require homophobia, only systemic heterosexuality, to produce discriminatory results. Mark's and my whiteness and maleness got us far, I have no doubt about it, but not all the way. During a faculty meeting at a prestigious university debating whether to hire me, I was later told I had been dismissed as a 'gay activist.' (This is the same university, by the way, whose pogroms against homosexuals less than a century ago are now coming to light.) Out gay men are always potential troublemakers. Bring it on, you are tempted to say, but there is a cost for audacity. I once heard Mark's scholarship described as 'narrow'. Translation? *Does not write about the things that matter.* Not clubbable, you see.

Until Association for Asian Studies then President Christine Yano invited me to participate in

Mark's digital memorial, the only thing the AAS leadership had ever asked me to do was preside over an LGBT 'no-host bar' (did they get the irony?) at one of its annual conventions. I said no. Gay folks, while fabulous, *do* do things other than throw parties and, as I have said, Mark, I and others had already provided outré entertainment, a.k.a. 'diversity,' at academic raves, *gratis*. With what Mark wrote at the end of *Male Homosexuality* in mind—that 'choice must be made from the very limited number of blueprints available'^[5] I gladly accepted President Yano's invitation because I wanted to do this with my allotment of words: recognise Mark and his scholarship, cited by all of us, and point out what we are capable of and what he in particular would have done, had he lived longer *and* been 'clubbable'. He and I are members of a gay generation already reduced in numbers by the (bad) luck of the virological draw. For a long time we have already been saying farewell this way, or in so many words: 'Save a seat for me at whatever members-only bar you're at, Mark. This *kurabu* is open to anyone who's paid their dues and can still crack a joke about it.'

Notes

^[1] For memories and reflections on the life and work of Romit Dasgupta (1964—2019), see Vera Mackie (ed.), 'Remembering Romit Dasgupta,' *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 17(1–2) (2020), doi: [10.5130/pjmis.v17i1-2.7470](https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v17i1-2.7470).

^[2] Truman Capote, 'In hot blood,' *Washington Post*, 6 June 1979.

^[3] I stopped covering when, in part due to Mark's urging, I published 'AIDS panic in Japan, or how to have a sabbatical in an epidemic,' *positions: east asia cultures critique* 2(3) (Winter 1995): 629–79, doi: [10.1215/10679847-2-3-629](https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2-3-629).

^[4] Mark J. McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, p. x.

^[5] McLelland, *Male Homosexuality*, p. 245.

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/treat.html>

© Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

Last modified: 12 Dec. 2021 1136