

**Boys Beyond Binary: An Exploration of the Non-Identitarian Nature of Relationships in Umberto Saba's "Ernesto" and Luca Guadagnino's "Call Me By Your Name"**

Bes Arnaout

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In her essay about the relationships of the protagonists in Umberto Saba's "Ernesto" and the 2017 film Call Me By Your Name, Bes Arnaout navigates the difficulty of arguing for the existence of a relationship paradigm that the theory has not considered. In doing so, Bes creatively extends her **motive**, that the critics have gotten the relationship wrong, to ground readers as they move through the paper. She is therefore able to motivate close-readings at critical moments to extend her **thesis**, which would otherwise become amorphous. In doing so, Bes opens up a new avenue for writers who want to argue something but lack the language to categorize it in existing **theoretical terms**.*

*Excerpt*

Since the man recalls having had only the "traditional"<sup>1</sup> queer relationships before Ernesto, it was the boy himself who defied normative queer readings, who carried in him the potential for a relationship unlike the others. Some critics<sup>2</sup>, reading Ernesto through a Freudian lens, analyse the boy's transition from "passive/bottom" (with the laborer) to "active/initiator" (with the sex-worker<sup>3</sup>) as the establishment of his sexuality -- his final transformation from "un'indentità sessualmente femminile, nel rapporto omosessuale, a una maschile, nel rapporto con la prostituta"<sup>4</sup>. However, this reading fails to observe that, in this single heterosexual encounter, despite ostensibly initiating the event by seeking the sex-worker, Ernesto is arguably passive, and his passivity is twofold. First, he is pressured by social norms to engage in such

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional meaning the archetype of essentialist ideas of sexuality, in which women (in extension to queer theory - the feminine/passive participants) are unable to separate sexual activity from emotional attachment, and in contrast, men (the masculine/active participants) are detached and unaffected emotionally by sexual intercourse. The day-labourer would "flee as soon as he'd had them" - he'd abandon the boys he had sex with. He was the penetrator - the active/masculine one, the one without emotions of postcoital attachment.

<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Cinquegrani's *Solitudine di Umberto Saba: Da Ernesto al Canzoniere*, (Venezia: Marsilio, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> which coincides with the "becoming" ritual of shaving -- a massively important rite which signified for Saba the bridge to adulthood, that by social norms required knowledge and certainty of one's identity, including sexual orientation

<sup>4</sup> Cinquegrani, *Solitudine di Umberto Saba*, 87.

behavior<sup>5</sup>, and in the act of sex itself, he is not the active one<sup>6</sup>. This alternative sexual behavior, different from the one he had with the labourer, implies that neither can be used to identify him in regards to a specific dichotomy. Instead, Ernesto seems to have used these encounters to mediate between societal conventions and his own sexual desire, but the outcomes failed to satisfy what he truly yearned for: a complex relationship in the realm outside of preconceived binary identities. The experiences he will start to have later, with Ilio, confirm this, but beforehand, we ought to see how the same effect -- establishing new non-identitarian grounds - is obtained in *Call Me By Your Name*.

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<sup>5</sup> His uncle gives him pocket-money for this (“his uncle who, fearing solitary vices in his nephew, was giving him weekly gifts for just this purpose though, alas, without actually stating his reason”), then, he feels peer pressure (“he recalled all the friends who had already done so and had bragged about it to him. (...) Even a cousin his own age (well, not exactly, he was three months older than Ernesto) had already done it—more than once, if you could believe him.”)

<sup>6</sup> “Well, don’t be scared,” she told him, “I’ll take care of everything. You just get yourself undressed.” The sex-worker said and then continued to instruct Ernesto on what to do, making him significantly more passive than he was with the labourer. There are also observations of how young and childlike he looks to her.

*Author Commentary*

Bes Arnaout

How does one go about describing the undefinable? How to reinvent the way in which we observe humans without resorting to the preconceived definitions of identity? The task seems to be particularly challenging when the matter in question is the nature of human relationships, which appear to be endlessly categorized in order to improve our ability to comprehend and process them.

In “Boys Beyond Binary: An Exploration Of The Non-identitarian Nature Of Relationships In Umberto Saba’s “Ernesto” and Luca Guadagnino’s film adaptation of André Aciman’s *Call Me By Your Name*, my final essay for “ITA322: Black, Queer, Jewish Italy,” I embark on this convoluted journey, inspired mainly by the controversies surrounding the two works. Readers of Saba’s “Ernesto” unsurprisingly often worry about the age difference between Ernesto and the man with whom he has his first sexual encounters. At the same time, somewhat disappointingly, many also appear to think Ernesto “grows out” of his non-heteronormative behavior, simply by later engaging in acts commonly associated with heterosexual practices. To challenge this oversimplification, I resorted to a comparative study of “Ernesto” alongside a film that came into public notoriety only months after I had originally crafted my essay.

Guadagnino’s adaptation of the novel *Call Me By Your Name* is haunted by an identical issue of powerplay in relationships with a significant agedifference. Yet Guadagnino encountered a different misreading of his work, this time coming primarily from queer audiences: his movie was not considered “gay” enough when it needed to be, or at least not explicitly. I was reminded of Achilles and Patroclus and the challenges many scholars face even today when attempting to categorize this ancient relationship, and I realized that I see elements of the same desire to label among the audiences of Saba and Guadagnino. I wanted to explore how these two narratives extend into a dimension that escapes our common categorizations. I did not offer a solution to the “problem” I recognized, and my essay thus appears “thesis-less” at times -- but that seems to be the challenge of trying to dispute an existing stance and offer “no solution” as the *only* solution, at least in the framework of queer studies.

The excerpt above is perhaps the best example of the struggle I experienced in writing this piece. One first thing to note is the sheer length of my footnotes: taken together, they exceed the length of the text itself. One would think such practice is merely a trick to escape the proposed word limit, but not in this case. Instead, my reasoning is related to the complexities of using theory in close reading. As I go along, I attempt to knit coherent steps that progress in a logical manner, but doing so relies on both empirical evidence from the reading and theoretical analysis of that

evidence. One might accuse me of trying to hold my reader's hand every step of the way, but in my defense, I simply wanted to leave no space for doubt when it comes to my reasoning. A deep analysis of such a seemingly short, yet crucial episode in a written work or motion picture requires careful *vivisection*, using diligently chosen theoretical tools, and the task, when done properly, yields substantial results. In this excerpt of my essay, we get a glimpse of my deep close-reading of Ernesto's visit to a sex-worker. I also relate this short episode to the context of the novel and its implications for understanding Ernesto's sexual behavior — a close-reading ought to simultaneously focus on the microscopic and on the *visione d'insieme*.

Another issue that I encountered in the writing process was disciplinary, having to do with queer studies in particular: there are often vastly different definitions of the same terms and phenomena. In other words, existing approaches are based on diverse interpretations, and no one is the norm, or considered a universal point of reference. This, of course, is immensely helpful in general study, as the degree of variety in the existing scholarly discourse allows for greater freedom in proceeding interpretations. However, a problem arises when attempting to figure out a *completely* new argument in a field of study, a non-"something," where the "something" means taking on the establishment of *all* pre-existing interpretations. Especially since I explore the non-normative, I had to anchor my exploration in the normative.

One could automatically assume a normative feature of my essay would be my reliance on the *phalloheterocentric* — meaning the male-dominated, heterocentric experience widespread in Western literature and arts ostensibly since their very beginnings. Yet my exploration attempts to go considerably far beyond that: beyond the currently existing non-normative, that which would be considered deviant, or *queer*. I consequently attempted to develop a reading that extends into new, unexplored territory of relationships, in any analysis inherently bound to an existing point of reference. With this in mind, any anchor in available theory seems too restricting, and instead of facilitating the development of the motive, it presents itself as an obstacle on the path toward new ground. As one cannot approach a theoretical analysis without theory — even if the theory has latent disadvantages — I had to carefully use references without relying extensively on preconceived notions that would restrict me. The task is certainly as difficult as it sounds, but I found solace in the results that such a journey generates: a path toward new theoretical grounds.

*Editor Commentary*

Zachary Flamholz

As Bes notes in the beginning of her commentary, she was attempting something extremely difficult, something most writers would shy away from. How can a writer stay focused, and more importantly, how can they avoid losing the reader if that which is being argued can only be described in the negative: in this case, “the otherness” of the relationships in her sources? Bes’s argument itself is that what she sees in the relationships of Ernesto (“Ernesto”) and Elio (*Call Me By Your Name*) cannot be described by current critical theory, and so these relationships require a new relationship paradigm. This is a great argument in and of itself, but the execution is tough. There is nothing for the reader to latch on to, no anchor to hold the reader steady as they move through the waves of evidence. But Bes was up to the challenge, and her solution to navigating this tricky situation can be a lesson for us in the versatility of motive.

Often when a writer is in the thick of presenting evidence in a paper, they forget to remind the reader of why this evidence is relevant. When this happens, the solution is to have the writer make reference to their argument, usually in the opening or concluding sentence of a paragraph, something to the effect of “by analyzing X we see evidence for Y” where X is the piece of evidence presented and Y is the argument. In Bes’s case, such a reference would only confuse the reader more, “by analyzing X we see evidence that the relationship is **not**...” Then what is it? Bes knew she did not have the literal words to describe what these relationships were, and so she could not use this trick of referencing her thesis. Instead, she uses motive to anchor the reader. In the beginning of the paper, Bes’s motive lies in the sharp criticism the works drew for their depictions of homosexual relationships. But what Bes does later with this motive is true artistry. Instead of having to repeatedly say that the relationships are “other” throughout the paper, she argues with different critical views of the relationships. Then, by systematically knocking down each one, she shows the reader that these relationships cannot be described by any traditional theoretical framework.

In the section of the paper we have chosen to excerpt, this move can be seen in perfect execution. Bes wants to show that, in Ernesto’s encounter with the sex worker, we do not see the establishment of Ernesto’s sexuality. Instead of outright saying that Ernesto is displaying something “other” than the traditional “active/initiator” role (thereby preserving the “otherness” of his relationship capacity), she introduces this nuanced analysis by presenting critics who read the scene with a Freudian lens. Here is a lens to which critics continue to return as they are too quick to jump established theory, and have therefore missed the “otherness” that Bes was able to see.

*Professor Commentary*

Alessandro Giammei

Umberto Saba's *Ernesto*, a masterpiece of Italian queer fiction by a biligious and bisexual poet from the marginal city of Trieste, was one of the last and most difficult readings in my seminar. Bes, who studied for a few years in Trieste and reads Italian with near-native proficiency, worked hard to overcome the many apparent binaries that torn [the word "torn" here is unclear; I don't know what this sentence means!] the enigmatic figure of Saba—son of a Jewish mother and a Christian father, raised by a Slovenian nurse and an Italian family in an Italian-speaking city at the edge of the Austrian empire, able to sing his love for his wife and for a younger male pupil in the same songbook, famous for both his prose and his poems. She intended to read the novel through both an awareness of the existing scholarship, in Italian and in English, and a keen eye on current theories of gender and sexuality. The result is, truly, an engaging interpretation, which goes beyond traditional frames of queer narrative and reveals the groundbreaking originality of Saba's work. Bes realized that the crucial character in Ernesto's story is not the unnamed man at the beginning, nor it is the female prostitute who completes the boy's sexual initiation: it is Ilio, the often overlooked second boy who appears at the end of the unfinished novel. His name, of course, calls to mind immediately the one of Elio, the protagonist of Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*, a very recent film on boyhood, love, and sexuality that took this country by storm in the past few months, winning Golden Globes, Critics' Choice Awards, and Academy Awards. The film, which I believe was directly inspired by Saba's novel, was barely out when I assigned *Ernesto* last Fall, and Bes must have watched it during winter break, when it became available in New Jersey and plans for the final paper were already made. One of the aspects of Bes's work on Saba that I admire the most is precisely her immediate reaction to Guadagnino's film, her ability to quickly involve an unexpected, new source in her critical meditation. Not only does the film resonate with Saba's novel, but it truly serves as a litmus paper in Bes' analysis. A great achievement of this writing exercise is the fruitful comparative nature of the paper, which actually uses a second text (from another medium, another language, another age) to shed light on the primary object of analysis. It is such a joy to see that what one brings into the classroom can authentically react with the finest products of contemporary culture, opening possibilities for a critic-in-the-making to read the present with the tools offered by the past culture of another country.

## Works Cited

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## Bios

**Bes Arnaout '20** is interested in Italian and French medieval and modern literature and arts as well as queer theory. At Princeton, she's passionately working on the Cicognara project in Marquand Library (check out [cicognara.org/about](http://cicognara.org/about)), volunteering with the Petey Greene program, and engaging with various film-related activities, including her attempt to start a film/tv review column as an editor at *Nassau Literary Review*. She likes compassion and spreadsheets. She doesn't like words that contain "oi". Bes wrote this essay as a sophomore for ITA 322: "Black, Queer, Jewish Italy."

**Zachary Flamholz '18** is excited to join the *Tortoise* staff this year and sees it as the culmination of three years as a Writing Center Fellow. He is a Molecular Biology concentrator and a certificate candidate in the program in Quantitative and Computational Biology. He is very involved with the Jewish community on campus and is a big fan of the Princeton golf team.