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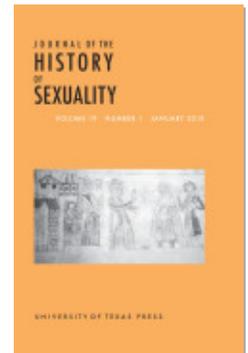
*Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age*  
(review)

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Journal of the History of Sexuality, Volume 19, Number 1, January  
2010, pp. 173-179 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sex.0.0074>



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for all scholars interested in the sociocultural and political makeup of New Zealand. The book probably has limited appeal for those seeking wider theoretical or epistemological contributions on sexuality, however. What are we left with, then? Clearly, there is a great deal more work to do to research still understudied topics such as heterosexuality, old age, identity, pleasure, ethnicity, and race. The volume will certainly work as a stepping stone for future research by identifying these vital research grounds.

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*Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age.* By MARK McLELLAND. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. Pp. 372. \$84.00 (cloth); \$36.95 (paper).

During the late 1990s I worked as a volunteer interpreter for a group of Japanese gay activists called OCCUR. We traveled extensively, meeting with other activists and attending conferences in the United States, Europe, and Asia. While the Western activists we met with invariably expressed a sense of solidarity with the movement in Japan, their support was usually mixed with a more or less patronizing assumption that Japan was “behind” the West in the struggle for the rights of sexual minorities. I do not know how many times I found myself translating comments like “What you describe in Japan sounds like the way things were here twenty years ago” or “It’s so exciting to hear about the work that your organization is doing and to see that Japan’s gays and lesbians are *finally* starting to fight for their rights.”

Such statements, while well intentioned and for the most part well received, were nonetheless rooted in two problematic assumptions: the notion that identity categories such as “gays and lesbians” are transhistorical and universal and the idea that their absence in any given cultural context is to be explained in terms of a temporal logic of belatedness rather than cultural and historical difference. They assume that the story of sexual oppression and liberation is a universal one, an inevitable and teleological movement from darkness into light, from hatred into tolerance, and that the progress made on this journey by any given society can be mapped as points along a single trajectory. It is a dynamic as old as Japanese modernity itself.

Japan plays the perpetual adolescent with “the West” (usually the United States) as its patient tutor. The group I worked for, as Mark McLelland points out in the book under review here, was itself prone to represent itself as a pioneer in gay and lesbian activism and to downplay not only the role of earlier activists but also the diversity of other queer voices in Japan at

the time. In this sense we were partly to blame for framing the discussion in terms that elicited such responses. And given the paucity of information available in English about queers in Japan, those few groups who are able to make themselves heard come to have a disproportionate influence. This is why a book like Mark McLelland's *Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet Age* is so valuable not only on its own merits but also as part of a growing corpus of materials that will make it more difficult for any one book or group of individuals to monopolize the discussion of the history and politics of sexuality in Japan or elsewhere.

*Queer Japan from the Pacific War to the Internet* is a richly detailed history of sexual subcultures in postwar Japan. Making use of an impressive array of materials culled from journalistic accounts as well as literary, sexological, and social scientific texts, McLelland provides Anglophone readers with a wide-ranging introduction to the ways in which various forms of nonnormative sexuality have been imagined and experienced in Japan from the 1920s to the present. Almost all of McLelland's sources are discussed here for the first time in English, and even in Japanese there is no work with a comparable scope or depth of analysis. Another strength of the book is what McLelland calls, following Foucault, its "genealogical" approach. Rather than "offering a history of the development of an already preconceived group of 'sexual minorities' in Japan," he writes, "I am more interested in exploring the emergence of those cultural factors that enabled individuals who experienced a wide range of *hentai seiyoku* or 'queer desires' both to conceive of themselves and be conceived by others as distinct kinds of people" (2). If "identities" do emerge here, they do so as the result of a historical process and not as the expression of innate desires. And they are always subject to change.

Both the historical mutability and cultural specificity of queer sexualities in Japan are brought home very clearly in McLelland's discussion of the array of Japanese terms used to designate queer subjects. The English term "gay," for example, had been introduced in Japan already in the 1950s, but it referred not to male and female homosexuals in general, much less to those who claimed a politicized gay identity, but to the effeminate bar hosts, or *gei bōi* (gay boys), who staffed Tokyo's many *gei bā* (gay bars). Because these locales were often written about in the mass media, the term *gei* became widely known among the Japanese public two decades before its English counterpart would achieve such widespread currency. The same was true for *lezu*, an abbreviated form of "lesbian" that was used from the mid-1960s to refer to a genre of pornography for heterosexual males. This earlier history of the terms meant that when "lesbian" and "gay" made their way into Japan again in the 1980s as part of the new rights-based discourse on sexual minorities, "they had to compete with the already indigenized meanings of the terms *lezu* and *gei*" (94). What McLelland is pointing to here is a proliferation rather than a one-way imposition of terms and

categories relating to sexuality. Just as individual Chinese characters were often “imported” multiple times into Japanese with slightly different readings and meanings reflecting the given historical moment, Western terms relating to sexuality have tended to multiply and morph into very different concepts in Japan.

One also finds a whole range of Japanese terms jostling alongside these foreign imports. There is *okama*, a slang term meaning “pot” or “kettle,” whose round shape is suggestive of the buttocks and is used (most say derogatively) to refer to gay men. *Onabe*, meaning “pan” and formed as a kind of complement to the “pot” of *okama*, is “the most visible and widely understood female transgender category in Japan” (122). *Nanshoku* is a premodern term for male-male sexuality that was still in use until quite recently in Japan alongside other imported terms such as *sodomia*, *pederastuto*, and the classical Sino-Japanese term *ryūyō*. Finally, there is a category of terms composed of foreign elements recombined and resignified with new Japanese meanings, such as *nyū-hāfu* (new half) and *Misuta redi* (Mr. Lady), which refer to transgender performers. The former term is derived from the term *hāfu*, which refers to people of mixed race, but in this case it is the gender that is indeterminate, hence the “new” (198–99). That such diversity persists and even proliferates in Japan, despite what we thought were the homogenizing effects of globalization, will be of particular interest to historians of sexuality. Far from endangering the diversity of our sexual world, McLelland’s work argues that “in the realm of sexuality, globalization results in creative indigenization and cultural admixture much more than it does in any unilateral imposition of western sexual identities” (221).

The book is organized chronologically and, aside from the first chapter, is focused on the postwar period. The first chapter charts the emergence during the 1920s of what McLelland calls a “perverse culture” with the founding of a number of popular journals focusing on various aspects of “perverse” sexuality with titles like *Hentai shiryō* (Perverse Material, 1926), *Kāma shasutora* (Kāmasāstra, or Treatise on Pleasure, 1927), *Kisho* (Strange Book, 1928), and *Gurotesuku* (Grotesque, 1928). While most of these journals took a medicalized or sexological stance toward perverse sexuality, McLelland argues that they also “offered readers the opportunity to write in and describe their own perverse desires in the hope that expert advice might remedy their condition” (23). Thus, in a classic case of Foucauldian reverse discourse, “the perverse themselves were given a voice” (23).

From the 1930s until the end of World War Two, McLelland shows how sexuality, both “hetero” and “homo,” was increasingly co-opted and controlled by the state. This did not necessarily mean sexual repression per se but the pseudo-scientific “managing” of the male soldier’s sexuality, which was considered violent and unpredictable if not periodically satisfied. This “hydraulic” model of sexuality would be used to justify the system of so-called comfort women, who were forced into prostitution to serve the

Japanese military as what one of McLelland's sources calls "semen toilets" (41). At the same time, the military took a relatively tolerant attitude toward some kinds of same-sex interactions among soldiers. This chapter ends with a close reading of two first-person accounts published shortly after the war but looking back to wartime: one about an S&M relationship between two Japanese soldiers and one on a love affair between a Japanese soldier and a sixteen-year-old Javanese boy (47–54). McLelland reads these texts not as documentary "evidence" of "perverse" behavior but as stories "scripted within the terms of specific narrative frames" that can, in turn, tell us about "the wider workings of a culture." Thus, while the S&M story evokes the persistence of hierarchically organized sexual culture in wartime, it also explicitly contrasts this to the postwar situation, when the author says he would like to meet his former lover again to continue their relationship "democratically" (50). The story about the interracial relationship, while not unmarred by a heavy dose of Orientalist exoticism, is also, according to McLelland, an implicit critique of the war and the "imperial project" (54).

Chapter 2, "Japan's Perverse Press," contains the fruits of a great deal of original research into the postwar sexual subcultures that preceded the politicization of sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. During the 1950s, when sexual minorities in the United States were suffering through one of the most repressive eras on record, McLelland claims that Japan was experiencing a veritable sexual renaissance fueled by a whole array of magazines devoted to the description (and often celebration) of nonnormative sexuality. These publications were not segregated by gender or what we would now call "sexual orientations." Instead, they were organized according to what McLelland calls "a perverse paradigm based on an all-encompassing interest in queer desire and its diverse manifestations" (11). The magazine *Fūzoku zōshi* (Sex Customs Storybook, 1953–55), for example, included a correspondence column for homosexual men called *Sodomia tsūshin* (Sodomitical News) alongside general discussions of "perverse sexuality," including the sudden postwar popularity of fellatio and kissing.

If the 1950s were about the postwar rediscovery of sexuality in terms of pleasure and play, the 1960s saw the rise of new categories of sexual identity facilitated by the mass media. Chapter 3 discusses the emergence of several of these, including the *gei bōi*, who rejected masculine gender roles and presented themselves as members of a "third sex." While male prostitutes (*danshō*) in the prewar period tended to cross-dress in traditional Japanese *kimono*, the *gei bōi* presented themselves as both modern and androgynous. They typically worked as hosts or bartenders in gay bars and were known for what one magazine called their "gay style" (*gei sutairu*), which could "parade itself in an imposing manner even in daylight" (quoted on 108). McLelland describes the *gei bōi* as a hybrid category that combined premodern practices of transgender entertainment with modern European ideals

of androgyny. Like the American gay man, the category of the *gei bōi* was made possible by historical conditions unique to the postwar period. But it was also a specifically Japanese category and “not some copy of a western original” (111).

By the 1970s the “perverse” subculture began to splinter into ever more specialized identity categories. Chapter 4 traces the rise of the *homo*, a hypermasculine and overtly sexualized identity made popular by magazines such as *Adon* (from Adonis), *Barazoku* (The Rose Tribe), and *Sabu* from *Saburō*, a common Japanese name for men. While the *gei bōi* had been trendy and modern, the *homo* found inspiration in the “long tradition of homoeroticism originating in the samurai *nanshoku* code and the homo-social brotherhood of the past” (154). They favored traditional *fundoshi* loincloths over Western underwear and modeled themselves after macho cultural figures such as film star Takakura Ken and writer Mishima Yukio. But despite the wide dissemination of the *homo* style, thanks to a boom in magazine production and consumer culture during the 1970s and 1980s, McLelland argues that it should not be confused with the “gay culture” that was developing in the United States and Europe during the same years. He cites the absence of any political activism and the lack of interaction and identification with other groups such as lesbians or even the transgendered *gei bōi*.

There was, however, one colorful exception to this reluctance to politicize sexuality. In the early 1970s the flamboyant activist Tōgo Ken, who referred to himself as an *okama*, repeatedly ran for public office in the name of all of those who were discriminated against for refusing to conform to the heteronormative family system, including not only homosexuals but sex workers, divorced people, unmarried mistresses of rich men, and people born out of wedlock. He also articulated his critique of heteronormativity with an attack on the postwar “symbolic” imperial system, using an untranslatable pun on the word in Japanese for “penis” and the first-person pronoun used (until the end of World War Two) exclusively by the emperor. McLelland argues that Tōgo’s position in the 1970s was close to contemporary queer politics in that it “stressed the importance of developing a shared agenda between people who, despite their many differences, were adversely affected by the same power structures” (165). Chapter 5, “Toward a Lesbian and Gay Consciousness,” describes Tōgo Ken as the first Japanese activist for sexual rights. By the 1990s there were several organizations devoted to winning rights and recognition for homosexuals, and the rest of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of these.

The consolidation during the 1990s of the categories of “gay” and “lesbian” as sexual identities that did not necessarily imply transgendered behavior left room for transgendered and transsexual people to claim a space of their own. Chapter 6 outlines the history of transgendered communities going back to the 1950s, including professional transgender performers as

well as small groups of amateurs. The chapter also includes a discussion of the history of legislation regulating gender reassignment surgery and name changes. Japan's first sex-change operation was performed in 1998, and the laws were changed to make it possible to change one's gender legally in 2004. These changes have brought with them a shift away from what McLelland calls "folk" transgender identities such as *nyu-hāfu* and *onabe* toward the medicalized model of "gender identity disorder" (210), which relies on a normative gender binary. While this latter model has brought greater respect and recognition to Japan's transgender community, McLelland argues that it is also "clearly inadequate to describe the variety of lived experience of transgender people themselves" (211).

In the introduction McLelland quotes Peter Cryle's call to scholars involved in the cross-cultural and transhistorical study of sexuality to engage in "a close hermeneutical reflection about our own situated capacity to know" (4). This approving citation leads the reader to anticipate some such reflection from McLelland himself, but it is never forthcoming. The closest thing we get to an answer is his expressed frustration over the way the history of sexuality in Japan has been written thus far (in English). What does follow that citation of Cryle is not a reflection on McLelland's own subject position but an attack on the editorial comments made by the translators of two recent books on queer culture in Japan, Francis Conlan and Barbara Summerhawk. Both of these writers, McLelland tells us, privilege the "out" gay person—"a state supposedly achieved by gay people in the west toward which Japanese people are still inching" (7). Both situate queer issues in Japan along a trajectory of oppression and liberation that is far too crude a tool for understanding the way people actually experience sexuality in their daily lives. And worst of all, both are condescending and neo-imperialist in their approach to Japan. When Conlan, for example, expresses his surprise "on a recent trip to Japan" that the country could be so advanced technologically and so far "behind" in its "social attitudes," he sounds like a Christian missionary.

There is no denying that the stakes are very high here. Given the paucity of materials in English on queer culture in Japan, the texts by Summerhawk and Conlan have a disproportionate influence and threaten not only to seriously misrepresent the history of sexuality in Japan but also to reaffirm ingrained notions of Western superiority. And yet McLelland's critique of their methodology seems in some ways to substitute for a critical reflection on his own. In contrast to the Eurocentric, "modernizationist" activism of Conlan and Summerhawk, McLelland gives us a detached, encyclopedic, and seemingly even-handed account of sexual practices, nomenclatures, and cultures in Japan over the last eighty years or so. But if there is a bias in his account, it lies in his too zealous rejection of the "repressive hypothesis." Perhaps in reaction to those who have overemphasized the prevalence of homophobia in Japan, McLelland almost completely avoids any discussion

of the suffering experienced by Japanese “queers” at the hands of mainstream society. The result is that one comes away from the book with the impression that Japan is a very queer place indeed, a place where virtually anything goes. And this, of course, is just the other side of the Orientalist coin from Conlan’s and Summerhawk’s excessively gloomy vision of a Japan groaning under a restrictive “Confucianist” morality.

There is one disturbing reference to transgender prostitutes (*danshō*) in the 1950s being murdered when their clients found out their actual sex. But here, as elsewhere in the book, McLelland avoids any serious discussion of the discrimination and even violence faced by Japan’s queer communities. Instead, he merely notes that men looking for partners in the park in question were “much more likely to be consciously on the lookout for a transgender partner” (79). One would certainly hope that murder was the “less likely” scenario here. But surely the fact that it happened at all points to a much higher level of anxiety and animosity around gender and sexuality than McLelland’s account would suggest. He is right to insist that the narrative of repression and liberation can grossly distort the history of sexuality. But in his zeal to avoid that narrative McLelland has painted perhaps a too rosy picture of “Queer Japan.”

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*The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World.* By MARIO PERNIOLA. Trans. MASSIMO VERDICCHIO. New York: Continuum, 2004. Pp. 160. \$39.95 (paper).

From its title I assumed this book would concern the sexual attractiveness of inanimate objects—that is, I expected to read about our lately increasing tendency through the use of sex toys, fantasy props, and the Internet to incorporate objects into our understanding of full sexuality. But Mario Perniola has something more ambitious in mind: the propounding of a new kind of “neutral sexuality” that takes persons as feeling things, takes bodies as clothing, shuns the narrative arc connecting sex to orgasm, distances sex from desire, and has no use for sexual pleasure. In “the sex appeal of the inorganic” we are indifferent to “beauty, age, and form.” So it’s not about loving objects. It’s about *becoming* them.

This is a philosophical work presented as a series of reflections in twenty-seven short and interrelated chapters; Perniola weaves discussions of historical thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger together with observations about contemporary culture and sex practices such as sadomasochism and fetishism. In Italy Perniola is a professor of aesthetics, and he writes in